

Dominant theories of
neorealism and
neoliberal
institutionalism
politics essay



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1. While neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism are now considered the dominant theories in international relations, neorealism can be viewed as the more dominant of the two because it more accurately portrays state behavior from a positivist standpoint. Unlike neoliberalism which can only adequately explain the economic relations of nations, neorealism is able to explain how states react to one another in terms of security affairs. Quite empirically, neorealism argues that states only act in its own interest vis a vis the “ material structural incentives of the international system” (Griffiths, O’Callaghan and Roach 282). How states behave is reflected upon how they are also positioned in a hierarchy within the international system. In the end, states will behave in a manner that allows them to improve, or at the very least, maintain their positions in the hierarchy. The more powerful states are likely to be more influential in deciding the fate of global affairs while the weaker states will have relatively less say on matters of international import. Therefore, among neorealists, how the international system is divided is dependent on how the capabilities of states are distributed.

The international system is essentially a system of anarchy. States pursue maximum utility in order to achieve their interests. From the neorealist’s point of view, states need the same things but are not equally capable of meeting their needs. For instance, states in the North American continent are relatively well-positioned economically than states in Africa. A consequence of the disparate capabilities between the states from both regions is that their cooperation is limited since partnerships will end up either in dependence or exploitation. On another note, the more affluent states engage in cooperation and competition to maximize relative gains and

power. This desire and the ability to maximize power on the part of states results in what is called “balance of power.” Neorealists believe that the unequal positions of states in the international system gives rise to a security dilemma where states struggle to balance power either by 1) building more powerful armies and increasing military spending, and 2) forging regional alliances or diplomatic ties with other states to check more powerful nations. Neorealists are able to characterize the distribution of power in the international system based on capabilities of nations: unipolar (a singular power), bipolar (two great powers), and multipolar (more than two powers). The establishment of European Union, for instance, is an attempt to balance power and promote a multipolar world in a present unipolar system ruled by the United States of America.

On the other hand, neoliberal institutionalism uses positivism to explain why states cooperate and why they do not cooperate with each other. Using game theory as its method of analysis, neoliberal institutionalists explain that behavior of states depends on their analysis of gains and losses. States are interested in cooperating only with states and institutions that can deliver mutual gains and profitable arrangements. Neoliberalism responds to the neorealist conception of the international system as anarchic. While it does not contest or deny this, neoliberalism purports that this is exaggeration. Neoliberals contend that states do not compete all the time and that cooperative behavior among states is possible if the international system is decentralized. Leaning on the classic liberal view of the state as a rational and self-interested actor, states, when allowed to compete fairly in a

decentralized environment, are able to maximize their relative gains in power and resources.

2. Neoliberalism and neorealism are considered modern interpretations of the classic positivist theories on international relations. While different in some conceptions of state behavior, both theories are complementary and mutually enforcing. They more alike than different; both theories are rooted in the explanation of international relations using the state as primary unit of analysis. They cannot be considered alternative theories to international relations, merely, a modern version of the traditional positivist view of IR.

In some ways, neorealism and neoliberalism contradict but they are essentially mutually reinforcing interpretations of international relations. Both recognize anarchy in IR but at different extents. The neorealist believes that the global system is anarchic by nature and that the main preoccupation of states is how to ensure their survival. Thus, whatever alliances and cooperation is forged among nations is hinged upon the need to survive. Other states, like North Korea, rely on their own processes of survival, even violating international law to ensure that it is not crushed by the more powerful states. Its concept of “balance of power” requires it to develop its own nuclear problem to deter threat. If states do not recognize anarchy, they will be weakened. From a neorealist perspective, international cooperation is illusory, if not outright impossible to achieve.

Neoliberal institutionalism recognizes that there is anarchy but there are creative ways to go about it, such as the building of regimes or institutions to mitigate anarchy. Neoliberals value the existence of international institutions

such as the World Trade Organization, the United Nations, and other international regimes that ensure mutually beneficial relations among nations. The WTO for instance, sets norms and rules for global trade. The UN acts as an arbiter of international conflict.

3. Marxism remains of the most relevant theories that provide alternative explanations to international relations. First of all, departing from the traditional realist and liberal view of the state as the fundamental unit of analysis, Marxism treats class as the unit of analysis. Marxism argues that the international system was established to protect the property interests of the upper classes and the most affluent states. Hence, the struggle in the international system is essentially a class struggle between rich and powerful nations and the exploited nations. Variants of Marxist theory of international relations include the world-systems theory, dependency theory, and neo-Marxism.

Marxism divides the world not into political entities but economic classes. Using its analysis of the base and superstructure, Marxism contends that economics supersedes politics in the global order. International relations was developed by the capitalist class to ensure capital accumulation of wealthy corporations and affluent states. The world-systems theory developed by Wallerstein argues that the world can be divided into economic classes: 1) First World represents the most affluent or the “ core”, and 2) Third World represents the poorest and underdeveloped or the “ periphery”. According to the world-systems theory, only the core countries are able to benefit from international relations because they own the means of production while the “ periphery” countries are exploited. The dependency theory which grew <https://assignbuster.com/dominant-theories-of-neorealism-and-neoliberal-institutionalism-politics-essay/>

popular in Latin America propose that the poor countries (classes) are transformed into mere source of cheap labor and raw materials, hence, keeping them utterly dependent on affluent nations. International institutions such as the WTO are said to perpetuate this inequality.

To resist this unequal relations, Marxists argue for protectionism and economic control policies that will liberate them from the control of the global economic regime, including import substitution to replace export-based economic models.

Work Cited

Griffiths, Martin, O'Callaghan, Terry, and Steven Roach. International relations: the key concepts. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2002.