Non-material Factors in International Relations

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Abstract: *While material factors were previously conceived as a core subject in the study of international relations (IRs), in modern times, non-material factors increasingly prevail in practice and have more influence on international relations, which requires further research. The paper reviews non-material factors in the history of international relations; indicates the rise of non-material factors of modern times through eight manifestations in international relations; analyzes five basic reasons for their emergence; and identifies some factors and their ability to affect international relations. On that basis, the paper draws some comments on the study of non-material factors in international relations.*

1. The non-material factors in the history of international relations

Throughout history, materials have always been the controlling factor in IRs. IRs' entities behave with each other for material benefits such as wealth, money, land, and resources. Countries build their power on material factors such as military, economy, geography, and population. The tools used in IRs are mainly physical, such as military forces or economic resources. Power such as the purposes and means of the country in the IRs is also hard power with reinforcing actions through military coercion or economic sanction. This reality is justified because life and national survival depend heavily on materials while material conditions are hardly sufficient. At that time, people and states were both interested in the material and interacted through a material exchange. In that context, of course, IRs are "crushed" by material factors. This reality is also regulated by security and development, which are the basic interests of people and states. Material powers and tools are the main means of ensuring those benefits. This in turn regulates security-politics and economy - two key areas of IRs. When these are the two main areas, material factors notably military and economic become more essential to implementing IRs.

However, that does not mean that material factors are completely dominant and exclusive within IRs. In reality, IRs are human-to-human relationships, conducted by humans, based on human calculation, and intended to follow human interests. The country is a community of people, and the state representing the nation is also

specific people who conduct IRs on behalf of the nation's communities. Therefore, non-material factors (subjective elements of the spiritual world) are certainly present in all stages and processes of IRs. However, while IRs are being "pressed" by material factors, non-material factors are not properly addressed in both practice and research.

This inadequate interest is also regulated by cognitive reasons. In the early days of IRs' history, at least in the ancient and medieval times as well as in some parts of modern times, the perception of IRs was influenced primarily by materialism and objective idealism. Materialism considers that without changing objective reality, humans and IRs are always governed by that factor. At the same time, the objective idealistic consciousness believes that the circumstances and fates are determined by supernatural forces and cannot be changed.

Such practices and perceptions are also reflected in IRs' theories, which accumulate the most fundamental perceptions of practice. The IRs' theories that emerged before the modern era were all materialistic. The earlier a theory emerged in history, the stronger the materiality. Realism is the earliest and completely materialistic theory in which people are governed by objective circumstances, and phenomena in the IRs are regulated by an anarchic environment. This doctrine also states that conflict of power is inevitable and that the history of IRs' movement is regular in the cycle of conflicts following conflicts. Liberalism is also a materialistic theory that recognizes the role of objective circumstances such as realism but interprets the IRs based on other influences from the circumstances. This theory states that the historical process of IRs is normative when moving in a straight line with the tendency of cooperation gradually replacing conflict.

It can be seen that the above two theories considered humans and non-material elements but are relatively insignificant and considered secondary. Both recognize the role of reasoning, but reasoning does not change the situation and only helps the subjects to calculate and choose what is advantageous in the situation. Both theories considered humans, but they always assume that humans are in the same natural state as Thomas Hobbes's view. Realism considers it [the natural state of man] as the cause of struggle and conflict, and liberalism always considers it [the natural state of man] in the construction of international organizations (Beate Jahn, 2000: xi). These theories all seek to be universal but do not account for cultural diversity (Lebow, 2009: 153-159) so it is difficult to fully explain many common cases in IRs such as ethnic, religious, ideological, value conflict. This generalization effort simplifies existing complex and multi-dimensional phenomena of IRs.

The comparison between these two theories shows that liberalism accounts for non-material factors more than realism, although it is essentially a materialistic theory. This theory deals with freedom, democracy, as seen in the early or as moral in the secondary. In addition, liberalism also argues that, without changing the course of normative history, humans can still act to make the law work more smoothly. Since then, scholars of this theory have suggested various ways to act on IRs in the direction of reducing conflicts and promoting cooperation.

2. The non-material factors of modern times

Gradually, the status of non-material factors has changed in modern times. These factors tend to be more and more tangible in world life and, together have an increasing impact on IRs. This trend is reflected in several key points:

First, the non-material factors have become a formant of power or collective power of a nation. Proving this is the rise of soft power in the role of culture and prestige, normative power in the role of norms and values, etc. It is increasingly necessary to build this mental component in national synergy, many of which are in large nations as well as small nations.

Second, non-material factors have become the main targets for foreign policy. This phenomenon comes from many reasons including the aforementioned power reasons. Non-material factors such as external goals are usually values, norms, culture, etc. This phenomenon is also quite common in foreign policy in many countries, even becoming the priority for policy achievement in first-world countries.

