INTRODUCTION

1. THE CENTRAL QUESTION—WHY HAS THERE BEEN SO LITTLE PROGRESS IN SECURITY STUDIES?

Why do many debates in security studies and international relations (IR) go on for decades, even centuries, without moving toward resolutions or agreements on the best explanation? Is there a way to improve the ability of IR and security scholars to make progress in finding the best explanation for the events and processes we study? This book tries to find at least one factor that will help answer the first question, and it uses that to suggest a change in the way that scholars advance their own positions and engage their rivals' views. The proposed change is a modest one, but it has the potential to make a significant difference in the way debates progress.

If policy choices are to have a chance of accomplishing their intended purposes, then it is of paramount importance for decision makers to draw on the best possible theoretical understanding available (Walt 1998). If a policy is based on a flawed theory, it will succeed only by luck. If scholarly debate is in disarray, arriving at the best policy choices—which sometimes are matters of war and peace—will be difficult for decision makers. This book looks at what might be more effective ways that scholars can reach conclusions about the best theory.

The natural sciences manage to progress over time, no matter how *progress* is defined. From time to time natural scientists have to debate a new theory. In those instances, the history of science shows that scientists eventually move toward agreement on the best theoretical explanation. Of course, what the natural sciences study is very different from the human affairs and relationships that the social sciences study. But since both claim to produce knowledge, it is

worth considering whether social scientists may be able to make more progress if they were to apply some aspects of natural scientists' methods. Thus, this book begins by considering the possibility that some aspects of what natural scientists do that enables them to make intellectual progress and build structures of knowledge might be applicable to the social sciences.

Perhaps what the natural sciences have that IR and security studies lack is a set of well-established criteria that are used to evaluate theoretical explanations. And if that is so, then an increased degree of clarity on criteria will enable authors to deal more directly with, and to respond to, one another's explanatory arguments. Success in dealing directly with opposing arguments could lead to greater success in finding the best explanations. No studies of IR have previously explored whether the use of different explanatory criteria may be one of the reasons that debates do not more often move toward resolution. The book thus investigates the hypothesis that progress in security studies has been slowed because of different scholars' use of different notions of explanation and different criteria of explanatory superiority.

To answer the central question of whether divergent uses of criteria inhibit agreement and progress, this book must address several prior questions, including the following: What do political scientists *actually do* when they claim to be "explaining"? And what is it about one explanation that leads scholars to regard it as superior to its rivals? The book begins by examining the core differences in debates over what science is and how it should ideally be conducted. Some authors who examine scientific practice focus on the descriptive task of finding out what scientists in fact do. Others focus on the prescriptive task of what makes empirical knowledge valid, true, useful, and/or reliable, since they develop principles about how scientific inquiry should be conducted. Chapter 1 offers a discussion of the relationship between the two. It asks whether improvements in explanatory practice must take account of existing practices, however justifiable or deficient they may be. The book does not assume that there is a single, univocal meaning that IR theorists attach to the term *explanation*; rather, it aims to determine which meaning(s) is used in the field.

Anyone who offers an explanation in security studies or IR should be able to specify what he or she means by that term and which factors or criteria qualify an explanation as a good one, even though books and journal articles in IR do not often present explicit definitions. The literature on IR methodology and metatheory offers several competing accounts of *explanation*. Because authors of substantive work in IR rarely identify any of these as the basis for their

approaches, the foundation for each approach remains implicit rather than explicit. While not minimizing the difficulty and fallibility of the task, this book attempts to identify the implicit ideas of explanation and good explanation in the writings of security studies scholars.

Further, the book attempts to determine how authors judge good explanations by examining three of the core debates in security studies: (1) Why do states pursue policies of nuclear proliferation? (2) Why do states choose to form the alliances they do, especially with regard to the role of power balancing? (3) And why do liberal democratic states behave the way they do toward other liberal democracies? The descriptive element of the book will select ten to twelve of the most influential and widely cited works on each of the three questions and will examine them with an eye toward extracting, as well as is possible, the notion or notions of explanation embodied in each. This requires a good deal of interpretation for most of the publications included. The initial goal was to find the ten most influential works. But since the ranking process was not purely formulaic or mechanical, and since some works ranked quite closely, there was an attempt to avoid an arbitrary cutoff point. In the alliance formation debate, two works ranked very close together; rather than choose one arbitrarily, both were included. In the democratic peace debate, three ranked so closely that all were included, for a total of twelve.

