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The importance of international learning

JEFFREY W. KNOPF*

Abstract. A programme of research on learning in international relations began developing in the 1980s. However, learning research has not realised its potential. This article seeks to stimulate new work on learning by analysing why learning is important in international relations and outlining a research focus that reflects this assessment of learning's significance. The research so far has mostly treated learning as a foreign policy phenomenon, but this fails to capture one of the major reasons for interest in learning. Learning matters in part because of long-standing debates about whether it is possible to make progress in reducing the amount of armed conflict in world politics. For such progress to occur, it is likely that some form of learning would have to take place. However, learning by just a single state will often not be sufficient to change the quality of international outcomes. There thus needs to be research specifically on the possibility of shared learning by two or more states, a research focus this article will label 'international learning'. A few illustrative examples will demonstrate the feasibility of doing research on shared, cross-national learning.

Given the problems that recur in world politics, writing on international affairs has often pointed to a need for learning or, more rarely, noted with satisfaction those cases that appear to indicate the achievement of learning. Although casual interest in learning has thus long existed, a scholarly research programme devoted to the study of learning in international politics only emerged in the 1980s. After critics pointed out conceptual problems in the initial studies, more recent examinations of learning have narrowed their focus to how policymakers draw lessons from past experience. At the same time, learning has become an important component of some broader ideational theories, especially social constructivism, but this literature often assumes that learning occurs rather than making it an object of research. This article argues that empirical research specifically on learning is still needed, but involving a different approach than is currently emphasised.

Research on learning has focused mainly on whether states or international organisations (IOs) show learning in their own, individual policies. However, this focus on what I will call 'foreign policy learning' is too narrow to address a major reason why learning matters. In international relations, learning is relevant to debates about whether it is possible to make progress in world politics, especially in

* For their helpful comments and suggestions, I thank John Odell, Martha Finnemore, Deborah Larson, J. David Armstrong, Geoff Wiseman, Andrei Tsygankov, Hayward Alker, and several anonymous reviewers. I give special thanks to Michael Barletta for extensive tutoring on the Argentina-Brazil case. I also thank Geert Poppe for research assistance. I presented preliminary versions of various sections of this article in papers given at the 1998 annual meetings of the International Studies Association and the American Political Science Association (APSA) and a poster for the 2001 APSA meeting.

reducing the amount of conflict. For such progress to occur, it will at minimum be helpful and may even be necessary for some form of learning to take place. However, learning by just a single state will often not be sufficient to improve international outcomes; more than one state may have to agree about how to change things for change to occur. Thus, in addition to work on foreign policy learning, there also needs to be research on the possibility of learning in common by two or more states, a focus I will label 'international learning.'

This article begins by showing that many studies that examine foreign policy learning are really most interested in whether learning increases the chances for cooperation or peace, but despite this they do not emphasise determining whether relevant learning has spread in such a way as to make these outcomes possible. The article suggests that this disconnect occurs because of steps taken to avoid anticipated realist and positivist criticisms. Next, the article makes a case for research on internationally shared learning by showing its significance for literatures ranging from classical idealism to more recent work on constructivism and critical theory. Final sections of the article describe two possible ways to conduct empirical research on international learning. First, the article illustrates the possibility of agreement across states on relevant lessons of history with examples from the 1991 Persian Gulf War and nuclear arms control. Second, the article examines a clear case of progress – the rapprochement between Argentina and Brazil – in order to show it is possible to identify learning that occurs along the road to conflict resolution. Overall, this article seeks to show both why it is important for IR specialists to study learning and that it is feasible to do so in a manner consistent with the reasons for learning's importance.

The emergence of the learning research programme

Although scholars of international politics have long made casual references to learning, learning in international relations only became a significant research focus in its own right in the 1980s. The research drew on notions of learning developed in psychology, in comparative politics research on the diffusion of ideas, and in work on organisational learning.¹ In an early study, Etheredge investigated whether there had been learning in US foreign policy towards Central America and the Caribbean (he concluded there had not).² Etheredge's interest was thus foreign policy learning by a single country.

Ernst Haas's studies of international regimes,³ which argued that 'cognitive evolution' explains some regimes, developed into another line of research on learning.

¹ Given the length of this article and the fact I argue for a different approach to studying learning in international relations, I will not review the learning research in other fields here. I refer interested readers to excellent literature reviews in Philip E. Tetlock, 'Learning in US and Soviet Foreign Policy: In Search of an Elusive Concept', in George W. Breslauer and Philip E. Tetlock (eds.), *Learning in US and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991) and Jack S. Levy, 'Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield', *International Organization*, 48 (1994), pp. 279–312.

² Lloyd S. Etheredge, *Can Governments Learn? American Foreign Policy and Central American Revolutions* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985).

³ Ernst B. Haas, 'Why Collaborate? Issue-Linkage and International Regimes', *World Politics*, 32 (1980), pp. 357–405; Haas, 'Words Can Hurt You; or, Who Said What to Whom about Regimes', *International Organization*, 36 (1982), pp. 207–43.

Haas and some of his followers have shown the most interest in whether there is shared learning. In addition, a volume edited by Adler and Crawford and a 1997 book by Haas also explicitly address the question of progress, including the issue of whether cognitive evolution is a route to progress.⁴

The Haas school does not always distinguish cross-national learning, however, from learning by individual states or organisations. Haas's most detailed study of learning, *When Knowledge is Power*,⁵ focuses on international organisations (IOs), which naturally blurs the distinction between learning by a single entity and learning by a collection of actors. At times, Haas discusses IOs as collections of states, in which case any learning is implicitly shared across states. Much of the time, though, Haas treats IOs as actors in their own right, which means the focus is on learning by an individual organisation, without concern for whether its lessons are shared by other international actors. His subsequent works also do not clearly distinguish learning across countries from learning within countries.⁶

Interest in learning increased in the late 1980s in response to the Soviet 'new thinking' and decline of the Cold War. Nye examined US and Soviet learning about nuclear weapons.⁷ Nye's article was largely speculative and did not attempt to document the learning process, but it did represent a move toward asking whether two states had learned in common.

More detailed empirical research on US and Soviet learning followed in a volume of essays edited by Breslauer and Tetlock.⁸ The empirical research was divided into chapters that generally dealt only with either the United States or the Soviet Union, across a set of parallel issues. Only two chapters (by Lavoy and Weber) explicitly compared US and Soviet policies, in the areas of non-proliferation and arms control, respectively. The volume thus moved away from the question of common learning to focus again on learning in individual states.

Thereafter, Janice Gross Stein applied learning concepts to studies of the US-Soviet and Egyptian-Israeli accommodation processes.⁹ Stein pointed out that there must be learning by both parties in an adversarial relationship if their conflict is to be resolved. She describes a two-step process, however, in which the two sides do not actually share the same learning. Rather, one side must learn that it can no longer advance its values through conflict. It then has to help the second side learn that it has actually changed its intentions.¹⁰ Such complementary learning is one possible

⁴ Emanuel Adler and Beverly Crawford (eds.), *Progress in Postwar International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Ernst B. Haas, *Nationalism, Liberalism, and Progress: The Rise and Decline of Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁵ Ernst B. Haas, *When Knowledge is Power: Three Models of Change in International Organizations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

⁶ See Ernst B. Haas, 'Collective Learning: Some Theoretical Speculations', in George W. Breslauer and Philip E. Tetlock (eds.), *Learning in US and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 91; Haas, *Nationalism, Liberalism*, p. 4.

⁷ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 'Nuclear Learning and US-Soviet Security Regimes', *International Organization*, 41 (1987), pp. 371–402.

⁸ Breslauer and Tetlock (eds.), *Learning in US and Soviet Foreign Policy*.