Third, non-material factors have become tools in IRs. This can be seen through confidence forming, which has become a deterrent to conflict and is applied everywhere. Public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy have also developed everywhere to gain favor and appeal. In addition, public opinions and values are promoted to increase influence and to gather forces, etc.

Fourth, non-material factors create new problems in IRs that have never existed before: international responsibility, humanitarian intervention, value competition, the formation of common identity, the construction of international order based on law, etc. These issues emerged primarily after the Cold War and are increasingly present in both bilateral and multilateral relations.

Fifth, not only countries but also non-national actors have participated in the pursuit of these non-material factors. The promotion of non-material factors is on the agenda of international forums and has become the goal of social movements and many non-governmental international organizations. Such a large number of propulsion forces make non-material factors more and more universal, widely used not only in the IRs but also within domestic affairs.

Sixth, international cooperation in cultural, social, educational, health, sports, etc. is currently growing. As cooperation in these fields increases, non-material factors develop. Due to inter-sectoral interactions, this development has hurt security politics and the economy. This in turn increases the number of non-material factors in the two. This defaults to the IRs' field. Overall, non-material factors of the modern era have become multidisciplinary phenomena.

Seventh, the presence of non-material factors is gradually reaching the scale of the international system. Such developments have helped form a non-material structure in the international system. A case in point is the European Union (EU), which has relatively developed non-material structures. Non-material structures are also becoming more and more formal in many other areas. This has increased the likelihood of non-material factors affecting the IRs, not only at the national level but also at the international system level.

Eighth, the prevalence of non-material factors has become a big trend in the world.

This is demonstrated in that many countries (including all large nations) pursue issues related to these factors in the IRs. Such widespread and increasing pursuits make the presence of non-material factors more common and their role increasing, as a major trend in IRs. This is a new feature of modern IRs.

Again, this new reality is reflected in the development of the IRs' theories. Following the rule of realism and liberalism, many new IRs' theories have emerged since the 1980s, including constructivism, critical theory, English school, feminism, etc. What these theories have in common is that they pay more attention to and highlight more subjective factors (inter-subjective factors) that belong to humans. The theoretical perception of these theories is largely based on rationalism. Subjective to the view that materialism and rationality are all relative. These theories, especially constructivism, argue that non-material elements should be added to the IRs' implementation research and practice. For example, regarding structure, unlike the materialistic view of realism that structures dominate elements, is thought to be as important as non-material structures and structures in the English school. This structure has shaped the interests of actors in world politics, structures, and elements that make up each other (Griffiths, 2007: 77).

We do not intend to rely purely on theory to prove any problem in practice. However, theories, especially long-standing theories, are often reflections of needs in practice. So, when big theories are interested in a problem, they reflect in part the role of the problems in practice and are problems that need to be solved to meet the needs of life. At least, the emergence of non-material factors in the spiritual world in modern times shows that people and countries are increasingly interconnected, not simply a one-dimensional country that governs people, as in the view of materialistic theories of realism and liberalism.

3. Why are non-material factors emerging in modern times?

Many factors influence the emergence of non-material factors. Among them, new factors have emerged, but some have long been latent and not fully recognized until modern times which have an impact on the IRs. These factors include both causes and conditions, specifically:

The first is human development. Historically, human development has been normative, taking place throughout both materialistic and mental life. Materialistic and mental life are closely related to each other within the same human subject. In modern times, materialistic life has developed so that people can no longer be too obsessed with material factors. Since then, humans have become more interested in improving non-material factors for the development of mental life. Then, as the need and mental life itself increases, humans will also pay more attention to the development of non-material factors. This dialectical development first emerged within each country, then spread to the IRs, as internal and external relations are increasingly intertwined in modern times.

The second is the development of the IRs. The IRs began to develop in modern times, but the most prosperous was in modern times and especially after the Cold War. The driving force behind the development of IRs is the needs of people and countries, including the need for mental life. Therefore, the developed

IRs must also meet the increasing mental needs of people and countries. In modern times, the IRs have no longer focused on areas that meet material interests but have tended to expand to areas that contain non-material elements such as culture, society, education, science, etc. This makes those elements more visible in the IRs. Since IRs are multidisciplinary, non-material factors will act and manifest more and more in all areas of IRs.

The third is the development of awareness level. This development is reflected in citizens' educational level, "leaders' educational level" and "governor's educational level". As the educational level increases, the demand for the development of mental life will also increase, creating pressure on both domestic and foreign policies. At the same time, increasing citizens' educational level will lead to higher requirements for intellectual leadership to meet the necessities for joint development. As leaders' educational level and leadership increase, awareness of the need to develop non-material factors will also increase, initially in domestic relations. For foreign affairs, more and more people will also be aware of the role and impact of these factors as effective tools and measures. As a result, these factors are likely to be of interest and application to foreign policy, and since then they have become more visible in the IRs.

