



Informal Groups and International Relations: A Critical Study on Behind-Scene World Politics

Wenhao Zhang^(✉)

China Foreign Affairs University, Beijing 054199, China
wenhao202109@yeah.net

Abstract. The actual content of political work is the handling of human relationships. As the study of international politics progresses, scholars increasingly feel the incompetence of formal organizations and political procedures in explaining political phenomena, thus shift their focus to informal areas such as political psychology and culture. In this paper, we shall focus on informal groups existed in international politics, distinguish between different structures of informal groups such as “iron triangles” and “political networks,” define the roles they play in international politics, and explore two types of power that come into play when the dynamics of informal groups change. The article will briefly invoke and analyze various political phenomena that have emerged in the history of international relations as a tool for explaining and elaborating its arguments. It is hoped that the study of informal groups will both escape the dilemmas of formal organizational and procedural studies and avoid the isolationist and idealistic tendencies that arise in the study of political culture and psychology, providing a sample for behind-the-scenes studies of international politics.

Keyword: Behind-scene politics · informal groups · paternal power · international relations · diplomacy

1 Introduction

The debate between structural realist and neo-liberal institutionalist theories is often labeled as “politics on the stage”. This means that both the emphasis on the pattern of power distribution among states and the observation of the design of international institutions and organizations almost always treats procedural and legally valid political subjects and political acts, such as alliances, institutions, groups, and declarations, as the main content of politics, while private associations of politicians, political psychology, and political inheritance, which are not legally proceduralized, are regarded as non-political content or as The political process is the main content of politics, while the private association of politicians, political psychology and political transmission, which are not legalized and proceduralized, are regarded as non-political content, or as preparatory work for politics, rehearsal of political phenomena, etc. One of the major drawbacks of such an approach is that phenomena are used to explain phenomena, or rather, sometimes the results of political relations are used in turn as causes to explain

procedural political phenomena. The idea that a politician may create public opinion to achieve political ends, or send national officials to international organizations to expand their influence on a particular agenda, is a common formulation in writings on international relations. This inclines us to believe that behind-the-scenes politics is often a preparatory and complementary work for onstage politics, and to bring this view into the analysis of political phenomena in a self-evident cycle.

The rise of constructivist theory has overturned the dominant traditional view of political relations. On-stage politics is seen as a legitimization and demonstration of the results of compromised political struggles behind the scenes, while the distribution of political power and the sharing of political tasks are mainly done behind the scenes. This is not a denial of the binding nature of political procedures and laws, but rather a belief that the former are inherently the fruits of what was produced and consolidated by earlier behind-the-scenes politics. As Alexander Wendt pointed out in his famous essay “Anarchy is what states make of it” [1]. “It is through reciprocal interaction, in other words, that we create and instantiate the relatively enduring social structures in terms of which we define our identities and interests.” Since then, the political behavioral science of identity and cognition, the political psychology has flourished rapidly since then. However, an over-reliance on cognition and psychology has nearly destroyed the foundations on which international political science had been built. The ambiguity of the subjective perceptions of political actors has caused confusion and meaninglessness in research, turning international relations theory almost into a purely creative endeavor. It has even been claimed that “political science, is about what psychology is about.” This over-reliance on explaining international politics turns the latter into something almost inexplicable at the same time.

According to Karl Marx, “Man is the sum of all social relations.” The critique of politics on the stage should not fall into a purely cognitive and cultural quagmire, but should point to the search for truer and deeper social relations. In the subsequent part of this paper, we will use the concept of “informal groups” to form an explanatory and deductive framework that provides a dialectical and historical materialist perspective on behind-the-scenes politics.

2 Informal Groups: Definition, Characteristics and Functions

Informal groups, as opposed to formal organizations, refer to small groups that are formed spontaneously and without formal documentation, based on private associations, friendships, and aspirations, tied to mutual satisfaction of needs, and bound by soft customs such as conventions rather than hard institutions such as rules and regulations. The concept of informal groups has been prevalent in sociology and management for a long time, and was originally proposed by the American behavioral scientist Elton Mayor and others after conducting the famous Hawthorne experiment [2]. In the field of international politics, political actors befriend each other and establish personal friendships, thus form traditions and practices to get along with each other, which will influence their respective choices and positions in political work; when political actors start to use informal groups to achieve their political goals, they can allocate political resources in advance, make decisions to take common actions, and have a decisive influence on the political process,

through which they can pre-allocate political resources, make decisions to act together, and have a decisive influence on the political process.

An important concept in traditional Chinese culture, “Guanxi”, can be used to understand the concept of informal groups in greater depth [3]. In China, Guanxi is seen as the result harvested from interpersonal interactions. Implicitly, this concept contains a layer that can be exploited to obtain what is needed. As a result, people spend time and money to maintain such informal social connections, including kinship, friendships, superior-subordinate relationships, and so on. Of course, informal groups in international politics have a broader scope than relationships in traditional Chinese cultural contexts, and include initiative groups formed by political interests and aspirations, etc., which are related to personal relationships and inseparable from political causes. Then, we shall discuss about several characteristics of informal groups.

