

Classical realism in explaining international relations research paper examples

[Politics](#), [International Relations](#)



Introduction

Controversy has always characterized the study of international relations, particularly in terms of politics. The complexity of such field has enabled the applicability of many theoretical models in studying politics in the international arena. There could be no “one-size-fits-all” approach, as there is an understanding that several theories have attempted to explain phenomena within international relations. Three theories - neorealism, neoliberalism and classical realism, stand out as among the most prominent ones applicable in studying international relations, with each tending to construct distinctive interpretations.

This study seeks to establish that of the three aforementioned theories, classical realism stands out as the most outstanding one that could best explain international relations. Classical realism faces competitive rivalries against neorealism and neoliberalism. The course of this study exhibits arguments between classical realism and its contenders, neorealism and neoliberalism, further strengthening the position that the theory at hand stands as the most appropriate international relations theory.

Definition of Classical Realism

Realism, in a classical sense, is a product of post-war thinking developed and promoted by University of Chicago professor Hans Morgenthau. Morgenthau has expressed his distrust on state actors in the international system (Snyder 2004, 55), as he described classical realism as the theory concerning human nature as the main force that shapes the imperfect world (Morgenthau 2005, 3). In that case, the pursuance of national interest is the

main goal of nations – the actors, in the international system (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 2005, 9). As a systemic theory focusing on the involvement of national interest in international relations (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 2005, 9), classical realism goes along the lines of unending power struggles between humans constantly lusting for power, as each one of them seeks to levy domination on one another. Power stands as an inescapable force that lures one to act against the advances of another, as it goes without a definite demarcation between good and evil, in the moral sense. Rather, power involves a set of evils within which actors involved have to choose from the lesser evils in order to pursue their interests. Interests, in this case, thus points out the adherence of actors to corruption. The lust for power characterizing classical realism thus involves actors resorting to evil options for the pursuance of their respective interests, thus characterizing politics as a tragedy in which one falls before the actions of another (Cozette 2008, 668).

“ Six Principles” of Morgenthau Vis-à-vis International Relations

In studying classical realism, it is important to take notice of the principles Morgenthau has provided as theoretical foundations. Six principles constitute classical realism – the existence of objective laws, interest understood within the concept of power, fluidity of interests across circumstances, moral implications of action in politics, difference of moral objectives of one nation with the moral laws of the universe and the distinction of the theory from other schools of thought in explaining political discourses (Morgenthau 2005, 4-18).

The first principle of Morgenthau posits that in order to maintain order and

progress in society, objective laws have to operate. Those laws have underpinnings based on human nature as it provides how an ideal system should proliferate within a given society. The integrity of those laws lies in how successful it becomes in reaching its purported goals. In international relations, objective rules are essential in understanding how the international system works and how actors should deal with it. (Morgenthau 2005, 4-5).

The second principle of Morgenthau asserts that power should characterize the analysis of interests. Politics is separate from other disciplines involving interests, such as economics and religion, in that its main concern is power. Foreign policy, in this case, has to satisfy actors by way of its success; otherwise, it will meet severe opposition from parties that hold interests contrary to the status quo. Such is because foreign policy tends to constrain or widen the interests of several actors, and that its legitimacy depends on its success (Morgenthau 2005, 5-12). Under the third principle, political interests are not constrained within the confines of time and place. It has extended throughout history and may continue to do so towards the future, subject to the determination of political forces. Whatever political reality there is in place, it cannot find a drastic replacement in the form of one that completely disregards the laws it has in place. Rather, political forces within any given political reality are the ones that could foster change. In the realm of foreign policy, the nation-state serves as the main point of reference. In that case, it is essential to take note that actors therein could eventually lead to shifting the point of reference from the nation-state to a new order of a different size, subject to new technicalities that might emerge from the actors themselves (Morgenthau 2005, 12-14). The fourth principle states that

political action could lead to moral implications. What could be successful politically may not be in line with the moral principles in place, thus there is considerable tension between the two sides. At some point, the success of a political action may emerge as more morally viable than the moral laws in place. Thus, political actions need not conform to the moral law in place, as the success of those may not be in line with the basic tenets of ethics. Rather, it is essential for prudence to emanate in successful political actions, in that political consequences serve as the key. Thus, international relations, involving a complex set of conflicting interests, must resort not to a universal moral law, but rather to a set of laws leading to politically successful consequences. In that way, actors become successful in obtaining their interests (Morgenthau 2005, 14). Moving on to the fifth principle, the clear distinction between universal moral laws and the moral objectives of actors established an imposing importance in studying international relations with classical realism. Thus, an actor in international relations cannot claim that its moral objectives are akin to that of universal moral laws, as it would result to the thinking that universal moral laws only take the side of one actor. That defies the concept of fairness in competition within international law, as actors who believe that the universal moral laws favor them than others tend to claim supremacy over others. Thus, there is an express undermining of justice in this case (Morgenthau 2005, 14-15). Lastly, the sixth principle states that it is perfectly understandable that the study of interests in the lens of power is autonomous to that of the lens of other disciplines. The autonomy of politics from other disciplines such as economics, morality and legal studies, rests on the conception that power

analyzes the interests of actors based on how they would continue to proliferate politically in the international system. Yet, classical realism takes into consideration the plurality of human nature - humans being political, moral, religious and the like, and that their plurality heavily influence their interests emanating from their involvement in the international system (Morgenthau 2005, 15-18).