⁹ Janice Gross Stein, 'Political Learning by Doing: Gorbachev as an Uncommitted Thinker and Motivated Learner', *International Organization*, 48 (1994), pp. 155–83; Stein, 'Deterrence and Learning in an Enduring Rivalry: Egypt and Israel, 1948–73', *Security Studies*, 6 (1996), pp. 104–52.

¹⁰ Janice Gross Stein, 'Image, Identity, and Conflict Resolution', in Chester A. Crocker and Fen Osler Hampson (eds.), *Managing Global Chaos: Sources of and Responses to International Conflict* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996), pp. 93–111.

route to progress in reducing conflict, but it is also important to explore whether states can learn things in common that help them achieve better outcomes.

In a 1994 review, Levy identified problems in the definition, measurement, and causal model of learning employed in the initial wave of learning research.¹¹ Levy recommended scaling back to a narrower, less problematic research programme. Specifically, Levy argued for focusing only on how individuals draw lessons from previous experience, especially past foreign policies, in order to determine how these affect subsequent foreign policy views.¹² As I will show below, the most recent research on learning has generally accepted this recommendation. However, this narrower focus is not adequate to address all the issues that initially led IR scholars to raise the question of learning.

Underlying motivations not always reflected in the research

Few of the initial studies state at the outset why learning or its absence matter. Yet the studies do not express equal interest in all possible lessons that states might learn. Instead, most focus on issues related to peace or cooperation. In fact, Nye considers learning only in relation to a possible outcome of cooperation, and Stein only in relation to conflict reduction and resolution. Similarly, Haas sees learning as a route to ‘managed interdependence.’¹³

However, not every lesson that leaders infer from past experience will be relevant or conducive to such outcomes. Focusing empirically on what individual countries learn from their earlier foreign policies may thus not be sufficient to address the underlying motivation for studying learning. For example, Etheredge claims that repeated US interventions in Central America reflect blocked learning: in particular, an inability to recognise ‘the causes of international violence [and] the commonality of humanity’.¹⁴ If reducing US military involvement in Central America is the goal however, simply removing the blocks to learning from past foreign policy will not necessarily help. This might only result in policymakers learning how to keep covert interventions more covert or how to apply violence more effectively.

The gap between empirical focus and underlying motivations is greatest in the Breslauer/Tetlock volume. Nowhere in the preface, introduction, or theoretical overview chapter by Tetlock do the editors say *why* they wanted to study learning. Only in the conclusion does Breslauer explain the motivation: ‘The normative

¹¹ Levy, ‘Learning and Foreign Policy’.

¹² Shortly before Levy’s article appeared, Jarosz similarly depicted the process of drawing inferences from history as the proper focus of learning research (William W. Jarosz with Joseph S. Nye, Jr., ‘The Shadow of the Past: Learning from History in National Security Decision Making’, in Philip E. Tetlock et al. (eds.), *Behavior, Society, and International Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 126–89. Earlier, classic works on the role of historical analogies include Ernest R. May, *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); and Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

¹³ Nye, ‘Nuclear Learning’, p. 372; Stein, ‘Image, Identity’, p. 101; Haas, *When Knowledge is Power*, pp. 4, 128.

¹⁴ Etheredge, *Can Governments Learn?*, p. 162.

impulse for the project was to understand the conditions for ending the cold war and reducing the incidence of large-scale international conflict'.¹⁵ Because this normative concern was not stated up-front, it was not incorporated into the questions the editors posed to the authors of the case studies. It is no surprise, therefore, that the empirical chapters fail to address the question of whether the two sides had come to share understandings that could reduce conflict.

In short, the first-wave scholars all investigated learning mainly in relation to outcomes that advance liberal values. This suggests that the reason they wanted to study learning is to explore the possibilities for conflict reduction and multilateral cooperation, rather than to ascertain all the different lessons that state leaders actually draw from past experience. If so, why wasn't this made explicit? I believe the reason lies in anticipated criticism from two strong traditions in IR research: realism and positivism. Because of realist critiques of idealism, learning researchers were reluctant to associate learning with only idealist outcomes. They thus hedged by acknowledging that decision-makers could learn lessons that promote conflict as well as reduce it, which leads toward a research agenda that considers all the lessons, whether favourable to cooperation or not, that foreign policymakers might come to believe. Awareness of positivist methodological standards created a similar concern: not to let one's personal values affect one's scholarly judgments. Most studies thus included an explicit statement that learning should not be defined so that it applies only to policies of which one approves.¹⁶

This created an inherent tension in the first-generation studies. The desire not to appear utopian or normatively biased encouraged taking a position that any new belief a foreign policymaker might adopt could potentially be considered a form of learning. At the same time, an interest in relating learning to prospects for peace or cooperation required excluding some beliefs because they would not help advance these goals. As a result, the scholars needed some way to differentiate learning that might facilitate cooperation from forms of learning that hold little promise for reducing conflict. Given their commitment to value neutrality, moreover, scholars sought to define objective criteria that could make this distinction.

The first-wave studies sought to do this in two ways. First, they tried to judge learning in terms of whether new beliefs reflect a more accurate picture of reality or lead to more effective policies. Second, and more important, the studies generally distinguished two kinds of learning. Nye uses the labels simple and complex, while Haas differentiates between actual learning and mere adaptation. Simple learning and adaptation involve changing only the means but not the goals of policy. Real or complex learning, in contrast, involves the adoption of new causal beliefs that lead actors to adjust their priorities or adopt a new solution. Not only did learning researchers differentiate means-oriented from ends-oriented learning, they contended that complex learning is the higher or more important type of learning.¹⁷

¹⁵ George W. Breslaauer, 'What Have We Learned about Learning?', in Breslaauer and Tetlock, *Learning in US and Soviet Foreign Policy*, p. 825.

¹⁶ Tetlock, 'Learning in US and Soviet Foreign Policy', pp. 51–2; Nye, 'Nuclear Learning', p. 380; Haas, *When Knowledge is Power*, p. 20; Jarosz, 'The Shadow of the Past', p. 132.

¹⁷ Nye, 'Nuclear Learning', p. 380; Haas, *When Knowledge is Power*, pp. 3, 23, 36, 175; Haas, 'Collective Learning', pp. 72–3; Stein, 'Deterrence and Learning', p. 110.

The reason for attaching special importance to learning that involves the adoption of new causal understandings or redefinition of goals is clearly an expectation that this will generally lead actors to embrace policies that favour peace and cooperation.

In the end, therefore, as Levy points out,¹⁸ scholars who attempted to find objective criteria for judging and categorising learning still tended to associate learning with policies they favoured. Rather than label a policy change as learning because it reflects one's values, one associates learning with a description of reality or causal understanding with which one agrees, which simply turns out to lead to the policy one supports.

Two possible future directions

Given the various difficulties that arose in learning research, what can be done? One possibility – which Levy espouses – is to avoid any possible normative bias. In order to make the measurement of learning as objective as possible, Levy concludes that learning should be defined as any change in an individual's beliefs based on new experiences, without any attempt by the observer to judge the accuracy or complexity of those beliefs. In his research agenda, studies would focus solely on how individuals draw inferences from history and experience. Levy describes the goal of such research as being to explain foreign policy change;¹⁹ he does not relate learning to questions regarding possible progress towards peace or cooperation.

Since Levy's 1994 article, research on learning has generally followed his recommendation. Books by Bennett, Farkas, and Leng all define learning as any change in policymakers' beliefs due to recent experiences or to lessons imparted by other officials based on their experiences, regardless of the content of the new beliefs.²⁰ These books also all treat learning as a potential explanation for foreign policy change, thus retaining a focus on learning by individual countries.²¹ Only Leng, who studies repeat crises between the same states, makes cross-national comparisons. However, Leng finds that usually only hardline lessons were drawn in common, leading to further conflict rather than conflict resolution. This is a useful reminder that sharing lessons *per se* does not automatically encourage cooperation; it depends on the ideas that are shared. But it also means that none of the recent studies investigate whether shared learning occurs in ways that could facilitate improvement in international outcomes.

