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## COLLEGE OF LAW, GOVERNMENT AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

INTERNATIONAL RELATION GFPP 2063 INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENT PREPARED

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KNOCK TAPIWA ZENGENI Question 2: Critically discuss the main ideas of the

constructivist approach to international relations Preface In our daily life, we

are interconnected with each other when we start to communicate. Actors

such as people, ideas and interest allow us to establish relationship. Same

goes to the international system, the same concept exist when we try to

understand international relation. International relation is a part of

international system whereby its concern on the relationship among the

world's government involving the state actors and non-state actors. There

are many theories used to explain international relation particularly in their

own way such as in Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, Marxism and etc.

Thus, this paper ought to discuss and explain constructivism on the main

ideas promote by the constructivist in an international relation. I choose this

question because of my understanding is more toward the constructivist

approach and I believe that constructivist approach is among the critical field

of study that we must clearly understand. Thus, I tried to find sources about

the approach of constructivism and there are some useful previous studies

that I used as my references. Thus, I tried to answer the question by pointing

out the definition of constructivist approach as well as the main ideas

brought by the approach. Apart from that, i am also highlighting few

examples to strengthen my answer Introduction Constructivism or social

constructivism can be clearly defines as a social theory or an approach that

has been long used in the field of international relation. Though, it is newly

recognised and being practiced by certain people. In our international system, constructivist approach seems to play crucial roles in organizing relationship among states. Based on the definition of international system in one book, " International system is a set of relationship among the world's states, structured according to certain rules and pattern of interaction".

Thus, it is no doubt that constructivist is a part of international system. What are the main ideas brought by constructivist in international relation matter?

The key answers are ideas, norms, identity and social interaction. These four terminologies is reflecting constructivism as a social theory and approach in

IR. Fundamentally, constructivist approach focused on the element of social rather than materialistic element as such in Realism. Constructivist argues

on realism point of view that material is the key element in understanding international relation. According to Yu —Tai Tsai (2009), constructivism never reject material things but also to complement it with the roles of ideas.

This idea will complement the material world through shaping human's behaviour. Therefore, the evolution of international system exist when actors of the international society and politic promotes cooperative relation

independently. Constructivist mentioned that, social reality is subjective whereby actor's behaviour creates collective meaning in an international

system. Indirectly, the behaviour of actors leads to the creation of norms and identity that shape foreign policy. Unlike realism and liberalism,

constructivism isn't just a social theory but more likely an approach in understanding international relation. This is because; social constructivism to some scholar is a lesson about norms, identity and interaction as a real situation that can provide us with useful knowledge for us to not only

understand international relation but to also understand the formation of foreign policy in the eyes of constructivist. Let us consider the following examples that can help us in understanding the main ideas brought by constructivist approach. Gun Story Imagine that there is a gun in your hand. Basically, the image of the gun is negative. When society sees you holding a gun, their first impression is that you are going to kill someone since the gun is the key to kill someone. However, constructivist views this differently; gun is nothing much than just a gun but the most important is who possesses the gun. This is because, the idea of killing is coming from the person who is having the gun and not the gun for sure. If he or she decided not to shoot, nothing will happen and no one will be killed. Related this example with constructivist concept of idea, in an international relation, idea is very important to shape the behaviour of actors. This is another example of constructivist idea of identity in international relation. In 1992, United State of America sent troops to Somalia. Somalia is a country with minimal strategic and economic importance to US. During that period, Somalia jump into civil war involving the political crisis and African drought that affected its population. Mass starvation occurred when its threaten one fourth of the population. US see this in the perspective of humanity and the idea of helping Somalia emerged after huge coverage by the CNN. Media such as CNN took active interest to attract world attention by picturing Somalian hunger. They illustrated and displayed the image of flies and children with diseases such as malnutrition and etc. Unconsciously, media has created such ideas for US to pursue their national interest in providing such aids to Somalia. Thus, according to constructivist, media plays strong influence in

spreading ideas that can help states in strengthening their international relations with others. Based on the example above, constructivists believe that social and material are complementing each other in the international system. This is because, according to Alexander Wendt (1994), the constructivist approach also stresses on international structure that consists of social relationships and material capabilities that will absolutely influence the identity and interest of a nation. Thus, constructivism is an interesting subject to be discussed rather than realism or liberalism.

**Conclusion** In our international system, it is no doubt that social interaction exists long time before. Thus, the constructivist approach points out that identity and national interest were constructed through social interaction. In Malaysia, for example, foreign policy toward Vietnam in the Rohingya ethnic issue was based on shared identity. Constructivists view this as the majority of Malaysians are Muslim and the identity of Islam shared by the minority ethnic (Rohingya) in Vietnam as Muslim as well. Thus, Malaysia feels that it is their responsibility to help their Muslim society and to implement their foreign policy as well. As a result, Malaysia took this opportunity by voicing out their opinion that the Vietnam government should acknowledge this minority ethnic group as part of their population. As stated in a book on international relations study, state identities are complex and they change through time through the process of socialization (Joshua S. G. & Jon C. P., 2012: p. 97). Therefore, the process of socialization was briefly discussed by the constructivists in their school of thought. Again, according to Kenneth Waltz, international systems are ordered based on the principle of their members' sovereign equality and it is therefore decentralized and anarchic. To sum up, the constructivist approach

brings the idea of social interaction as a core element in shaping our international system and this can be supported by several opinions of theorist. Max Weber for example emphasized that, “ the social world (i. e. the world of human interaction) is fundamentally different from the natural world of physical phenomena". Plus, he conclude that “ subjective understanding is the specific characteristic of sociological knowledge" (as cited in Jackson, 2006, p. 164). Hence, constructivist approach rely on such perception that shared understanding as well as shared knowledge of each other’s behaviour is very important for human being to create meaning to them. In fact, constructivism tell us that the international system is constituted by ideas and not material. References: Jeffrey T. Manuszak (1994). The United States Army in Somalia 1992-1994. Retrieved from <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/Somalia/Somalia.htm> Andrew Vogt (2010). Constructivism: International Relations Theory in Brief. Retrieved from [http://www.bukisa.com/articles/335688\\_constructivism-international-relationstheory-in-brief](http://www.bukisa.com/articles/335688_constructivism-international-relationstheory-in-brief) Yu-tai Tsai (2009). The emergence of human security: A constructivist view International Journal of Peace Studies, Volume 14, Number 2, Autumn/Winter 2009 Retrieved from [http://www.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol14\\_2/TSAI%20-%2014n2%20IJPS.pdf](http://www.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol14_2/TSAI%20-%2014n2%20IJPS.pdf) Jackson (2006). Social constructivism: Constructivism as social theory, 164(6) . Retrieved from [www.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199285433/jackson\\_chap06.pdf](http://www.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199285433/jackson_chap06.pdf) Joshua S. G. & Jon C. P. (2012). International Relation (10th ed). United States: Pearson.