Proliferation of Classical Realism in International Relations- Herz and the Security Dilemma

Classical realism does not fall short as a theory explaining international relations. In fact, it has helped found particular phenomena that have helped shape foreign policy and power relations between different nations. John Herz, the proponent of the security dilemma approach, has successfully integrated classical realism as a potent point of analysis in understanding international relations (Sylvest 2008, 451). The suitability of classical realism to tactical approaches emerged as the key approach of Herz, who integrated internationalist and constructivist thinking in seeking to understand the security dilemma. With classical realism as the foundation of his approach, Herz has called on for considerations on the interconnectedness of international and domestic politics, as he noted that the two concepts should remain within a proximate distance when studies would attempt to discuss both separately. The integration of constructivist thought in his classical realist application has found sufficient coverage in explaining the importance of holding dialogues between parties of actors (Sylvest 2008, 451). At the same time, Herz has introduced the integration of liberalism to classical realism, which holds the importance of coexistence, order and mutual

empathy high, without the disruption of the pursuance of state interest in international relations. Such highly reflects the supremacy of classical realism in portraying international relations sufficiently. The integration efforts of Herz in forming the security dilemma approach have further established the continued relevance of classical realism to the present time (Sylvest 2008, 451-452).

Neorealism as a Competing Force against Classical Realism

Classical realism, as a theory, has found a formidable competition in the form of neorealism. Kenneth Waltz, the proponent of neorealism, posited that actors in the sphere of international relations are constrained and pressured by existing international laws. Actors in the international system knowingly communicate with one another with constrains in mind provided by international laws, thus providing for the structural sense of the theory (Nye 1988, 241). Thus, it is important to commend the existence of those laws in explaining patterns characterizing the occurrence of conflicting actors. Claiming that the world exists in anarchy, Waltz posits that the international system does not stand to have a single ruler compared to that of the domestic system. The concept of anarchy in the lens of Waltz thus proposes a different one for the international system and that of the domestic system. Natural anarchy thus characterizes the field of international relations due to the inability of international orders to establish a single ruler in the same ease to that of the domestic system (Shymko 1992, 293). In that sense, neorealism does not adhere to the premise that states, as units of analysis in international relations, would eventually find

replacements, even in the midst of the globalizing world (Waltz 1979, 1-18). Additionally, Waltz stated that a bipolar world is a more feasible one for maintaining the balance of power than a multipolar one implicitly proposed by Morgenthau in his classical realism. Bipolarity ensures that the anarchic world order finds stability by encouraging actors to find their balance for survival rather than engaging in bandwagon-type approaches with other actors. The lack of a central authority in the international system would thus urge actors to fight for their own survival, rather, than rely on others for the protection of their existence (Walt 1998, 31).

Synthesis: Classical Realism Vis-à-vis Neorealism

Classical realism differs greatly to that of neorealism, although both studies adhere to the premise that self-interested actors characterize the international system. Nevertheless, both theories differ in many different respects - classical realism being observant of objective sets of international rules (Morgenthau 2005, 4-5) and neorealism being more keen on concluding that the international system is anarchic (Shymko 1992, 293). Yet, an important consideration as to why classical realism supersedes neorealism in terms of explaining international relations lies on the premise that international laws tend to prevent a state of anarchy in the international level (Morgenthau 2005, 4-12). The mere presumption that international laws exist, however, does not sufficiently refute the argument that anarchy exists in international relations. Sufficiently covering the rejection of anarchy in international relations are the state actors and their interests. The interest of states lie on the premise of survival (Williams 2004, 639), and in fighting for their survival, it is reasonable to presume that they are fighting against any

instance leading to the complete domination of one actor in the international system (Cozette 2008, 668). Thus, that leads to the formation of international coalitions serving as mechanisms preventing any demeaning factors of anarchy from threatening their survival. Order thus finds maintenance through international organizations resulting from those coalitions. Those international organizations, in turn, support the premise of classical realism that the future might see new points of references other than states (Williams 2004, 649-650). The influence of globalization, in this case, defies the assumption of neorealism that the world will not see through new paradigms taking points of analysis other than states. Bipolarity, in this case, may not necessarily stand as the only viable international order. Rather, the multipolar system upheld by classical realism would hold more credit through the existence of international organizations defying the notion of anarchy (Williams 2004, 656).