¹⁸ Levy, 'Learning and Foreign Policy', p. 292.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 293, n. 54.

²⁰ Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition? The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973–1996* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Andrew Farkas, *State Learning and International Change* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Russell J. Leng, *Bargaining and Learning in Recurring Crises: The Soviet-American, Egyptian-Israeli, and Indo-Pakistani Rivalries* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

²¹ Bennett does include 'international learning', involving the transmission of ideas across international borders, as a type of learning (*Condemned to Repetition?*, pp. 120, 369). But he treats it as a source of beliefs that could explain individual foreign policy decisions, not a possible route to joint action or policy convergence. Moreover, he concludes international learning played no role in his cases, so he discusses it only quite briefly.

In short, Levy's recommendations have channelled learning research into the investigation of how leaders' beliefs are shaped by experience. This is a valid area for research, but to equate it with the study of learning is to conflate two distinct research programmes. Individual belief systems and their impact on policy have long been the province of a research programme already known by other labels, such as a decision-making or cognitive approach. However, learning research has not had the exact same concerns as decision-making research. The initial learning studies were interested in learning primarily as a potential route to conflict resolution or international regime formation. But the suggestions made by Levy would require jettisoning the normative concerns of this earlier research.

However, even from a positivist perspective, this is not necessary. The mainstream understanding of the fact/value distinction that Levy and most learning researchers embrace does not logically require banishing values from having any place in research. It is possible to specify an interest in certain outcomes because one attaches normative value to them, then ask as a factual matter whether those outcomes occur empirically and, if so, when and how they come about. The second possible response to the problems encountered by earlier studies is thus to accept that there is an inherent normative connotation in asking about learning and to focus on figuring out how to design empirical research that could help answer the questions learning researchers really sought to ask.

To say someone learned, in ordinary language, normally implies they achieved some form of improvement. Moreover, this connotation is unique to the term learning and is not captured by discussing belief change or the lessons an individual draws from the past. Since other terms exist for the neutral description of an individual's inferences, learning should not be stripped of its special meaning if that meaning is implicit in questions the research community considers important. In fact, the positive connotations of the word learning are essential to some major literatures in IR.

Learning as an element of the realism-idealism debate

The lessons individuals draw from history are relevant for explaining foreign policy decisions. But this focus does not capture all the ramifications involved in raising the question of learning. In the context of the classic debate between realists and idealists, the possibility of learning has much wider significance than the Levy critique recognises.

Progress is one of the most contested issues in this long-standing debate. Realists assume that the essential dynamics of international politics do not change. As Carr puts it, although he distances himself from this position, 'realism tends to emphasize the irresistible strength of existing forces and the inevitable character of existing tendencies, and to insist that the highest wisdom lies in accepting, and adapting oneself to, these forces and these tendencies'.²² Neorealists similarly emphasize continuity. Waltz, for example, contends 'The texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly. . . . Over the

²² E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964 [1946]), p. 10.

centuries states have changed in many ways, but the quality of international life has remained much the same.²³ Even in a book devoted to explaining change, Gilpin starts from an assumption that ‘the fundamental nature of international relations has not changed over the millennia’.²⁴

This is the central difference in the assumptions of idealists and liberals, on the one hand, and realists on the other. While realists doubt the possibility of progress, idealists and their more cautious liberal successors seek to identify processes or institutions that could bring about a more peaceful or equitable existence. Although interwar idealism is associated with specific proposals, such as collective security and international arbitration, in a broader sense the idealist project is not about specific proposals, but rather involves a belief that human ingenuity can discover ways to improve ‘the quality of international life’, to use Waltz’s phrase. For example, in a recent re-examination of Kant’s prediction of a democratic peace, Cederman concludes that ‘Kant’s reasoning depends on the idea of progress through learning’.²⁵

This suggests that the possibility of learning is integral to the liberal and idealist projects. To be sure, there are differences within the family of liberal approaches, and not all theories emphasise cognitive change. Despite differences in emphasis, however, for all liberal and idealist theories, the possible improvements they envision become much less likely if human consciousness does not perceive the possible paths to achieving better outcomes; conversely, progress becomes more likely if states can learn to do things differently.

Realists assume this possibility is non-existent and therefore a potentially dangerous illusion; to realists, the only possible learning is relearning either the need to balance power or the constraints that require foreign policy continuity. Idealists dispute this position. To any good social scientist, the answer must be determined empirically. Therefore, the possibility or impossibility of learning how to make progress can and should be made an object of study, and not just treated as a starting assumption of various theoretical paradigms.

The design of previous learning research has not been well matched to this context. The desire to have a non-normative definition of learning and to avoid appearing utopian has led to a focus on the role of cognitive changes in modifying particular foreign policies or IO programmes. Yet learning by just one state or IO will not necessarily be adequate to bring about international progress and, depending on what cognitive change takes place, may not be favourable to conflict reduction at all. A different research focus is required.

Toward shared learning

If a set of states agree on some premise that was not always part of their past thinking, and acting consistently with this idea they achieve an outcome that is

²³ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 66, 110.

²⁴ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 7.

²⁵ Lars-Erik Cederman, ‘Back to Kant: Reinterpreting the Democratic Peace as a Macrohistorical Learning Process’, *American Political Science Review*, 95 (March 2001), p. 16.

better than observers would normally expect, we would by the usual meaning of the term be inclined to say they had learned. Though there are exceptions, in many cases such an improved international outcome would not come about if only one side accepted the premise in question but other parties did not. Progress is thus most likely if learning is common to multiple states.

Obviously, there can still be foreign policy learning that is not shared by others, and this will often be of interest for other research agendas, but learning that is unique to a single state or IO is less likely than cross-national learning to contribute to international progress. If the question is whether people can find ways to reduce armed conflict or increase beneficial forms of multilateral cooperation, the type of learning that matters most is shared, international learning. Foreign policy learning might serve as an important microfoundation for international learning, but empirically the key question would still be whether such learning occurs cross-nationally.

While cross-national and foreign policy learning are related, the inference requirements for each lead to different research designs. For Levy, who sees learning only as a possible explanation for foreign policy decisions, if everyone learns the same thing then learning is 'epiphenomenal'. If the goal is to explain individual decision-making, then learning is only relevant when 'different individuals . . . behave differently'. To Levy, a learning model must predict that learning 'varies across actors'.²⁶ Thus, Levy would actually have the *least* interest in cases where all state leaders drew common lessons from experience. In such cases, Levy would conclude this means a structural explanation is sufficient and there is no need to investigate cognitions. In a decision-making approach, learning is only significant when it is *not* shared.

If the interest is progress, however, the focus must be exactly the opposite. Hence, those who seek to explain cooperation often raise the question of shared learning. For example, Nye observes, we would normally expect the different US and Soviet systems to have learned different lessons. Thus, especially with something as consequential as nuclear weapons, '[i]t is particularly interesting when common lessons are learned despite varying prior beliefs'. To Haas and Adler, learning actually requires common inferences, not variation across individuals. With reference to learning in IOs, Haas writes, 'A common understanding of causes is likely to trigger a shared understanding of solutions . . .' And Adler contends that 'A cognitive evolutionary approach requires that new or changed ideas be communicated and diffused . . .'.²⁷ Cederman similarly argues that for learning to play its role in Kant's prediction of democratic peace, multiple states must learn in common: 'the process depends crucially on both sides' learning capacity'; the theory 'presupposes collective learning, both at the state level and within the entire international system'.²⁸

²⁶ Levy, 'Learning and Foreign Policy', p. 297.

