

Researching Complex Effects of International Relations

While it is increasingly common for political scientists to describe world affairs as a complex arena of roundabout ramifications, they often employ the substantial concept of indirect consequences narrowly and without careful elaboration. Analysts are increasingly inclined to invoke the concept, but clear definitions of it are rare.

This book suggests an extension of the subject of indirect consequences and tackles *complex effects of international relations*, or the simple but rather stark reality that foreign policy activities can produce more than just direct or linear outcomes.¹ A range of examples in the book backs up the theoretical argument presented here from the vantage point of the Middle East,² dating from the end of World War II through the Cold War era, to the present day.³ Complex effects of international relations relate to various indirect and circuitous, intended as well as unintended consequences of human actions in Middle East conflicts.⁴ They can be desirable or undesirable, overt or covert, anticipated or surprising, foreseeable but unanticipated, and anticipated but simultaneously ignored or discounted.

On the global scale, complex effects occur because of real-time interaction between the system's structure and the countries and individuals acting within it⁵—this interaction plays out in ways that cannot be precisely predicted because the effects themselves are nonlinear in nature. In the context of this study, Robert Jervis's definition of a system is employed: "(a) a set of units or elements that are inter-connected so that changes in some elements or their relations produce changes in other parts of the system, and (b) the entire system exhibits properties and behaviors that are different from those of the parts."⁶

Understanding complex effects of international relations systematically requires a focus on two primary themes. The first and more prevalent category is unintended consequences, which refers to purposive human procedures and activities that result in surprising, unforeseen, or unexpected outcomes.⁷ This is not to be confused with a situation in which purposive actions fail to achieve their intended consequences; indeed, that would fall outside of the scope of the category of unintended consequences. Instead, this category includes outcomes of policy decisions that were not purposely elicited or intended by the actors who planned the intervention. The first theme includes two subcategories both of which are unforeseen repercussions different from the actor's initial intentions: (1) rebound results, or human actions, that themselves turn out to be detrimental or costly, with an impact that worsens the situation, and (2) derivative products, or human actions with side effects that can be positive, neutral, or negative.

The second theme of complex effects of international relations is intended consequences in which an intervention is designed to bring about certain changes but in an indirect and roundabout manner. Within this category are circuitous but intended outcomes, which refers to the planned and anticipated outcomes of purposive actions that are complementary to the actor's goal—essentially a nonlinear set of actions utilized on purpose to achieve aims indirectly.⁸

Rebound results are not the same as derivative products nor are they similar to circuitous but intended outcomes. Both rebound results and derivative products are the particular effects of actions purposely carried out but which are different from those effects desired at the moment the actions were carried out or from the original aim and desire behind the acts. Circuitous but intended outcomes, on the other hand, are purposive actions aimed to indirectly and sometimes craftily achieve certain desired goals.

It is clear, then, that not all complex effects of international relations are undesirable. The paradoxical outcomes of actions in world politics are not necessarily harmful or unwanted. This is a reality reflected by the category of derivative products, which includes positive and neutral side effects as well as the category of circuitous but intended outcomes. The United States, for example, has been in many cases positively transformed by its major wars. The end of slavery, for instance, was obviously a circuitous but intended outcome of the Civil War.⁹

Within the realm of international relations there are several distinctions when analyzing the outcomes of actions. Some complex effects are good, some are neutral, and some are harmful. Still, the majority of complex effects in world affairs are unpleasantly rather than pleasantly surprising.

