Anarchy as a Domestic Phenomenon

Although anarchy is deservedly one of the most heavily studied political phenomena, the overwhelming portion of this research has treated it as an international phenomenon, with relatively little thought given to the possibility that it might be a domestic phenomenon with far-reaching international consequences. This, in my view, is a considerable omission, especially since the expansive body of literature on ethnic conflict and state failure makes clear that anarchy can indeed be found as a feature of domestic politics, not solely international ones. Moreover, when considering the widely attributed effects of international anarchy on the nature of interaction between state actors, one becomes cognizant of the importance of effective governance and the effect such governance has through the elimination of anarchy on the domestic level.

International Anarchy

Starting with Thucydides and continuing through contemporary structural realists, the long-standing realist argument has held that the effects of international anarchy on state actors are fixed and resistant to efforts to change (Ahrensdorf 2000). These effects include making conflict an ineradicable part of interaction of international actors. Realists claim that in a self-help system where there is no overarching central authority and where all states possess inherent offensive capabilities and therefore the ability to destroy other states, each state as an instrumentally rational and strategic actor must safeguard itself against the possibility of destruction (Grieco 1988). The absence of a world government and the preservation of
the institution of state sovereignty that ensures states retain the monopoly on the legitimate use of force and recognize no higher authority means, according to the structural realists, wars occur because there is nothing in the international system to prevent them (Waltz 1988). Given the absence of any institution with real power to prevent international aggression, anarchy is inevitably going to force states not only to seek their security by enhancing their power relative to other states, but the ensuing competition between states will frequently erupt into conflict and even outright warfare (Grieco 1988). Even though the international system may not be in a constant state of war, it is nevertheless under a constant threat of war that limits cooperation due to the logic of security competition. Since international cooperation will almost inevitably benefit one partner more than the other, the prospect of a potential adversary realizing a relative gain is sufficient, according to the structural realists, to forgo cooperation even if such cooperation offers the possibility of an absolute gain (Grieco 1988). The necessity of self-reliance combined with the threats posed by others leads to an overriding concern with relative power position over other states and makes cooperation at best temporary and difficult to sustain due to power distribution concerns and fear of cheating (caused by imperfect information and lack of enforcement mechanisms) even among allies, all the more so since structural realists do not view alliances as anything other than fleeting arrangements forced upon the allies by the presence of a common threat that requires the assistance of others (Mearsheimer 1994). The World War II–era “grand alliance” that did not much outlast the destruction of Nazi Germany is a prime example of the fleeting nature of alliances in an anarchic international system.

Given these conditions occasional wars are inevitable due to the security dilemma, competition for scarce resources needed to maintain or improve own position in the international system (Roy 1993), or merely miscalculation caused by imperfect information due to adversaries’ incentives to misrepresent own aims and intent (Mearsheimer 1994). Consequently, the argument goes, state leaders do not have the luxury of indulging in idealism, let alone altruism, as each state’s right to ensure self-preservation overrides all other moral obligations (Jackson 2005).