²⁷ Nye, 'Nuclear Learning', p. 382; Haas, *When Knowledge is Power*, p. 24; Emanuel Adler, 'Cognitive Evolution: A Dynamic Approach for the Study of International Relations and their Progress', in Adler and Crawford (eds.), *Progress in Postwar International Relations*, p. 54 (see also p. 58).

²⁸ While Cederman presents aggregate data consistent with a hypothesis that learning increases the amount of peace over time, he does not investigate whether there is empirical evidence for the actual occurrence of international learning. He thus concludes that empirical research is still needed to ascertain what 'collective learning mechanisms operate' at different points in time. Cederman, 'Back to Kant', pp. 16, 21, 28.

If research focuses on common lessons and their diffusion, moreover, this makes learning relevant to several other recent IR literatures. Not surprisingly, therefore, learning is mentioned prominently in these other literatures. However, leading works in these other research programmes often do not isolate learning *per se* as an area for empirical research.

The role of shared learning in other literatures

The learning research programme that emerged in the 1980s is not the only contemporary body of IR theory that discusses learning. Studies of learning, especially Haas's cognitive evolution approach, were part of a general 'reflectivist' turn that emphasised the ability of human beings to reflect upon and alter the ideas and knowledge that guide behaviour. Interest in cognitive evolution led most directly to research on epistemic communities, but learning also plays an important role in social constructivism and critical theory. These latter approaches again emphasise learning that is shared across states, not learning in foreign policy. Moreover, they do so because, consistent with the argument above, they see learning as related to the prospects for progress. For the most part, though, these other literatures simply assume that learning occurs as an intermediate step in a larger process, so they do not seek to study learning empirically. Thus, research on international learning is still needed and would contribute to a range of contemporary theory debates as well as to the traditional realism-idealism debate.

For example, Linklater's approach to critical theory utilises notions of learning drawn from Habermas. Linklater also explicitly connects critical theory to the realism-idealism debate. He presents it as a challenge to the realist assumption of immutability on the one hand, and as a way to recover and update 'the old idealist programme' on the other. From a critical theory perspective, Linklater claims, international politics can be shown to be a realm of progress, not stasis.²⁹

How does progress arise? Consistent with the account of learning developed above, Linklater claims that progress will come about '[t]hrough learning processes' that lead to a 'more adequate inter-subjective consensus'. Linklater identifies Habermas's notion of 'moral-practical learning' in particular as the type of learning needed.³⁰ Linklater's argument is purely theoretical however. He makes no attempt to investigate empirically whether moral-practical learning actually happens internationally.

Shared learning should also be of particular interest to social constructivists given their focus on intersubjective understandings and the diffusion of norms. Moreover, like earlier idealist thought, constructivism also envisions the possibility of progress

²⁹ Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*, 2nd edn. (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 4, 11, 18, 174–7; Linklater, 'The Question of the Next Stage in International Relations Theory: A Critical-Theoretical Point of View', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 21 (1992), p. 98; Linklater, 'The Achievements of Critical Theory', in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 282.

³⁰ Linklater, 'A Postscript on Habermas and Foucault' in *Men and Citizens*, p. 217; 'The Question of the Next Stage', p. 95; 'The Achievements of Critical Theory', p. 285.

in world politics.³¹ In fact, given the overlapping concerns of constructivism and cognitive evolutionary approaches, some scholars like Adler who came out of the Haasian tradition have explicitly embraced constructivism and sought to subsume Haas's notion of cognitive evolution within constructivism.³²

Not surprisingly, learning does receive attention in the constructivist literature. Learning is especially vital in Wendt's account of constructivism. Specifically, Wendt argues that if the international system is ever to evolve from a Hobbesian state of war to a Kantian world of collective security, social learning will be the primary mechanism of change.³³ However, Wendt does not describe learning as if it might be problematic. Hence, he neither conducts nor calls for empirical research focused specifically on learning.

This same issue arises in efforts to apply constructivism to questions of peace and security. Adler and Barnett have edited a volume that uses a constructivist approach to re-examine Deutsch's earlier ideas about pluralistic security communities.³⁴ Adler and Barnett posit that social learning is one process in the emergence of security communities. However, their book is not an effort to study learning *per se*, so their framework simply assumes that such learning occurs, as an intermediate step in their larger model. They do not seek to investigate learning empirically.

However, some empirical research on social learning has emerged. Finnemore hypothesises that 'countries learn from the international environment',³⁵ and in several case studies she traces the internalisation of new norms by states. Checkel has investigated social learning as a possible reason for the spread of human rights norms in Europe.³⁶ As Checkel acknowledges, however, his existing model and case studies remain purely one-way:³⁷ one side already espouses a norm and diffuses it through persuasion to the second side. Shared learning could arise in other ways however, such as through the separate learning of similar lessons or, more important, through joint learning that arises from mutual interaction. Moreover, social learning emphasises the learning of norms of appropriate behaviour, but other forms of learning could also play a role in promoting progress. However, Finnemore, Checkel, and other constructivists tend not to consider other possible forms of learning beyond the diffusion of norms. Empirical research is thus still needed on these other possibilities.

Because cross-national learning plays an important role in theorising by critical theorists and constructivists, empirical research on international learning would contribute to these other literatures. In addition, the fact that learning must be shared internationally for the changes hypothesised in these theories to take place

³¹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 10.

³² Emanuel Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 3 (1997), pp. 319–63.

³³ Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 44, 320–6, 336, 341.

³⁴ Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (eds.), *Security Communities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³⁵ Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 7–8, 11–12.

³⁶ Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'Why Comply? Social Learning and European Identity Change', *International Organization*, 55 (Summer 2001), pp. 553–88.

³⁷ Checkel, 'Why Comply?', p. 579.

enhances the case for maintaining such a research focus distinct from efforts to study foreign policy learning within a cognitive paradigm.

The need for descriptive inference

While shared learning is relevant to the prospects for improving the quality of international outcomes, it is important to recognise that learning is not necessary for international cooperation to occur and that not every form of learning leads to progress. For example, if states enter an alliance for traditional balance-of-power reasons, no new learning may be required to produce this cooperation. In addition, not all cooperation or dissemination of knowledge leads to normatively desirable outcomes. Some states may collaborate simply in order to exploit others. And some know-how that diffuses, such as how to make biological weapons, is unlikely to make the world a better place. Not all learning is conducive to progress, and progress may have other causes besides learning. But many cases of progress will involve some prior learning process. Thus, if we are interested in assessing the prospects for making progress in international relations, it will be valuable to examine whether internationally shared learning that favours peace or cooperation ever develops.

For now, this makes the primary goal descriptive inference. The eventual goal is still explanatory theory, so we can determine whether and how it is possible to cause favourable changes in the probability of desired outcomes. But we also need to determine as an empirical matter whether shared learning even occurs or could be a plausible outcome.

One possible approach is to specify one's model of learning first, then evaluate whether or not various cases fit the model. Haas has taken this approach, describing in detail a particular model of the learning process that can be used as 'a coding scheme . . . to judge' when learning has occurred.³⁸ The core feature of this model is the introduction of new causal or technical knowledge, usually by an epistemic community.³⁹ As noted above, and consistent with the argument of this article, Haas and others in his research programme also connect such learning to the possibility of progress. Hence, Adler and Crawford claim that 'the key to progress . . . lies in the realm of cognitive change or learning, which can result from the increasing use of knowledge in the policy process.' Haas describes the purpose of a 1997 book similarly: 'I want to explore the hypothesis that progress has occurred in international politics, but I also want to argue that progress has occurred *because* our conceptions of what constitute political problems, and of solutions to these problems, have increasingly been informed by the form of reasoning we label "scientific"'.⁴⁰

³⁸ Haas, 'Collective Learning', p. 63.