The Study in Context: Related Research

The phenomenon of complex effects explored in this study is constantly at work within the social and political spheres; it is a continual subject of study for a range of practical and academic disciplines. Within the field of social science, however, the concept has been recognized more narrowly as “unintended consequences.” Unintended consequences are generally understood to refer to the fact that any intervention in a complex system may or may not produce the results intended and will instead inevitably create unanticipated and often undesirable outcomes.¹⁰

Karl Marx was the first to conceive of social theory as the study of the unwanted social repercussions of nearly all our actions. He believed that the “system of economic relations” could be explained in terms of “the means of production,” rather than in terms of individuals, their relations, or their actions—all of which, Marx argued, give rise to unwanted consequences.¹¹

Karl Popper, on the other hand, holds that institutions and traditions must be analyzed in terms of individuals acting in certain situations and the unintended consequences of their actions. According to Popper, the main task of social science is to analyze the unintended social repercussions of human actions.¹² Hannah Arendt also observed that politics is in the realm of unintended consequences.¹³

Robert Jervis, in his classic study *System Effects*, presents the most comprehensive statement of the broad notion of complex effects.¹⁴ His work, however, misses two significant points, which this book addresses. First, contrary to the common cause-effect relationships described in the majority of social sciences, Jervis observes that we actually live in a world where all things are interconnected, where unintended consequences of our actions are unavoidable and essentially unpredictable. Building on that premise, the first significant contribution of this book is to reveal that despite the complexity of the international world politics surrounding us,¹⁵ many complex effects of international relations are, in fact, predictable, and for that reason, avoidable, and in some cases even achievable if desired and well implemented.

Second, while Jervis’s theoretical applications are principally applied to international politics, the diversity of examples and subject matter he employs in his study are mainly drawn from society and the natural universe, applying his argument as a general social and scientific philosophy. Consequently, the second important contribution of this book is the development of a systemic and scientific analysis of this subject with an argument that focuses precisely on international politics, especially in the Middle East region. This,

in turn, could potentially provide a useful mechanism for avoiding some of the negative and harmful consequences of human actions and in particular the devastating results of many Western countries' actions in relation to and within the developing world.

While few students of world affairs would deny the proposition that political systems are complex,¹⁶ many current theories and models of international relations rely on a simple system and are "reposed in deep Newtonian slumber."¹⁷ Linear ways of thinking tackle problems as if elements in world politics could be dealt with in remote isolation.¹⁸ Such solutions are bound to fail in the complex sphere of world politics where interactions can often produce complex effects.

When navigating through the complex system of world politics, complex effects—at least in the context of this study—are actually the normal outcome of such a structure; they should not come as a surprise. Unexpectedly, however, there are only a small number of studies within the international relations field that directly and extensively deal with this phenomenon. One well-known study explores the security dilemma¹⁹—"a state's defensive search for security that can have the perverse effect of leading to greater insecurity by triggering an open-ended cycle of moves and countermoves."²⁰

Sociologists, economists, historians, physicists, and others are all familiar with the universal concept of complex effects. They have recognized the existence and the influence of complex effects for many years having explored the subject extensively.²¹ Nevertheless, regardless of the theoretical and empirical importance of the general idea of complex effects in the world of academia, the concept's presence within the field of international relations is limited.

Consequently, the phenomenon has yet to be sufficiently examined, theoretically organized, or synthesized exclusively by political scientists, and it still awaits a systemic and systematic analysis that solely relates to the field of international relations. This book, therefore, attempts to shed light on the complex intended and desired, as well as the complex unintended and undesired, repercussions of human actions carried out by international players within the changing and shifting realm of world politics.

Definitions, Methodology, and Contents

Many political scientists have not yet come to terms with the perversity of ordinary actions within world politics. Hence, one of this study's main purposes is to introduce a typology of complex effects of international relations.

Before continuing my discussion of complex effects of international relations it is important to define some key terms that will be widely used in the rest of the book.

For the purpose of the study, effects, consequences, results, products, outcomes, and in some cases also fallouts and ends, are interchangeable terms.

Unintended effects are not part of the agent's goal-directed behavior but rather flow from those behaviors. Intended effects signify those results that one specifically aims to bring about.

Some complex effects might be beneficial from the agent's point of view—both circuitous but intended results and also derivative products with positive side effects. Other complex effects could be harmful from the agent's point of view—both rebound results, which damage the initiator, and derivative products with negative side effects, which mistakenly damage the initiator in other places and/or other times—or damage others, enemies and friends alike. Moreover, such complex effects, positive as well as negative, may often—although not always—be foreseen.