The fourth is the development of democracy. Democracy allows the people to raise a voice regarding the problems of their country, including foreign policies. Therefore, winning the sympathy or higher support of the people of other countries is always the goal of countries because their support can put pressure on the government of that country to limit actions that are not beneficial to their country or vice versa. To this end, impact by non-material factors is always an effective way, which is often used by countries in IRs to influence other countries. The target audience is usually the public and elite of the country.

The fifth is the development of transnational media. In modern times, we see an explosion of information and communication in various ways, such as the Internet and social networks. Social media is the fastest, most accessible, non-materialized means of delivery to individuals from different countries. The media is also capable of generating wide and effective international public opinion through non-material factors. The transfer of non-material factors can not only affect emotions but also change perceptions, benefiting the subject of communication. At the same time, as the use of communication increases, the demand for non-material factors increases. Therefore, with the development of communication, non-material factors are more present in international life, and the potential for impact on foreign policies and IRs increases.

4. What non-material factors should be considered?

Non-material factors to consider are those belonging to the human mental world but must affect the IRs. Many factors meet this requirement, such as:

Knowledge: Includes information, understanding, and skills gained through learning, [research], and experience. Knowledge affects IRs in several key ways: (i) Knowledge plays an important role in the calculation of reason, in which different knowledge leads to different calculations of reason, different choices of wisdom; (ii) Knowledge affects all processes of foreign

policy, such as situation recognition, problem identification, policy formulation, solution suggestion, selection of tools, and behavior manners. Everyone is involved in the "brainstorms" of all these processes; (iii) Knowledge can lead to higher levels of science and technology, resulting in greater development, power, and even power in the IRs, as in the case of developed countries. Also, high knowledge tends to be less violent. Overall, as life and IRs develop, knowledge is increasingly needed.

Nationalism: An ideology of loyalty and an attachment to the nation-state. Nationalism has a great influence on IRs: (i) Nationalism leads to the need to maintain national sovereignty, thereby helping to maintain anarchy in the international environment as well as the division of the world into many countries; (ii) Nationalism always emphasizes national-ethnic interests in foreign relations, thus turning countries' interests into main drives of the country in IRs; (iii) Nationalism is an important cause of two fundamental states of IRs: conflict and cooperation, conflict of national interests, and harmony of national interests facilitating cooperation; (iv) Nationalism is the agent of many major issues in IRs, such as separatism, secessionism, ethnic conflict... It can be said that among the non-material factors, nationalism is the most influential factor to IRs.

Leadership: To set goals, set tasks, choose methods, and direct action for an organization or a group to which you are the leader. Leadership also includes engaging, mobilizing, organizing, and guiding others to achieve those goals and tasks (Hoang Khac Nam, 2011: 167-168). National leadership has important implications, sometimes crucial, for the successful adoption and implementation of foreign policy. Good leadership makes the right decisions, can create unity, empower the country, create international prestige as soft power, and vice versa. Although there is still controversy over whether individual leadership or policy-making mechanisms play a decisive role, the individual leadership imprinted in national foreign policy is quite common. Leaders' intellectual ability, personal dignity, and individuality remain factors to be taken into account at the level of individual analysis. The practice shows that many individual decisions change "history" rather than controlled by it.

Ethics: A system of beliefs based on accepted ethics that are capable of controlling behavior. In the IRs, ethics is reflected in relationships with other countries, which include beliefs or concepts about good/bad, angelic/satanic, things that should be done/should not be done. Ethics has the potential to affect IRs, such as (i) Ethics exists in the same way as standards or values and can adjust policies and behaviors within the IRs; (ii) With its humanistic values, ethics helps reduce war, conflict, and violence - which results in many crimes and infidelity in human-to-human relations, including the IRs; (iii) Also, from the above human values, ethics when accepted and shared will encourage cooperation, a sense of responsibility, and common values toward a common community.

Identity: The most fundamental characteristics of one subject to distinguish one subject from another. Identity factors are often considered in two dimensions: the subject perceives itself and the other person perceives the subject. Subjects often have different identities. The biggest

effects of identity on IRs are twofold. First, identity contributes to the regulation of national perceptions, ideas, and interests in the IRs. Different identities among countries contribute to the regulation of complexity, lack of uniformity, and hence the risk of conflict and chaos within the IRs. Second, identity can be born, changed, and lost, not immutable. Thus, through the process of interaction, a common identity can be formed and is an important factor in the sharing, cooperation, cohesion, and formation of communities between countries.