³⁹ Haas, *When Knowledge is Power*, pp. 3, 23, 40, 129–30. On epistemic communities, see also Peter M. Haas (ed.) *Knowledge, Power, and International Policy Coordination*, Special Issue of *International Organization*, 46 (1992).

⁴⁰ Emanuel Adler, Beverly Crawford, and Jack Donnelly, 'Defining and Conceptualizing Progress in International Relations', in Adler and Crawford, *Progress in Postwar International Relations*, p. 28; Haas, *Nationalism, Liberalism*, p. 1, emphasis in original.

While the use of knowledge supplied by an epistemic community is one plausible route to learning, it is not the only possible pathway. This is especially true for issues like security where political leaders may trust their own judgment and thus not feel a need to defer to technical experts. In contrast to Haas, therefore, I believe it is better not to commit, prior to empirical research, to a particular portrait of what learning looks like or how it occurs. If states find ways to coordinate that produce more security or less conflict, this is an important finding regardless of whether epistemic communities, social learning, or any other particular prespecified mechanism were involved.

To make the discussion less abstract, however, it may help to suggest some ways in which shared learning might emerge. Processes that could lead states to share the same lessons or ideas include: an evolution in both sides' thinking as a result of their bargaining or working together; persuasion of one side by the other side; lobbying of both by an epistemic community or, alternatively, by a transnational advocacy network that does not claim any special technical expertise; or separate internal processes that lead to the same conclusion. If one is interested in explaining or promoting learning, it will be important to develop a more detailed understanding of the processes and mechanisms involved, but at this stage it is advisable to seek this understanding, at least in part, inductively.

In sum, the goals of descriptive and causal inference can be separated. The various liberal challenges to realism depend on the possibility of learning, not on the particular mechanisms that produce learning. Hence, independently of the causal model one might propose to explain learning, empirical research is required to assess whether international learning occurs and is associated with cases of progress.

The most obvious supporting example is the development of the European Union. Among a set of states that once experienced recurring warfare, there has now been a long period of peace and friendship. At the same time, though, it will be important to show this case is not an anomaly and there are other likely cases of learning. Moreover, study of other cases is needed to broaden the database for drawing inferences about the conditions and processes involved.

A roadmap for research

Given a goal of descriptive inference, I propose proceeding on two tracks. First, learning research must consider whether there are other cases that, like the development of the European community, strongly appear to indicate learning. In each case, process tracing should be used to ascertain whether the actors in question communicated shared understandings that differ from ideas that were associated with less favourable outcomes in the past. Below, I apply this approach to the case of Argentine-Brazilian relations.

The second approach is to identify potential sources or forms of shared learning that it seems feasible to research empirically. If one identifies mechanisms that could produce learning whose presence can be confirmed or disconfirmed relatively easily, then one could explore how frequently one finds these mechanisms in operation; the more examples, the stronger the case would be for thinking international learning is possible, while lack of cases would count against such a hypothesis. For this second

track, I propose returning to the ‘lessons of history’, only this time with a focus on whether they are shared cross-nationally. This is not to suggest that every agreement on a lesson of history will result in progress, nor that shared analogies are the only possible route to progress. However, in the context of debates about the possibility of progress, it would be meaningful if one could identify clear empirical evidence for the operation of even one mechanism with the potential to facilitate progress.

A suggestive example

The possibility of cross-national sharing of historical analogies is suggested by a well-known example whose implications have not been fully grasped. The existing literature on the influence of historical analogies predicts that national leaders will draw their lessons from traumatic international events their own country experienced during their formative years or from recent events in which those leaders were personally involved.⁴¹ The example most often cited is how the generation of US leaders that came of age during World War II always referred to the ‘lessons of Munich’.

There is a puzzle here, however. No Americans were at Munich, nor was it the appeasement of Hitler that brought America into World War II. Rather, the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, an undeniably traumatic event, forced the US into the conflict. The prominence instead of the Munich analogy suggests that countries are not prisoners of their own experiences. If multiple countries can draw common conclusions from a historical event not all of them experienced, this could form a basis for policy coordination.

Sharing of an analogy is no guarantee of cooperation. As a number of observers have noted, the inferences American leaders drew from the lessons of the 1930s generally discouraged cooperation during the Cold War.⁴² However, the question here is only whether there are some cases where agreement among a set of states on a historical analogy encourages a cooperative approach to security; if some cases work this way, this would be evidence for the possibility of international learning even if not every shared analogy facilitates progress. Moreover, if one looks beyond the Cold War, in other circumstances even the lessons of the 1930s might encourage cooperation. After all, Munich is not just an object lesson on the risks of making concessions; it also contains a lesson about the need to act together to stop campaigns of aggression. One case that illustrates sharing of this lesson is the building of the coalition that fought against Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War.

The Gulf War case

The Gulf War is not an ideal test of the hypothesis that a shared belief in a particular lesson of history can be a form of international learning. The outcome

⁴¹ Jervis, *Perception and Misperception*; Christopher Hemmer, *Which Lessons Matter? American Foreign Policy Decision Making in the Middle East, 1979–1987* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).

⁴² The classic study remains May, *Lessons of the Past*.

was a war, while I have argued that international learning will lead to progress towards peace. The use of force does not automatically mean no learning was involved however. In the Wilsonian strand of idealism, with its emphasis on collective security, action by the international community to defeat aggression is intended to deter future aggressors and reassure insecure states, thereby improving the prospects for peace in the future. To the extent it strengthened norms against aggression, the Gulf War might still count as progress.

More important, even if one is not convinced that this case represented progress, this does not undermine the main point of this case study. The goal here is to show that multiple states can agree on certain lessons of history and this agreement can encourage them to cooperate. This possibility is a sub-hypothesis that can be examined separately from the broader hypothesis that learning to make progress is possible. Once the possibility that multiple states can employ the same analogy is established, additional cases can be used to explore whether and under what conditions this mechanism helps promote better international outcomes.

Because US President George H.W. Bush publicly compared Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to Hitler, some early analysts of the Gulf case concluded that the Munich analogy largely explained the US decision to use force against Iraq.⁴³ As an explanation of foreign policy, there are some obvious possible objections to this argument. References to Nazi Germany may have been calculated to sway public opinion and put Congressional opponents of military action in an awkward position, without really being believed by the President and his aides in private. However, this objection misses the point with respect to international learning. The question is whether officials of two or more governments, in private communications intended to generate agreement on the correct course of action, give assent to the same historical analogy. If two or more states agree on a certain analogy in settings that are not geared towards public consumption and this agreement helps them coordinate policy, then it is reasonable to conclude that those states have shared some form of learning. In fact, there is evidence that lessons of the 1930s played a role in the development of a multilateral response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

A belief that Saddam Hussein would interpret offers of compromise in a manner similar to Hitler was expressed by several Middle Eastern leaders. They appeared to be trying to ensure that other states in the region, and also the United States, would stand firm against Iraq. In his joint memoirs with Brent Scowcroft, his national security advisor, President Bush quotes a phone conversation in which King Fahd of Saudi Arabia told him that Saddam 'is following Hitler in creating world problems. . . . I believe nothing will work with Saddam but the use of force.' In a subsequent conversation with Turkish President Turgut Ozal, Ozal told Bush he had sought to reinforce Fahd's will: 'I told him that if the solution is that Iraq pulls back and Kuwait pays, that is not a solution but another Munich'. President Bush in turn referred to messages like these in internal administration discussions. At an NSC meeting where Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney expressed doubt about the prospects of maintaining support for military action against Hussein, Bush told Cheney he was underestimating world opinion: 'Lots of people are calling him

⁴³ Alex Roberto Hybel, *Power over Rationality: The Bush Administration and the Gulf Crisis* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).