1. Firstly, Informal groups do not have a constitution or rules of operation, which means that there is nothing legally enforceable to guarantee their survival. The most fundamental motivation for their proliferation in various fields comes from mutual attraction. When they find that the rules and regulations of existing formal organizations are not conducive to the realization of their political aspirations, or that the cost of using them is high, they will use informal groups to achieve a coordinated remedial action. American scholars Vabulas Felicity and Snidal Duncan carried out a special study on informal intergovernmental organizations (IIGOs). As they explored, “IIGOs are less legalized and closer to soft law in terms of the relative imprecision of their institutional arrangements and also because they entail less delegation but they may engender fairly high levels of obligation among members” [4]. The distinction of softness and flexibility makes them sometimes a great way of handling with tricky tasks, which in turn strengthen their ties among each other.
2. Moreover, once informal organizations are formed, they generate corresponding customs and practices that impose soft constraints on the behavior of their members. For example, once a group of diplomatic envoys in the same country forms a diplomatic corps, it is customary for the oldest or earliest arriving ambassador to serve as the head of the diplomatic corps and coordinate relations among the ambassadors [5]. This central figure in informal groups, similar to the head of diplomacy, has a very different prestige and influence from formal organizational leaders, as we will discuss in more detail later.
3. Finally, informal groups have a stated goal, and if this goal is the same or similar to that of the formal organization, it can facilitate the advancement of the formal organization’s work; conversely, it can become a conservative force and hinder the achievement of policy goals. For this reason, informal groups are often used in both positive and negative terms. In international politics, many informal groups are doing work that is ahead of the formal organizations: aspiring young politicians who are familiar with each other for changing the international order and calling for environmental governance are advancing related agendas in common areas. At the same time, fear of the power of rising powers can unite politicians to isolate and alienate their country’s representatives at receptions, banquets, and conversations, and to conspire to vote against their country’s proposals.

3 Two Types of Informal Groups: From a Static Perspective

Merely characterizing informal groups in general terms does not deepen the knowledge of this concept and develop it into a powerful tool for understanding international phenomena. Therefore, in this section, we will analyze in depth the structure and interrelationships within informal groups and distinguish between informal groups with different structures.

The two structures of informal groups coexist in the international community, and we distinguish them into “iron-triangles” and “political networks” using formulations from policy science.

3.1 “Iron-Triangles”

The “Iron Triangle” is a Chinese idiom used to refer to the combination of several powerful parties into a strong and solid lineup. Theodore Lowi, an American political researcher, first used the concept of the “iron triangle [6] to describe the workings of the “shadow government” in his study of the behind-the-scenes distribution of state power in the U.S. Lowi cites Grant Jordan’s further dissects the mechanism of the “iron triangle” [6] and analyzes the relationship between the three parties. B. Guy Peters further dissects the mechanism of the “iron triangle” and analyzes the mechanism of mutual attraction between the parties [7].

The “iron triangle” in the international community has the following distinctive features: the number of subjects is small; they hold a lot of power and have decisive influence in their respective spheres. The subjects have a very deep and complex interdependence and mutual constraints, forming a rather stable and strong multilateral relationship. Such personal relations can help them to transcend cumbersome organizational structures and diplomatic procedures, and quickly and accurately convey their respective views; they can open up two diplomatic routes, explicit and implicit, to convey political intentions and interests that are not easily expressed in public; they can develop exclusivity and deepen their respective prestige and influence in each other’s sphere. Let’s take the “Stalin-Roosevelt-Churchill” triangle during WWII as an example.

As World War II entered its later stages, the heads of state of the Soviet Union, the United States and the United Kingdom prepared for secret negotiations to divide the postwar world, and on November 28, 1943, at 3:00 p.m., before the start of the Tehran Conference, Stalin, in his Soviet grand Marshal’s uniform (the purpose of which was clear), made a special visit to U.S. President Roosevelt, who was suffering from polio and working day and night, and could only be seen in in a wheelchair due to polio and day and night work. The two leaders exchanged pleasantries and expressed their excitement at seeing each other. And after the first meeting, Churchill passed on a sword to Stalin in the name of King George VI of England as a tribute to the Soviet soldiers and civilians who fought at Stalingrad. The three men’s hopes for the progress of the conference were shown through their private interactions. And when the conference came to substantive issues, the triumvirate began to show their ability to compete with each other and control the world. They determined the options for attacking Germany, the disposition of Poland and China (despite the absence of the two countries), and in this distribution the informal relations also had a profound influence on the negotiation

process. Stalin invited Roosevelt to take refuge in the Soviet Embassy under the pretext of avoiding assassination by German spies, so that Roosevelt’s security depended on Soviet guarantees and gave Stalin more initiative [8].

