Theories of IR try to find the causes and conditions that lead nations into conflict sometimes and cooperation at other times. Theories are proposed to answer questions such as, why don’t states live together in harmony? Why do some states build arms and threaten each other during peacetime? Why do some states go to war? And why, in general, is there so much conflict in the international system? This chapter summarizes the most prominent types of theory and then looks at how they would or would not support the various policy options toward Iraq, North Korea, and China presented in Chapter 1.

Theories and Their Uses

In showing how IR theories serve as the intermediary that links policy making to debates over metatheory, we need to consider alternative theoretical approaches. This chapter looks at three: political realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Political realism and liberalism are long-established theoretical approaches. Constructivism is relatively new—some have questioned whether it is a theory, a metatheory, or both. The substantive IR theory of constructivism is considered in this chapter and the metatheory is considered in Chapter 4.

This chapter presents outlines of the three theoretical approaches noted but only in outline form in order to show how they differ on some of their theoretical principles. We can thus show that the metatheory debates between naturalist/rationalists and interpretivist/reflectivists have a bearing on how scholars and policy makers should rationally choose among competing policy solutions. There are textbooks that enumerate the competing theoretical approaches in much more detail.1 The aim of this book is to show why the metatheory debates are relevant to those who seek policy solutions. In order to do so we will offer only a brief view of policy options and theories sufficient to set the stage for the more detailed exposition of contemporary metatheory debates in Chapters 3 and 4.
Policy makers are able to decide rationally among the available competing options only when they have a theory, empirical evidence, and values or goals. As we will see, some theories used to justify policy actions include moral values and some do not. When they do not specifically include values or goals, we will assume that American policy makers choose policies based on the most basic goals Americans elect their leaders to fulfill, those of protecting the borders of the country and promoting the security and prosperity of American citizens. Figure 2.1 illustrates this relationship.

For example, think about the disagreements between political candidates Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon in the 1960 presidential campaign. They took different positions on how to treat China, which at the time was using its artillery to attack two islands held by the Nationalists. But the two presidential candidates agreed on the goals of protecting U.S. national interests, credibility, and allies. Their difference was over the best means for achieving those goals, which was, therefore, a difference between the “cause-and-effect” theoretical principles they accepted. Vice President Nixon held that allowing China to control the islands between Formosa and the mainland would cause U.S. allies to question the commitment of the United States to defend them; Senator Kennedy did not.

In 2004 Senator Kerry and President Bush disagreed on foreign policy matters, including how to deal with North Korea, which had indicated in 2002 that it had nuclear weapons. The United States and North Korea (along with Japan, South Korea, China, and Russia) were engaged in Six-Party Talks, which had no one-on-one U.S.-North Korea component. The two candidates disagreed on cause-and-effect consequences of adding a set of talks directly between the United States and North Korea. Bush and Kerry agreed on the goal of maximizing the security of the United States and its allies, and they agreed that the best means to reach that goal would be to prevent North Korea from developing a nuclear arsenal. But they accepted different theories about the effects of certain policies. Senator Kerry believed that North Korea would simply continue moving toward nuclear weapons tests if the United States did not go along with its demand for direct negotiations. President Bush insisted that North Korea would be less likely to test and build a nuclear weapon if the United States refused to talk directly with North Korean officials and instead forced them to deal with the five other parties together. As with Nixon and Kennedy, the two candidates

![Figure 2.1](image-url)