This book begins with the presumption that there is merit in Thomas Kuhn's (1970) view of how scientists come to learn how to conduct inquiry; that is, scientists in a particular question area conduct research in ways that fit with the paradigm or disciplinary matrix in which they were trained. They are taught which works are the key works, or "exemplars," in the field. As they enter a field, researchers absorb both the substantive theories and the implicit standards of how to contribute to the debate. From these works they learn what constitutes good defense of a theory, what kinds of evidence are expected, what kinds of mathematical or logical methods are appropriate, and so on. Students internalize the methods and assumptions of exemplar works and then carry them forward in their own studies. If this account is correct, then it will be useful to look at works that appear to be such exemplars of high-quality security studies.

2. POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Is there a unified concept of good explanation—or best available explanation—used by political scientists in the field of security studies, and thus a single set

of criteria by which they choose explanatory theories? There are three possible answers. First, we may find that there is a clear notion of good explanation that spans the various discourses in security studies with a consistent set of criteria used by all. A second is that we may find that each of the substantive debate areas has a unified notion and unified set of criteria that are used by all authors in that debate, but those differ from one debate to another—perhaps because of systematic differences arising from methodological peculiarities of each area (e.g., proliferation studies tend to be small-*N* and others tend to be large-*N*). Third, we may find that there is no unified notion of explanation or pattern of criteria at all; in this case, different authors within a single debate area use different notions of explanation and/or different criteria of explanatory superiority. This book argues for the third, which in turn raises the question of whether divergences in the criteria do or do not have an effect on the differences in the explanations offered by different theoretical schools.

3. EVIDENCE

Just what sort of evidence reveals how security studies authors judge which explanation is best? A survey of works in security studies that focuses on what the authors mean by "good explanation" would do the job. A comprehensive survey of all major journals and presses would tell us how the term is used, but it is too large a project to be practical. A much smaller survey will suffice, if it contains the most widely read, widely assigned, and widely cited works, since such works must embody the one (or several) most entrenched notion(s) of explanation. If those works did not use the term in these well-understood ways, they would be unlikely to reach the status of most often read, assigned, and cited. In fact, if there were a difference in the meaning used by the most widely read works and the less influential works, we would discover an interesting paradox, and possibly a counterexample to Kuhn's view of how new researchers learn how to conduct inquiry in a particular field. But because of both the low probability that there is such a split and the limitations of space, this study confines itself to ten-to-twelve published works in each of the three question areas, and so will not explore the popular-obscure divide.

Discounting the small probability that there is a divergence between the influential and obscure works, we may expect that ten to twelve works in each area are enough to show either that there are wide discrepancies in what authors mean by *explanation* or that there is convergence on a specific meaning—and if the latter, what the meaning is. The highest-profile works both reflect

what the field does in the way of scholarship and shape how those who are currently being trained for professional academic careers understand the concept. That is, the most widely read, cited, and assigned works convey the idea or meaning of *explanation* to the next generation of scholars. As noted already, Kuhn's account of the history of the natural sciences includes an analysis of how key methodological ideas are conveyed from one generation to the next. The ways these exemplar works convey core questions and methods in the field is discussed in Chapter 1.