For the purposes of my discussion, immediate effects will include consequences that follow directly after the action itself—for instance, a building damaged by a missile. More remote effects may be termed mediate in that they come about only through the intervention of someone or something else.

Additionally, complex effects of international relations are not limited to only the desired and undesired consequences of our purposely chosen actions. Also, to be considered, are the foreseeable effects of inactions. Decision makers could decide not to implement certain actions and they could be held responsible for the harmful complex effects that will emerge as a result.

Within the realm of academia, understanding is often sought for its own sake without further practical application. However, this study seeks to combine theory with a policy-oriented approach in order to understand the unique phenomenon of complex effects of international relations with the aim of making suitable policy recommendations. This study is comprised of a hypothesis of international relations that begins with assumptions about the way individual leaders make foreign policy decisions and extends to a macroassessment of how these decisions emerge to form particular historical processes and desirable as well as predicted outcomes. The types of outcomes are a function of the interplay of variables on a number of levels.²²

The methodology used to support this study's arguments is that of Alexander L. George's *Method of Structured, Focused Comparison*, which is adequate for a within-case analysis of a single case combined with his

Controlled Comparison Method,²³ which is a nonstatistical comparative analysis of a small number of cases that resemble each other in every respect but one.²⁴

This book has three parts, one theoretical and two empirical, and is structured in four main sections. In Part I, Theoretical Background, I first introduce my theoretical assumptions in chapters 1, 2 and 3. Next, in Part II and Part III, I use the theoretical premises developed to provide an empirical analysis of six selected case studies in chapters 4–9. Finally, in the conclusions presented in chapter 10, the study arrives at several theoretical conclusions that could be useful for current and future foreign policy decision making.

Chapter 1 develops the concepts, the hypothesis, and the theoretical framework that will guide the remainder of the book. The following two chapters constitute the theoretical core of the book. Chapter 2 deepens the argument and presents a typology of complex effects of international relations as a means to an end not as an end in itself. Chapter 3 develops the general theoretical model of the book, which links causal factors of the different types of complex effects: in the category of unintended consequences I will introduce a complex-causal mechanism that explains rebound results as well as derivative products of international relations of two kinds—positive and negative side effects. In the category of intended consequences, I will introduce a complex-causal mechanism that explains circuitous but intended outcomes. The typology and the complex-causal mechanism chapters challenge realist and rationalist models of international politics in various ways.

Because complex effects of international relations invoke complex-causal mechanisms, testing the key assumptions of the phenomenon through case studies provides added value. Although quantitative analysis methods can be sufficient tools for analysis, the complex-causal relations that characterize the complex effects of international relations are difficult to study with traditional statistical and quantitative methods. Therefore, in this study, qualitative methods are utilized to test and present the case.

By addressing, framing, and presenting the subject, the rest of the book will further develop these ideas through real-life examples, showing how these theoretical ideas can be applied practically in the realm of international relations. As was already mentioned, the focus will be on global affairs with a special spotlight on the Middle East region—although examples from many fields and other regions will be drawn upon.

The empirical tests of the book's argument are to be found in chapters 4 through 9. In Part II: The Complexity of Unintended Consequences: Rebound Results, I will demonstrate the category of unintended consequences or ends

that are unanticipated by the actor/s involved. In chapters 4 and 5, I will describe cases that demonstrate rebound results of international relations. In chapter 4, I will examine the June 1967 Six-Day War,²⁵ which, in damaging “Arab pride,” was one of the main causes of the October 1973 Yom Kippur War and is an example of a rebound result from the Israeli perspective. In chapter 5, I will examine Israel’s unique policy, called *amimut* in Hebrew and translated as “ambiguity.” According to non-Israeli sources Israel is the only nuclear-armed state that does not acknowledge its possession of the bomb even though that circumstance is common knowledge throughout the world. By establishing a policy of *amimut* Israel has wisely and uniquely avoided the automatic dire rebound results that usually accompany the buildup of arms within the international scene.