Norms: Acceptable standards for actions that are applied within a community. Standards are established through interaction and exist in all societies. Standards often exist as community conventions, which are accepted by the majority without necessarily being expressed in writing as law. In the IRs, norms play a similar role to laws, i.e., they act to regulate behavior and relations between countries. The form of normative sanctions is often simply the adverse reactions of other members of the international community. The normative binding is not high, so it is easier to accept in IRs than in international law. Another emerging effect is the introduction of standards and the validation of them in the IRs to limit the actions of other countries. That's the normative power that first-world countries and some international organizations are using.

Trust: To trust someone is honesty, doesn't affect oneself, and is trustworthy. Trust plays an important role in IRs. History shows that distrust often leads to suspicion, concern, and conflict. Disbelief will increase IRs' complexity, leading to various phenomena such as security dilemma, arms race, etc.

The fact also shows that many international conflicts arise from more distrust than from conflicts of interest. Disbelief also hinders efforts for international integration and cooperation. Therefore, building trust has become an important measure for conflict management, promoting cooperation within today's IRs. At the same time, many measures to maintain trust have been proposed and implemented in practice. In addition, building trust in others can also help create prestige, making the nation's voice more persuasive.

Reputation: Other people's recognition of certain characteristics or abilities. In the IRs, national reputation reflects the recognition of other countries for certain outstanding characteristics or capabilities of their countries. These characteristics/capabilities are usually positive (providing trust rather than fear) and have been proven to give credibility to other countries. Credibility gives the country the ability to persuade or influence other countries on certain issues; makes the country's voice more weighted, more persuasive, and easier to support. In addition, it is easy for a nation with a reputation to gain international support and even gain leadership and power. To some extent, reputation is soft power.

Culture: Impact on IRs in various ways: First, culture and its values serve as a norm that can inhibit or promote any action in foreign relations. Second, culture is often used as a means of influence. A country that exerts cultural influence can spread its values and political views in its favor. Even cultural influence creates cultural appeal. Third, culture can also be used as a means of attracting and gathering forces to gain power. Compared to economy and politics, cultural means are less suspicious

and easier to accept. Fourth, cultural similarities and shared common values are easy to form mutual understanding and sympathy among countries, thereby gaining international support on certain issues. Fifth, on the contrary, cultural differences are sometimes agents of conflict or make international conflicts more difficult to resolve. It is these roles of culture that make cultural diplomacy popular in modern IRs. Public Opinion: Information, views, values in the form of social response to policy decisions. Public opinion influences policy-making participants through public media, through various forms of responses from both domestic and foreign forces. International public opinion is capable of encouraging or suppressing many of the country's actions in the IRs, helping the country to gain international support and limit international aid to the other party. Therefore, countries often carry out foreign propaganda and reputation to win public opinion in their favor. Currently, the development of cross-national mass media is facilitating countries to influence public opinion.

5. Some conclusions

In modern times, the important role of non-material factors is clear. They are likely to have a significant impact on all processes of foreign policy, from planning to implementation. They affect the calculation, choice, and behavior of partners. They also have the potential to impact the international environment and the international structure. Because of these roles, the study of non-material factors in IRs is necessary, especially for modern IRs. The study of those factors further identifies the causes, conditions, and implications of IRs.

Despite the non-material factors that emerged mainly in modern times, taking these factors into account is still useful in historical exploration and interpretation. Little or more, those factors played a role in the IRs in previous periods. Of course, this study is not easy due to historical difficulties. However, non-material factors may be important indicators for the study of regional and broader history, based on measuring commonalities in recognition and behavior for these factors.

Due to non-material factors with movement, there is also a difference at each stage of history. Countries and regions have different cultural and social environments, so the presence of non-material elements varies from place to place. Therefore, applying these factors to explain IRs will not be the same across historical periods, not the same across countries and regions. At the same time, it is not easy to derive general models for studying the role and impact of non-material factors of different countries, because countries have different concepts, acceptance, and resistance.

When you study the roles and effects of non-material factors in the IRs should be noted at least in two points: (i) more subjective research, because these factors are highly dependent on individual subjects; (ii) more attention to internal affairs, because these factors are influenced by domestic and not just the external environment.

The application of the non-material factors leads to questions: Are humans the "slaves" of objective circumstances? Is history legal and inevitable? And should IRs research be based on materialistic or subjective thinking or a combination of the two? These will be controversial issues, but it is clear that IRs and their history are not just material

developments and material developments are not entirely alone.

In practice, all countries now seek to develop and utilize non-material elements in the IRs. This trend demonstrates their usefulness for security and development. Therefore, it is necessary to accelerate the study of these factors, not just for understanding, but for application. On the other hand, the use of these factors has been, is, and will cause problems related to other countries, including Vietnam. So, we need to be aware of how to behave appropriately, because dealing with these problems with uncertain physical means is appropriate and effective ❑

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