4. EXEMPLAR WORKS

The research design of this book requires, as just noted, the identification of a set of works that manifests the concept (or a concept) of explanation, as it is currently understood in security studies, which also transmits the understanding to the next group of students in the field. The selection of works is based on three sorts of considerations. One consideration is a survey of the most cited articles in the five key academic journals that cover international security issues. Two of these are general scholarly journals of IR, namely *International Organization* and *International Studies Quarterly*, and the other three are the most prominent journals that focus specifically on security-oriented issues, namely *International Security*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and *Security Studies*. A second source is a survey of editors of the top twenty IR journals (as rated by the most recent *Teaching, Research, and International Policy*, or *TRIP*, survey of scholars in the field of IR at the time the research design was finalized; see Jordan et al. [2009]). These individuals have unique advantages in gaining a sense of which journal articles and books are the most influential in the three issue areas. The third source is graduate syllabi from courses that deal with international security affairs in the major graduate programs, that is, the institutions most likely to produce the next generation of publishing scholars. The top twenty institutions, as ranked by the *TRIP* study (Jordan et al. 2009), were contacted and asked to provide course syllabi and reading lists in the fields covered. Approximately fifty course syllabi were collected. Of the three methods used to select works, only the inspection of course syllabi targets books as opposed to journal articles. So there was an additional effort to balance books with journal articles. However, some of the books that appeared had been summarized in widely read journal articles prior to their publication. So the notion of explanation of those articles that are analyzed in this book was checked against the notion in the same authors' books for any discrepancies.

The works on course syllabi were evaluated for their prominence by counting them only once for appearing on a given syllabus; works that were assigned at different points for the same course were still counted only once. Works that were listed as "recommended" were not counted. Works authored by the course instructors were excluded from consideration for that syllabus. In a few cases, a specific author was frequently assigned, but there was no single work by that author; rather, there were several different works assigned with more or less equal frequency. Because, in those cases, each author's concept of explanation would thus seem to be an important one in transmitting the notion to current students, an effort was made to be sure that one of the author's works appeared on the list of publications surveyed.

Some authors published multiple works in the same substantive area in which they advanced or refined their arguments. For example, in the case of democratic peace, there are multiple works by Farber and Gowa, by Doyle, and by Russett and his various coauthors. Since these did not generally constitute independent positions and did not represent an expansion of the range of concepts of or criteria for explanation, the set of works is considered together as constituting a single position, and one of the works is emphasized in the descriptive analysis. Most attention in the analyses in Chapters 3–5 emphasizes the most prominent of the works, although references to others on the same topic by the same author are referred to when appropriate.

5. STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book proceeds in several parts. First, in Chapter 1 it poses the central question of the study, asking whether progress in some areas of security study is slowed by scholars' failure to use similar criteria in assessing their arguments in favor of competing explanations. It then considers whether such a question can be answered in view of the complex relationship between describing epistemic norms and prescribing new norms in the natural sciences, examines the two traditions of inquiry in IR, and briefly discusses the notion of progress. Second, in Chapter 2, the book examines some of the most serious and widely debated efforts to analyze the notion of explanation and the criteria regarded as showing that one explanation is best. Third, in Chapters 3–5, the book surveys the prominent mainstream works in three selected topical areas of security studies—nuclear proliferation, alliance formation, and democratic peace—and seeks to identify common features, criteria, and patterns of progress. Finally, in Chapter 6, the book offers a broader look at the data in a way that connects

the three debates with the notion of progress in social science knowledge. It concludes with an examination of possible alternative answers to the central question, some caveats, and recommendations for improving research in a way that will open up more opportunities for progress and approach-to-consensus about "best explanations" in security studies.

This book focuses on "explanation" in empirical-explanatory debates in security studies. As a field, IR encompasses question areas in various other subfields, such as international political economy, international law, and international organization. Furthermore, even within security studies there are different sorts of question areas, and some of the questions within these areas are primarily moral-normative, such as, when is the use of force justified? (For a discussion of the distinction between statements with "primarily" factual versus evaluative content, see Chernoff [2005, 18–19, 41].) No claim is made here that the analysis and conclusion of Chapter 6 apply beyond empirical-explanatory debates in security studies. There are prima facie reasons to suspect that there are differences, and generalization beyond security studies would require additional case studies. But in debates that are primarily empirical-explanatory, the recommended focus on identifying the criteria that one's study relies on could significantly enhance the possibility of progress.