Hitler'. These analogies were all made in private settings and apparently helped generate agreement among a set of states on a common response to Iraq's occupation of Kuwait.⁴⁴

Analogies to the 1930s also arose in another setting: the UN Security Council debate on Resolution 678, which authorised the use of 'all necessary means' to force Iraq out of Kuwait. During the debate, three of the 15 members referred explicitly to the failure by the League of Nations to act against Italy after its 1935 invasion of Ethiopia.⁴⁵ In line with the traditional hypothesis that countries make analogies to their own past traumatic experiences, Ethiopia was one of the states that raised this analogy. But the other two countries that cited this example, Romania and the United States, were not drawing on any lesson from a failure in their own past. Romania had supported keeping sanctions against Italy in place, while the US had not even been a member of the League. The fact that three of the 12 countries that voted for Resolution 678 all drew on the same analogy again suggests that it is possible for states to share historical lessons.

This is not to argue that analogies to the 1930s fully explain the war against Iraq; other considerations, such as oil, also clearly played a role. And it is certainly not to argue that invoking the lessons of the 1930s tends in general to improve the chances for peace: the many references to Hitler and appeasement in the US Congress, when it voted in October 2002 to authorise again using force against Iraq, show otherwise. But it is also worth recognising that the United Nations' support and the participation of a broad coalition added legitimacy to the military action in 1991 and increased the chances that states contemplating aggression in the future would anticipate resistance. It is likely that a shared understanding of certain lessons of the past contributed to this multilateral response to Iraq's invasion. Of greatest relevance for present purposes, it at least appears that states can agree on the relevance of analogies to historical events that not all of them experienced directly. This suggests it would be worthwhile to conduct further research on whether there are other cases of shared lessons and, if so, what consequences this has.

Other possible shared analogies

Because the hardline implications of the Munich analogy often discourage efforts to achieve peace, it is important to consider whether there are alternative analogies that might be more conducive to cooperation that aims to avoid the use of force. The origins of World War I provide one possible alternative. One well-known interpretation of the war views it as a case of inadvertent escalation. In this view, leaders in a crisis situation lost control of events once they ordered military mobilisation, making it important not to repeat the mistakes that made escalation so hard to avoid in 1914.

⁴⁴ George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), pp. 320, 326, 328.

⁴⁵ United Nations Security Council, *Provisional Verbatim Record of the Two Thousand Nine Hundred and Sixty-Third Meeting*, S/PV.2963, 29 November 1990, pp. 6, 48, 98. Two Security Council members voted against the resolution and one abstained.

An analogy to this image of 1914 influenced the theory of arms control that emerged in the West in the early 1960s.⁴⁶ The new arms control theory emphasised that, if there were advantages to striking first in a crisis, reciprocal fears of surprise attack could lead to a nuclear war no one wanted. Influential studies such as Schelling and Halperin's classic text supported this argument about the danger of accidental or inadvertent nuclear war (and thus the need for arms control) with explicit references to the events of 1914.⁴⁷

For the 1914 analogy to facilitate progress on arms control, however, both sides would have had to agree on the relevant lessons, and there is no publicly available evidence that the Soviet Union proposed a similar interpretation of this analogy during arms control talks. Only further research using archival and other primary-source materials could determine whether nuclear arms control is an issue where a shared lesson of history contributed to cooperation. However, the fact that some Americans drew lessons from the July crisis, which again is not a situation that involved the United States, indicates that 1914 could potentially serve as a source of shared lessons.

The Gulf War and nuclear arms control cases suggest that investigating whether two or more parties agree on a particular historical analogy is one feasible way to assess the empirical evidence for shared learning. The hypothesised connection between shared lessons and progress is less clear in these cases however. The cooperation in the Gulf War did not lead to a sufficiently satisfactory outcome to keep the threat of another war against Iraq from re-emerging barely a decade later. And the possible sharing of the 1914 analogy has not been demonstrated at this point. The uncertainties in these cases suggest it would be useful to supplement this evidence by working in the other direction, that is, by identifying a case where evidence of progress is strong in order to explore whether shared learning also took place.

A final illustration: Argentine-Brazilian rapprochement

The dramatic transformation of relations between Argentina and Brazil constitutes such a case. During decades of rivalry, the two countries limited their trade and cooperation. Fear of war between them reached a high point in the 1960s and 1970s, when leading military officials and strategists in both countries embraced zero-sum 'geo-political' doctrines.⁴⁸ Barely a decade later, Argentina and Brazil had achieved such a level of friendship and cooperation that military conflict between them had

⁴⁶ For an account of this influence that criticises the underlying interpretation of World War I, see Patrick Glynn, 'The Sarajevo Fallacy', *The National Interest*, 9 (Fall 1987), pp. 3–32.

⁴⁷ Thomas C. Schelling and Morton H. Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1961), p. 27.

⁴⁸ Wayne A. Selcher, 'Brazilian-Argentine Relations in the 1980s: From Wary Rivalry to Friendly Competition', *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 27 (1985), pp. 26–8, 39. Philippe C. Schmitter, 'Change in Regime Type and Progress in International Relations', in Adler and Crawford, *Progress in Postwar International Relations*, pp. 95, 97–101, 107–8; Julio C. Carasales, 'Goals of Argentine-Brazilian Nuclear Cooperation', in Paul L. Leventhal and Sharon Tanzer (eds.), *Averting a Latin American Nuclear Arms Race* (Washington, DC: Nuclear Control Institute and Macmillan, 1992), pp. 47–8; Andrew Hurrell, 'An Emerging Security Community in South America?' in Adler and Barnett, *Security Communities*, pp. 230–34.

become virtually unthinkable. Two dramatic changes both contributed to and symbolised this transformation. The two sides adopted measures that eliminated lingering suspicions that they were interested in developing nuclear weapons. And they began an economic integration process that created Mercosur, the Common Market of the Southern Cone.

These changes in Argentine-Brazilian relations are convincing evidence of progress.⁴⁹ But did shared learning contribute to this progress? While some policy changes did not derive from shared learning, cross-national learning proved important in two ways. First, the two sides came to a shared view of the connections between issues, especially a mutual realisation that nuclear cooperation was necessary to make economic integration possible. After that, they shared learning about how to make progress within issues: in particular, their nuclear rapprochement evolved in important ways as a result of the very process of trying to work together. This is thus a case of inherently joint learning. In contrast to the Gulf War case, where multiple states independently drew similar lessons from the past, in this case the two countries would not have drawn matching lessons if their foreign policies had evolved separately.

Nuclear policy change and its role in rapprochement

Both countries began working on nuclear technology as part of their economic development efforts, and neither government ever made an official decision to build nuclear weapons. However, certain features of their nuclear programmes created suspicions, both in the other capital and internationally, that they were working to get the bomb. First, Argentina and Brazil sought to develop technology that would give them the potential to produce weapons-grade fissile materials: each built a plant to enrich uranium, and Argentina also started work on a plant to reprocess plutonium from spent nuclear fuel. Second, the two countries refrained from joining and implementing the major regional and global non-proliferation agreements. They vigorously criticised the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as a discriminatory agreement designed to prevent developing countries from gaining access to civil nuclear technology. As a result, they refused to place their facilities related to producing uranium and plutonium fuel under full-scope safeguards (FSSG), which had developed under the non-proliferation regime as a way to prevent diversion of nuclear fuel to military uses.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ People in these countries might not consider their shifts to orthodox economic policies to be progress, given the collapse of the Argentine economy in early 2002. The focus here is on relations between the two countries, however, not their domestic economies.

