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Constructivism and Identity Politics in Global Affairs: A Theoretical and Critical Analysis

Ghulam Ali Mangi

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Govt Degree
College, Kotdiji

khp.mangi@gmail.com

Abstract

This study covers the theoretical background and tools of the constructivist approach in the foreign policy and in the international Relations. This paper defines the constructivism approach and explains how the constructivism approach is applied to foreign policy and international relations analysis. According to scholars, constructivism in foreign policy, and in international relations, highlights the importance of norms and ideas, and in the context of foreign policy, norms and ideas are best thought of national identity. Constructivism scholars acknowledge that the material world is separate and exists as a whole, they also argue that through foreign policy state interact with each other, and then they socialize with each other. Due to such interaction, they acquire their identity. The intermediate group of ideas, general attitudes and frames links the fundamental values of national identity with the causal ideas that are the ones that determine policy choices. The national identity construction process cannot be separated out of the sociopolitical context within which the process occurs. This paper has given special focus on identity, collective identity, political identity, state identity, national identity and national interests. Regarding foreign policy and international relations as social constructivism asserts, identity and interests of actors are extremely crucial to the states. Other than interests, constructivists believe that mutual constitution of agents and structures, or structuration is a part of the ontology of constructivism. Activities, relations and interactions are very important between agents and structures; as a result, through these activities, states can understand each other, and they can build and shape their identities.

Keywords: foreign policy, international relations, interests, identity, constructivism.

INTRODUCTION

Realism and liberalism are the traditional theories in the study of global affairs that have long focused on material power and institutional cooperation. Constructivism, however, presents an alternative viewpoint because it contends that the international politics is socially constructed via ideas, norms, and identities. In this context identity politics is highly influential on how states and actors perceive themselves and others and in turn affect world interactions, conflicts and cooperation.

Most of the ancient theories used in the study of global politics such as realism and liberalism are centered on things such as military power, money and international organizations. According to realism, states are concerned about power and survival. Liberalism states that peace can be achieved through cooperation based on institutions. But constructivism considers world affairs in a different light. It states that the world politics is not only concerned with material power. It is constructed through ideas, beliefs, norms and shared identities. The way the countries behave is determined by the way they perceive themselves and perceive others. A significant aspect of this is identity politics. It implies that the manner in which groups or states define themselves, in terms of culture, religion, history or ethnicity, influences the manner in which groups or states behave in the world. These identities define who is regarded as a friend or an enemy. They may also result in cooperation in addition to causing conflicts. This paper will describe why constructivism perceives identity politics and why it is important in international relations today (Wendt, 1992).

Theoretical Foundations of Constructivism

Constructivism is not identical to realism and liberalism in that it does not regard international politics as predetermined.

Its main ideas are:

Socially constructed is world politics: the international system is neither natural nor automatic. It is made by the way states and individuals think, talk and act. The way we behave in the world is determined by what we believe about the world.

Interests of states may vary: According to Realists, all states merely desire to have power and security. But constructivism indicates that interests are not predetermined. These evolve and evolve as states interact with other states in the course of time.

Ideas and identities do count: Weapons or money are not the only factors in getting states to act. The determination of what a state considers important is determined by shared ideas, norms, culture and identity (Onuf, 1989).

One well-known constructivist concept is by Alexander Wendt: anarchy is what states make of it. This implies that the international system has no established rules. In case states perceive each other as adversaries, then there will be conflict. Cooperation is possible in case they view each other as friends. The anarchy in itself does not make war or peace. Key Constructivism Main Points: Social interaction plays a very important role: The state learns who they are through interacting with others. The sharing of meanings is not a giving. Rules regulate action: Rules regarding what is right or wrong, such as human rights or sovereignty, will affect how states behave. Interests are an identity: The identity of a state, determined by its history, religion, or culture, influences what state wants and whom states trust.

In a word, constructivism proposes that we can not just understand global politics by merely looking at power. We must also consider concepts and identities as well (Wendt, 1999).

Identity Politics in Global Affairs

Identity politics implies that nations and communities in the politics engage according to their identity rather than the material requirements. They do not simply consider money or power, they make decisions by considering common identity.