3.2 “Political Networks”

We define “political network” as a form of informal group in international politics. It is characterized by a large number of participants, frequent exchanges and movements, unstable relationships around specific issues, and a non-formal collection of politicians united not by interests but by common interests, ideals and directions. It is also considered to be a manifestation of political socialization because it is widely distributed in all sectors of society, depends on initiatives and public pressure, and acts loosely and without unity.

The recent phenomenon of Track II diplomacy, which has become a big hit, can be seen as a major example of a policy network. Track II diplomacy is distinguished from intergovernmental diplomacy in that experts, scholars, and community members provide authoritative and influential solutions to government-to-government problems through interactions and exchanges among themselves. The Network of East Asian Thought Societies (NEST), formed in East Asia after a long period of tension, not only presents a more open and inclusive political atmosphere, but also increasingly creates a sense of community in the Asia-Pacific region, becoming an informal organization arising from the mutual attraction of addressing East Asia’s common security and development needs in the face of anarchic dilemmas [9].

Sometimes Political networks feel their inability to decide on key issues that can affect the future of the world, they will serve as the periphery associations of the iron triangle, the most influential behind-scene power, trying to push on their demand through giving pressure to iron-triangles, see Fig. 1.

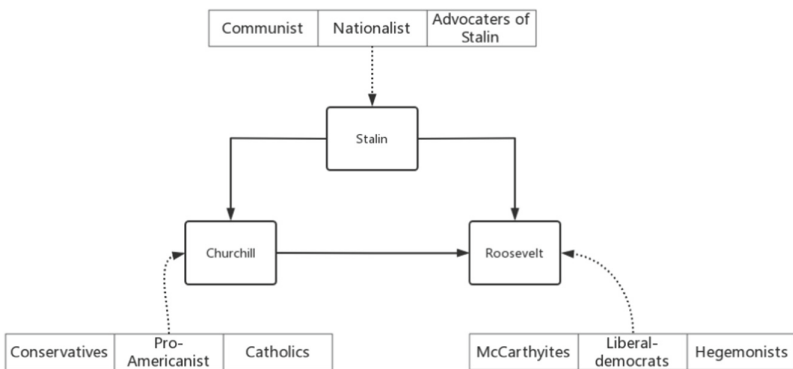


Fig. 1 The interaction between Iron-Triangles and Political Networks During WWII

4 Two Kinds of Power Within Informal Groups: From a Dynamic Perspective

4.1 Paternal Power

The word paternal power, literally meaning “power of fathers”, refers to the power and authority formed by social metabolism [10]. Paternal power differs from both power that relies on violence as its backbone, as in the case of government power in domestic politics, and power that relies on consent and contractual formation, as in the case of elections to parliament and the presidency. In informal organizations, the interrelationships among members are neither coercive nor defined by contract. Older, more experienced politicians have a very strong appeal and role model for new, uninformed young people. This makes young politicians pay full respect to the ideas and behavior of older politicians, and they learn the art of politics from authoritative politicians and apply it to the international community, creating stability and continuity in international politics.

Elizabeth II [11], for example, was the holder of great paternal power, left substantial influence on the political atmosphere since post-WWII. The Queen did not have any substantial power to deal with political issues, and even the country she represented declined rapidly during her time in office, but during her 60 years in office she earned a high reputation for her political prestige and interactions with important politicians, and played an important pivotal role between Britain and Europe and the Commonwealth community. Elizabeth’s state funeral was extremely grand, with politicians from all walks of life gathering to pay tribute to the honorable life of this humorous and discreet diplomat.

4.2 Temporal Power

Temporal power refers to the authority and power belonging to the former under a sudden political crisis or change, when old political network relations and political behavior patterns are difficult to adapt to the new status quo, when one political subject quickly finds a solution or gains dominant power, and other politicians follow suit. The three necessary conditions here are: first, society has entered a period of fear and confusion; second, the “political hero” has new ideas and can organize new political experiments; and third, he has gained the trust and emulation of others. This power is neither coercive nor contractual, and is not based on tradition, so it is called temporal power.

Roosevelt and Stalin during the economic crisis, Hitler during World War II, and Deng Xiaoping at the end of the twentieth century are examples of people who became the holders of temporal power as a result of their political innovations.

4.3 The Inter-conversion of Paternal and Temporal Power

Paternal power and temporal power can be transformed into each other, as follows: the holder of paternal power can become the organizer of new changes and experiments in times of emergency by virtue of his political prestige and influence, and transform his power into temporal power; while the holder of temporal power can become a reputable paternal politician once his experiments become successful and classic.

5 Conclusion: The Logic of the International Community's Metabolism

This paper differs from previous studies of behind-the-scenes politics by reducing the logic of behind-the-scenes politics to the study of social relations among political subjects. Through the construction and enrichment of the concept of “informal groups,” three major contradictions that drive the development of international relations are summarized: the contradiction and alternation between formal organizations and informal groups, between iron triangles and political networks, and between paternal and temporal power. These three contradictions make international politics balance between innovation and stability, and fulfill the task of metabolism.

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