⁵⁰ Virginia Gamba-Stonehouse, 'Argentina and Brazil', in Regina Cowen Karp (ed.), *Security with Nuclear Weapons?* (New York: SIPRI and Oxford University Press, 1991); Ruth Stanley, 'Cooperation and Control: The New Approach to Nuclear Non-proliferation in Argentina and Brazil', *Arms Control*, 13 (1992), pp. 194–201; John R. Redick, Julio C. Carasales, and Paolo S. Wrobel, 'Nuclear Rapprochement: Argentina, Brazil, and the Nonproliferation Regime', in Brad Roberts (ed.), *Weapons Proliferation in the 1990s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 376–7; Etel Solingen, *Regional Orders at Century's Dawn: Global and Domestic Influences on Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 140; Michael Anthony Barletta, 'Ambiguity, Autonomy, and the Atom: Emergence of the Argentine-Brazilian Nuclear Regime', Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2000, p. 139; T.V. Paul, *Power versus Prudence: Why Nations Forgo Nuclear Weapons* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), pp. 103–5, 107–8.

Nuclear policy change was an element of Argentine-Brazilian rapprochement from the beginning. Rapprochement began in the late 1970s, when both countries were still under military rule. It included agreements to cooperate on civil nuclear technology development so as to overcome problems created by restrictions that exporters of nuclear fuel and technology had imposed due to Argentina and Brazil's suspected proliferation ambitions. This cooperation would not have done anything to foreclose the weapons option, but it still represented a change from the previous pattern of intense competition and opened the door to further co-operation.⁵¹

The rapprochement process gained momentum after both countries returned to democracy. Indeed, desire to consolidate democracy provided an important motivation. In Argentina, Raul Alfonsín won the 1983 election that ended military rule. After Brazil returned to democracy, José Sarney became its president in 1985. Both new administrations feared their democracies would not survive unless regional threat perceptions could be changed in a way that would remove pretexts for the military to interfere in domestic politics.⁵²

The two sides also agreed on the nature of the initiatives they should take. Alfonsín and Sarney gave high priority to economic integration, partly as a way to respond to economic problems, but also as a way to change political relations and build barriers against a possible future reversion to adversarial relations.⁵³ A shared analogy played a role here as well, and as in the examples discussed above it came from outside the two countries' own past experience. Diplomats from the two sides discussed how the European Economic Community had helped prevent any return to authoritarian rule in Spain, Portugal or Greece after their democratisation in the 1970s, and this reinforced their belief that economic integration could help consolidate democracy in the Southern Cone.⁵⁴ In July 1986, the two presidents concluded a treaty initiating an Argentine-Brazilian economic integration programme.

Just recognising the desirability of reducing tensions and increasing economic cooperation did not automatically make these goals achievable however. Closer examination reveals that nuclear rapprochement was critical to the realisation of economic integration and political rapprochement. At the same time, finding the means to make nuclear rapprochement effective was also a noteworthy feat. Both aspects of nuclear cooperation reflect shared learning.

⁵¹ Mitchell Reiss, *Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain Their Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center and Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 53–4; Stanley, 'Cooperation and Control', pp. 201–2; Julio C. Carasales, 'The Argentine-Brazilian Nuclear Rapprochement', *The Nonproliferation Review*, 2 (1995), p. 40.

⁵² Barletta, 'Ambiguity, Autonomy, and the Atom', ch. 4; Dominique Fournier, 'The Alfonsín Administration and the Promotion of Democratic Values in the Southern Cone and the Andes', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 31 (1999); Franklin Steves, 'Regional Integration and Democratic Consolidation in the Southern Cone of Latin America', paper presented at the workshop on Globalization and Armed Conflict of the European Consortium for Political Research, Copenhagen, 15–19 April, 2000.

⁵³ Luigi Manzetti, 'Argentine-Brazilian Economic Integration: An Early Appraisal', *Latin American Research Review*, 25 (1990), pp. 109–10, 114–15; Fournier, 'The Alfonsín Administration and the Promotion of Democratic Values', p. 51; Steves, 'Regional Integration and Democratic Consolidation in the Southern Cone', pp. 11–13, 16.

⁵⁴ Fournier, 'The Alfonsín Administration and the Promotion of Democratic Values', p. 49.

Shared learning in the denuclearisation process

Former officials from both countries have made it clear that nuclear cooperation was deliberately tied to economic integration and that nuclear rapprochement cannot be understood except in the context of the effort to change economic relations.⁵⁵ The connections made between the nuclear and economic efforts were especially important in convincing the two sides to overcome their prior commitments to autonomous development of nuclear technology. The mutual recognition of a connection thus represents the chief manifestation of shared learning in this case.

The simplest realisation was that economic integration would not proceed very far if the two sides continued to harbour military suspicions. To allay suspicions, it was necessary to have a shared understanding of the steps that would signal a turning away from rivalry. This came from agreement on the importance of nuclear cooperation. As a former Brazilian ambassador to Argentina has explained:

The time was ripe for action and the nuclear domain was chosen by elected Brazilian and Argentinean leaders because advances here would have a profound impact on . . . both societies and provide an eloquent symbol for the two recently restored democracies. . . . It is quite obvious that economic and commercial integration could not easily coexist with military rivalry or strategic planning of an adversarial nature.⁵⁶

Reflecting the perceived linkages, Sarney and Alfonsín held several summit meetings that focused on economic and nuclear cooperation. Moreover, agreements in one area were overtly related to agreements in the other. For example, a December 1986 protocol on nuclear cooperation described the envisioned nuclear cooperation as related to 'the objectives set forth in the [July 1986] Statement on Argentine-Brazilian Integration'.⁵⁷

Seeing that their nuclear programmes could undermine integration was the first step in the learning process. As the two sides moved forward, however, they came to the further realisation that joint development of civilian nuclear technology could not allay suspicions about possible secret military programmes. The two sides had to create greater transparency in their nuclear programmes as well. The two presidents thus began a reciprocal process of inviting each other to tour the nuclear facilities

⁵⁵ Carasales, 'The Argentine-Brazilian Nuclear Rapprochement', p. 41; Georges Lamaziere and Roberto Jaguaribe, 'Beyond Confidence-Building: Brazilian-Argentine Nuclear Cooperation', *Disarmament*, 15 (1992), p. 103. Carasales was an official in the Argentine foreign ministry at this time, Jaguaribe held a high position in the Brazilian foreign ministry, and Lamaziere was an adviser to Brazil's foreign minister.

⁵⁶ Marcos Castrioto de Azambuja, 'Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Confidence-Building in the Southern Cone', *Disarmament*, 16 (1993), p. 127. See also Lamaziere and Jaguaribe, 'Beyond Confidence-Building', pp. 104, 106; Steves, 'Regional Integration and Democratic Consolidation in the Southern Cone', p. 9.