This identity may be achieved by:

Religion: As with Muslim, Christian or Hindu states joining block.

Ethnicity: Groups feeling close to people of the same race or language

Culture: Common traditions, values, and history.

National identity: Firm beliefs concerning the Pakistani, Indian, American, etc. national identity.

Therefore, political objectives do not necessarily make sense. They are influenced with the way people perceive themselves as members of a group. This impacts politics within a country and inter country relations.

Key categories of Identity:

National identity: The sense of loyalty to a nation and its image on the international level.

Religious identity: Beliefs and religious affiliation that shape the policy.

Ethnic and cultural identity: Belonging to a language, tribe, or cultural group (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Intersections Between Constructivism and Identity Politics

Constructivism helps us understand why identity politics matters in global affairs because it explains that identities are not fixed or natural. Instead, they are socially constructed through history, language, culture, and interaction with others. A state is not born as a “democratic power” or a “terrorist state.” These roles are created over time by political speeches, media, education, and foreign policy actions. This means identity can change. A former enemy can become an ally if the shared understanding between them changes. According to constructivism, a state’s interests are not automatic. They come from its identity. What a country wants depends on how it sees itself. For example, if a state defines its identity as a leader of the Muslim world, its foreign policy will focus on issues affecting Muslim countries. If it sees itself as a secular, modern state, its priorities will be different. So, identity comes first, and interests follow from that identity. Constructivism also explains the idea of “self” versus “other” in world politics. States understand who they are by comparing themselves to others. Labels like “ally,” “rival,” or “threat” are not just descriptions. They shape how states behave. Calling a country a “rogue state” or a “strategic partner” builds a relationship of conflict or cooperation. This shows that identity politics is not just about emotions. It is a key factor that shapes real decisions in global affairs, from forming alliances to going to war. In short, constructivism provides the theory, and identity politics shows how that theory works in practice (Hopf, 1998).

Applications in Global Affairs

Constructivism and identity politics are not just theory. We can see them working in real global politics.

Foreign Policy Formation

Countries make foreign policy based on how they see themselves.

- Western countries often see themselves as leaders of democracy and human rights. So their foreign policy promotes elections, free speech, and liberal values in other states.
- Other countries may see their identity differently. They might focus more on sovereignty, religious values, or protecting their culture. For example, some Muslim states give importance to Islamic identity in their foreign policy.

So a state’s actions depend on its identity, not just power or money.

Conflict and Cooperation

Identity plays a double role in global affairs. It can both cause conflict and create cooperation between states. When groups or countries have different or opposing identities, it often leads to tension and war. Religious, ethnic, and national identities are especially powerful. For example, Shia-Sunni divisions have fueled conflicts in the Middle East, and national identity disputes are central to the Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan. In these cases, people see the “other” as a threat to their culture, faith, or nation, which makes peaceful solutions harder. Political leaders sometimes increase this division by using identity-based language to gain support, turning disagreements into deep-rooted conflicts. However, identity can also bring countries together when they share common values or beliefs. Shared identity creates trust and makes cooperation easier. The European Union is a strong example. Even though member states have different languages and histories, they share a “European identity” based

on democracy, human rights, and economic integration. This shared identity helped them move from centuries of war to close political and economic cooperation. Similarly, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation works because member states identify with a common religious and cultural heritage, which allows them to cooperate on issues affecting the Muslim world. So, identity is not always negative. When used positively, it can build alliances, increase trust, and help solve global problems that no single state can handle alone. London and New York: Isa Erbas 5096

Role of International Institutions

International institutions are not just places where states make rules or settle disputes. According to constructivism, they also play an important role in shaping identities and spreading norms. Organizations like the United Nations, European Union, World Health Organization, and Organization of Islamic Cooperation help create new ideas about what is “normal” or “acceptable” in world politics. For example, the UN promotes norms like human rights, peacekeeping, and sustainable development. When states join these institutions, attend meetings, and sign treaties, they are slowly socialized into these values. Over time, these external norms can become part of a state’s own identity. A country that once focused only on sovereignty may later start to see itself as a “responsible global actor” because of its membership in international bodies. These institutions also promote shared values that change how states see themselves and others. Asano, A. (2005) The European Union is a clear case. By working together on trade, law, and human rights, member states developed a common “European identity” alongside their national identities. This made cooperation easier and reduced the chance of conflict. Similarly, the WHO built a sense of global health community during COVID-19 by pushing the idea that “no one is safe until everyone is safe.” So, international institutions do more than manage state behavior. They help construct new identities, build trust, and create the foundation for long-term cooperation on global issues like climate change, terrorism, and pandemics. Adler, E. (2005).