In Part III: The Complexity of Unintended Consequences: Derivative Products, chapters 6 and 7, I will describe cases that resulted in derivative products of international relations of two kinds: positive and negative side effects. In chapter 6, I will examine the October 1973 Yom Kippur War. Although it constituted one of the most traumatic incidents in Israel’s history it also led to the peace treaty between Israel and its strongest rival, Egypt, and therefore serves as a derivative product with a positive side effect. In chapter 7, I will describe the Abadan/AJAX-Suez hidden link. More specifically, I will test how British actions in Iran in the early 1950s served, from the British perspective, as a derivative product with negative side effects in Egypt several years later.

In Part IV: The Complexity of Intended Consequences, I will demonstrate the category of circuitous but intended outcomes or the desirable consequences accurately anticipated and predicted by the actors who initiated the original action. In chapter 8, I will examine the case of the October 1973 Yom Kippur War between Egypt (and the Arab States) and Israel, which provides a strong illustration of how an actor who wages war can circuitously achieve his political goals despite suffering military defeat on the battleground. President Anwar el-Sadat astonishingly predicted the indirect results of the war he initiated. Sadat predicted that Egypt needed a spark—or as he put it, a “single Egyptian soldier that crossed the Suez Canal”—to trigger the involvement of much more powerful forces, such as the two superpowers and the United States in particular, which successfully compelled Israel to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula, a desired Egyptian goal.

In chapter 9, I will examine the case of Operation AJAX, a military coup d’état of deposed Iranian prime minister Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh on August 19, 1953. The British were behind the plot but the United

States implemented it, in effect allowing the British to circuitously achieve their intended but at the same time covert goal. Skillfully leveraging the deeply held American fear of Communism, London succeeded in securing Washington as a partner to lead the joint U.S.-UK—but at the same time mainly American—mission to overthrow the democratic government of Iran, elected two years prior, on March 12, 1951, and to remove Premier Mossadegh from power.

Finally, in chapter 10, conclusions are drawn through an examination of the theoretical and practical implications of the book's main arguments.

The book is first and foremost a study in international relations, not regional studies in general or Middle East studies in particular. The book is also not an attempt to provide a diplomatic or security history of the Middle East from the end of World War II throughout the Cold War era to the present day. Instead, I have analyzed complex effects of international relations through six Middle East case studies of this time period in order to present a new, unique, and general international relations mechanism—complex-causal mechanism. The global system is complex, and the results and outcomes of actions are not linear and do not necessarily follow one after the other. While we have the mathematics for simple systems, we do not yet have the mathematics to fully understand complex systems such as those active in the realm of international relations. This book attempts to close that gap.

Accurately explaining complex effects of international relations is important for two major reasons. First, if there is a theoretical explanation for such a seemingly unusual phenomenon, then understanding it is not only an option but also a necessity. Such an understanding can make a new and significant contribution to existing theoretical knowledge in the field of international relations. Second, and much more importantly, it would give decision makers a valuable tool to avoid fatal decisions in the global scene.

Despite the strong theoretical arguments of the book, I faced at least two methodological problems in conducting this study. Although they could only be partially resolved, none presented an insurmountable barrier. First, the concept of complexity is difficult to define and measure with precision. A second difficulty arose from the fact that I used case studies from the Middle East region only.

Although these considerations are not without importance they do not present an overwhelming barrier. It is commonly argued in the field of international relations that international politics is a complex arena.²⁶ The second problem is a methodological one that many advanced researchers

other than myself have been confronted with—however, regional systems are still used widely to support arguments concerning global systems.²⁷ As a common practice with analytical value, I too have used this approach despite some of its drawbacks.

To undertake a systematic examination of complex world affairs and to address the complex effects of international relations we need to carefully define our terms. Not everything unfortunate that happens should be called complex effects of international relations. Thus, to exclude many minor complex effects, we need an exact definition of it. We move on now to the next chapter, which deals with this challenge.