⁵⁷ See Manzetti, 'Argentine-Brazilian Economic Integration', pp. 115–20; David R. Dávila-Villers, 'Competition and Co-operation in the River Plate: The Democratic Transition and Mercosur', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 11 (1992), pp. 271–3; Paulo S. Wrobel, 'From Rivals to Friends: The Role of Public Declarations in Argentina-Brazil Rapprochement', in Michael Krepon et al. (eds.), *Declaratory Diplomacy: Rhetorical Initiatives and Confidence Building* (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, April 1999), pp. 141–3, 149; Reiss, *Bridled Ambition*, p. 72. The quote is from Protocol on Nuclear Cooperation between Argentina and Brazil, 10 December 1986, English translation in International Atomic Energy Agency, 'Joint Declaration on Nuclear Policy, Annex 2', INFCIRC/351 (Vienna, 16 May 1988), copy provided by Michael Barletta.

that prompted the most concern about possible weapons programmes, including some plants that had previously been secret. Between July 1987 and November 1988, Sarney visited Argentina's uranium enrichment plant and the plutonium reprocessing facility it had under construction, while Alfonsín visited Brazil's uranium enrichment facility.⁵⁸ As two Brazilian officials later explained, 'the latent misgivings and suspicious perceptions of each other's nuclear programmes had to be overcome if the economic integration was to have any meaning. It was at that stage (1987 and 1988) that the first reciprocal visits to each country's most sensitive nuclear facilities were undertaken.'⁵⁹

After the last of these visits, a joint statement released by the two presidents emphasised that the visits and implementation of joint projects to date had produced 'a growing and continuing mutual understanding'.⁶⁰ In other words, the presidents indicated that they even saw themselves as going through a joint learning process.

The successors to Alfonsín and Sarney, Carlos Menem (elected in 1989) and Fernando Collor de Mello (elected in 1990), continued the process. Based on interviews with officials in both countries, John Redick ascertained that '[b]oth presidents recognized that dramatic new nuclear cooperation initiatives could serve to accelerate economic and political coordination'.⁶¹ Meeting in November 1990, Collor and Menem reached a new nuclear cooperation agreement. In part, it extended the mutual confidence-building effort of their predecessors, by proposing to establish a joint system of nuclear accounting and inspections. However, the 1990 Declaration on Common Nuclear Policy also moved beyond the previous bilateral approach. In a dramatic policy shift, Brazil and Argentina also committed to negotiating a full-scope safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); this agreement was signed in December 1991.⁶² Having overcome their longstanding opposition to international safeguards, the two countries also eventually joined the NPT (though congressional resistance delayed Brazil's accession until 1998).

The decisions to accept FSSG and the NPT reflect a further step in the learning process. Former foreign ministry officials in both countries have stressed that the leadership in each came to realise that measures to reassure each other as to their peaceful nuclear intentions were not sufficient to reassure the rest of the world, which could still suspect the two countries of colluding to hide nuclear arms programmes.⁶³ Since the two countries had also made participation in the global

⁵⁸ John R. Redick, 'Nuclear Illusions: Argentina and Brazil', Occasional Paper no. 25 (Washington, DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, December 1995), pp. 22–3; Wrobel, 'From Rivals to Friends', pp. 142–3. These reciprocal visits all took place in connection with summits at which new steps in economic integration were also agreed upon.

⁵⁹ Lamaziere and Jaguaribe, 'Beyond Confidence-Building', p. 112; see also Stanley, 'Co-operation and Control', p. 203.

⁶⁰ Ezeiza Joint Statement on Nuclear Policy, 29 November 1988, English translation in International Atomic Energy Agency, 'Joint Declaration on Nuclear Policy, Addendum 1', INFCIRC/351 (Vienna, 27 January 1989), copy provided by Michael Barletta.

⁶¹ Redick, 'Nuclear Illusions', pp. 24, 28 (esp. n. 69).

⁶² In the 1990 and 1991 agreements, the two countries also renounced peaceful nuclear explosions and agreed to bring into force on their territories the Treaty of Tlatelolco, which creates a Latin American nuclear-weapon-free zone.

⁶³ Carasales, 'The Argentine-Brazilian Nuclear Rapprochement', pp. 42, 45, 47; Lamaziere and Jaguaribe, 'Beyond Confidence-Building', p. 112. See also Redick, Carasales, and Wrobel, 'Nuclear Rapprochement', pp. 382–3.

economy a priority, it no longer made sense to continue suffering the denial of access to advanced technology caused by their refusal of FSSG.⁶⁴

These final steps required Argentina and Brazil to execute a complete about-face on positions to which they had been overtly committed for decades. The shift from denouncing the non-proliferation regime as discriminatory to accepting its legitimacy was only possible because of the prior learning process in the two states and the resulting steps they had already taken jointly to eliminate the possibility of covert nuclear weapons development.⁶⁵ It is doubtful whether either country acting in isolation would have made such a large policy change. Shared, international learning was necessary to enable a degree of progress that foreign policy learning in just one of the countries could not have generated.

Conclusions

At the end of his critical review essay, Levy concludes: ‘Our understanding of the role of learning in foreign policy and policy change more generally will be best served if we abandon the attempt to construct an analytically distinct “learning model”’.⁶⁶ I disagree. The question of learning is too important to be abandoned as an analytically distinct research programme.

When scholars raised the question of foreign policy learning in the 1980s, they encountered significant problems, many of which Levy elucidates persuasively. But there is more than one way to respond to these problems. Levy assumes that the goal is to map and explain all of the belief changes leaders undergo, and the most recent studies of learning have tended to adopt this research agenda. This is a valid and interesting research agenda, but it is not what the initial efforts to study learning were really about, nor should it be the only focus of learning research.

To ask about learning in ordinary language is often to ask about the possibility of progress or improvement. If we accept this positive connotation, it leads us to another context in which learning carries great importance: the traditional debate between realists and idealists. Realists deny any possibility of substantial progress in eliminating war or institutionalising cooperation. Idealists contend that progress is possible and that it will involve changes in human understanding. More recent writings on critical theory and social constructivism make similar claims. The question of whether such learning is possible is thus too central an issue in international relations for us to give up doing research explicitly on this question.

The kind of learning that matters most in this context is shared learning. To improve the quality of international outcomes, states will generally have to work together, and they are more likely to do so if they agree about the ideas that should guide policy. Among earlier learning researchers, Haas and Adler showed the most

⁶⁴ Quotes by high-level officials on this point can be found in Solingen, *Regional Orders*, p. 153; John R. Redick, ‘Latin America’s Emerging Non-Proliferation Consensus’, *Arms Control Today*, 24 (1994), p. 6; Jose Goldemberg and Harold A. Feiveson, ‘Denuclearization in Argentina and Brazil’, *Arms Control Today*, 24 (1994), p. 14.

⁶⁵ Barletta, ‘Ambiguity, Autonomy, and the Atom’, ch. 5 is especially convincing on this point.

⁶⁶ Levy, ‘Learning and Foreign Policy’, p. 312.

interest in shared learning, but they associated learning primarily with the growth of scientific knowledge, and there is no reason to assume this is the only possible source of learning. Constructivists and critical theorists also discuss shared learning, but they often do not treat it as problematic and requiring further research. Moreover, the constructivist emphasis on social learning limits the focus to the diffusion of norms, which again excludes other possible forms of learning. Because the prospects for and potential sources of learning are still uncertain, it is important to conduct empirical research on international learning as a focus in its own right.

In the areas of conflict and security, the simplest source of cross-national learning may be agreement on the lessons of certain historical events. The indications that lessons of the 1930s played a role in the development of the Gulf War coalition and references to 1914 in US works on arms control suggest that this is a plausible avenue of research. As a second direction for research, this article also proposes identifying cases that strongly appear to represent progress and then tracing how those cases developed to see if shared ideas helped the countries concerned achieve progress. A study of the rapprochement between Argentina and Brazil illustrated the potential of this approach. It showed that shared learning about their nuclear programmes helped make their rapprochement a reality. Moreover, important elements of this learning arose jointly out of the effort to work together. This suggests that shared learning need not always arise prior to cooperation, but can also develop through mutual learning during the process of cooperation itself.

The study of learning is conceptually distinct from the study of decision-making. If one wants to refer to learning in the latter context, I propose that the terms foreign policy or individual learning be used, while we use international learning to refer to those types of learning that might be a route to progress in international relations. Whatever terminology is used, however, the bottom line is that international learning is sufficiently important to warrant further research.