Critical Analysis

Constructivism and identity politics help us understand global affairs better, but they also have weaknesses.

Critique of Constructivism

Although constructivism explains how ideas and identities shape global politics, it has important weaknesses. First, it often underestimates the role of material factors like military strength and economic power. In the real world, a country with a weak army or poor economy cannot survive just because it has a strong identity. Hard power still decides many outcomes in international relations. Second, constructivism lacks predictive precision. Theories like realism can make clear predictions about how states will act in anarchy. But constructivism depends on changing norms, culture, and discourse, which makes it hard to predict future behavior. Third, it relies too much on interpretation. Different scholars can look at the same speech, treaty, or historical event and draw different meanings from it. This makes constructivism less scientific compared to positivist theories that focus on measurable facts (Dawisha, 2003).

Critique of Identity Politics

Identity politics helps explain why states and groups behave in certain ways, but it also creates serious problems. When political leaders focus too much on religion, ethnicity, or tribe, it often intensifies divisions and conflicts instead of solving them. People start seeing each other as enemies rather than citizens of the same country. This can undermine national unity, especially in diverse states like Pakistan, India, or Nigeria, where many identities exist together. Another major issue is that identity is often manipulated by political elites for their own strategic purposes. Leaders use emotional identity-based appeals to win elections, hide corruption, or distract people from real issues like poverty and unemployment. So, while identity is powerful, it can be dangerous when used irresponsibly. Press Bozdaglioglu, Y. (2003).

Power and Identity

Critical perspectives argue that identity is not always formed freely. Powerful states have a big influence in shaping global norms and identity narratives. Countries like the United States and China promote their own values as “universal” through media, international organizations, and economic pressure. Smaller states then adopt these norms to gain legitimacy or aid, even if the norms do not match their culture. Identity narratives are also used to legitimize power and influence. For example, when a strong state intervenes in another country, it often uses identity-based justifications like “spreading democracy” or “fighting terrorism” to make the action look acceptable. This shows that global discourse is often unequal and biased. Non-Western identities, histories, and values get less space in international discussions, while Western ideas are treated as the global standard. So, power and identity are deeply connected, and we cannot understand one without looking at the other. Routledge. Checkel, P.J. (April 2004)

Policy Implications

If we understand that identity shapes global politics, then we can use it in a positive way. Here are some policy ideas:

Promoting Dialogue and Inclusion

If identity shapes how states and people behave, then one of the best ways to reduce conflict is to promote dialogue and inclusion. Many global and domestic conflicts happen because groups do not understand each other or feel excluded from the political system. Governments and international organizations should therefore encourage intercultural and interfaith dialogue. When people from different religions, ethnicities, or nations talk directly, it reduces fear and breaks stereotypes. For example, student exchange programs, interfaith conferences, and joint cultural festivals help people see their shared humanity instead of only their differences. Inclusion is just as important. States should create policies that make all groups feel like equal citizens. This means protecting minority rights, giving fair representation in government, and ensuring equal access to jobs and education. When people feel included, they are less likely to turn to extremism or separatism. Media and education also have a big role. Schools should teach about different cultures in a positive way, and media should avoid hate speech that divides people. Reducing polarization through these inclusive policies does not happen overnight, but over time it builds trust and social cohesion. In short, dialogue and

inclusion turn identity from a source of conflict into a source of peace and cooperation.

Constructive Use of Identity

Identity is a powerful force in politics, and instead of trying to remove it, leaders should learn to use it constructively. The goal should be to build national cohesion through shared values rather than letting identity create division. Every country has multiple ethnicities, religions, and cultures. If the state only highlights differences, it weakens unity. But if leaders focus on common ground like patriotism, justice, tolerance, and respect for law, then identity can bring people together. For example, national movements for independence in many countries succeeded because they built a shared identity that was bigger than tribe or sect. Pakistan's idea of "unity, faith, discipline" was meant to serve the same purpose. At the same time, states must avoid exclusionary or extremist identity narratives. When politicians or media present one group as "true citizens" and others as outsiders, it creates hate and violence. History shows that extreme nationalism and religious extremism often lead to civil wars and genocide. To prevent this, governments should regulate hate speech, promote balanced education, and punish leaders who use identity to spread fear. Schools, mosques, temples, and TV channels should teach that diversity is strength, not weakness. In short, identity cannot be ignored in politics. But if it is guided toward inclusion and shared values, it becomes a tool for stability and progress instead of conflict. . Geppert, C.D. (2011

Norm-Based Global Cooperation

Strengthen Global Norms

International organizations like the United Nations, European Union, and African Union play a big role in spreading global norms. These norms include human rights, peace, gender equality, and respect for international law. They do not force states to change overnight. Instead, they use diplomacy, reports, aid conditions, and global campaigns to slowly influence state behavior. When a state repeatedly signs treaties, joins debates, and faces global pressure, it starts to adjust its policies. Over time, these external norms become part of the state's own identity. For example, many countries that once ignored human rights now include them in their constitutions because of international pressure and socialization. So, constructivism says that norms do not just regulate behavior, they actually change how states see themselves. A country that once identified only as a "sovereign power" may later identify as a "responsible member of the global community." This identity shift makes long-term cooperation more likely.

Solve Global Problems Together

Some challenges are too big for any one country to handle. Climate change, pandemics like COVID-19, terrorism, and refugee crises cross all borders. If states only think about their narrow national interest, these problems get worse. But if they start seeing themselves as part of a larger shared identity, like "one human family" or a "global community," then cooperation becomes natural. For example, during COVID-19, countries that shared vaccines and data recovered faster than those that acted alone. On climate change, the Paris Agreement works because states accepted a shared identity as protectors of the planet. Constructivism explains this well: when states develop a collective identity, their interests also change. They move from "my country first" to "our world first." International organizations can help build this

shared identity through joint projects, global education, and media that highlights common humanity. So, shared identity is not just emotional. It is a practical tool to solve real global problems. Alistair S. May (2004)

CONCLUSION

Constructivism and identity politics provide us with a new approach to the global affairs. Conventional theories such as realism and liberalism merely consider material power, money and institutions. But constructivism demonstrates that world politics is not simply a matter of tanks and trade. It is also conceptual, ideological, normative, and identities. The way a state perceives itself and other states determines whether it will go to war, or buy peace, fight or collaborate. This is demonstrated in real life through identity politics. Groups and countries do not necessarily operate in a rational manner. Religion, ethnicity, culture, and national pride influence their actions. A state that considers itself as a state who defends the ideals of democracy will do things differently compared to a state that regards itself as a state that upholds the ideals of religious values. The concept of who is a friend or an enemy is not predetermined as well. It is socially constructed in history, media and political speeches. But we must also receive the restrictions of these conceptions. Constructivism is known to turn a blind eye to the fact that military and economic power are actually very important. An identity cannot exist by itself in a weak country. The identity politics can be also hazardous. In the hands of the wrong people, it only aggravates the division within a nation, the national unity is weakened and mostly abused by the wrong people to their own benefit. The strong states also have the capacity to influence the global norms and identity narratives to benefit themselves. Therefore, a balanced approach is the most appropriate. The world of power cannot be used to explain the world of global affairs, and the world of global affairs cannot be explained by the power alone. Material and ideational factors interact. This has two implications to policy makers. To begin with, it is important to note that identity is potent. Apply it to create dialogue, inclusion, and common global values. Second, manage its dark aspect. Beware of extremist or exclusionary identity politics that result in hatred and conflict. Ultimately, constructivism and identity politics remind us of the fact that the world politics is human. People, ideas and shared meanings construct it. When states and leaders realize this, they will be able to use identity not to divide the world, but to solve common problems and create a more peaceful world order.

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