Neoliberalism as a Competing Force against Classical Realism

Classical realism also has a contender in the form of neoliberalism. Yet, it is best to explain neoliberalism in light with its more direct ideological competitor, neorealism. In terms of tackling anarchy as a problem, neoliberalism holds ground on the premise that anarchy does not place too many restraints on actors. In this case, anarchy in the neorealist view possesses overemphasis, without much regard to interdependence as argued by the neoliberals (Nye 1988, 245-246). Whereas there may not be a single leader ruling the international sphere, it does not mean to say that actors cannot coordinate peacefully with their interests (Baldwin 2007, 4).

Within the topic of international cooperation, neoliberalism stands on the premise that cooperation among actors would not be as difficult to achieve and guard compared to the neorealist view that much of international cooperation lies strongly on state power. In that case, neoliberals and neorealists would base the success of their views based on whether international cooperation succeeds or fails (Baldwin 2007, 5). For examining interests based on absolute or relative gains, neoliberals possess the view that absolute gains characterize the main interests of actors from international cooperation, while neorealists presume that actors have more interest in relative gains (Baldwin 2007, 5). Neoliberalism holds that absolute gains is achievable through the use of comparative advantage in trade relations, whereas neorealism is more inclined with relative gains, which concerns the arbitrary distribution of wealth necessitating one actor to take gains from another (Baldwin 2007, 5-6). In determining the importance of state goals, neoliberalism views the importance of economic welfare above other matters while neorealism has high concern on security affairs. Since anarchy presupposes the need for state survival, actors thus engage themselves in determining the goals they need to fulfill. (Baldwin 2007, 7)

Both neoliberalism and neorealism recognize the emergence of international institutions, although they differ drastically. Neoliberals claim that international institutions could result to loosening the constraining effects of anarchy; neorealists provide that such assumption by the neoliberals have profound exaggerations (Baldwin 2007, 8).

Synthesis: Classical Realism Vis-à-vis Neoliberalism

The pessimist nature of classical realism contrasts the positive outlook of

neoliberalism (Nye 1988, 245). Yet, classical realism presents a more formidable analysis of international relations in that it regards the dangers brought by self-interested actors without dismissing any possibility that cooperation may arise (Morgenthau 2005, 5-12). What is daunting about neoliberalism is that it regarded the concept of interdependence in a highly positive light, particularly in terms of obtaining absolute gains. Yet, there remains the possibility that interdependence would not work at its optimum because of political considerations staged by self-interested actors. The emphasis of neoliberalism on interdependence has led the theory to presume the prevalence of peace in dealing with the anarchic world (Nye 1988, 250). Yet, it fails to recognize that interests coming from domestic affairs influence the movements of actors. Thus, interdependent actions have to abide by the existing structures, which in turn could become contentious once their effectiveness becomes questionable (Nye 1988, 249). Another arena that makes classical realism more viable in explaining international relations is the field of international cooperation. Admittedly, classical realism is strict in terms of regarding international cooperation as an amicable process, yet what neoliberals lack is the regard for more stringent safeguards against the strength of state power that could change the game in international relations (Nye 1988, 238). Protection of economic interests may not prove compelling enough to influence against political motives. In fact, actors may use political motives to advance economic interests - not for the whole of the international community, but for domestic purposes (Nye 1988, 240). Therefore, the optimism of neoliberalism does not

prove adequate to the pragmatic, albeit pessimistic, approach presented by classical realism.

Example: Determining United States-China Relations Using Classical Realism

The rise of the Peoples' Republic of China (China) as a great power is a contemporary example where classical realism would operate at best. The entry of China into the foray of great powers has threatened the United States (US), long considered as the most powerful nation in the world. Confronting the increasing prominence of China, the US has sought for remedies that would enable it to retain its position in the international arena; thus, instability would certainly arise between the two (Kirshner 2012, 58-59). Apart from its self-interests, the US has seen the rise of China as one that could lead to two possible directions -China might become a great power through peaceful terms or that it would become a hegemon through calamitous means (Kirshner 2012, 70). Classical realism prompts the US to respond to the growing prominence of China on three conditions: (1) the US should not resort to costly measures, (2) the US should not employ countermeasures that would afflict its position in the international arena and (3) none of those countermeasures should help increase the power of China (Kirshner 2012, 70-71).

Classical realism asserts that both the US and China have self-interests to protect against one another in the midst of their competition (Rosato and Schuessler 2011, 813). However, classical realism does not advise both nations to resort to actions with dangerous or risky consequences to their political positions. With the US being in a better position to mobilize as it

witnesses the rise of China, it should not become too assertive in its position by taking on an “offensive realist” approach, wherein the consequences may be more perilous due to the aggression such approach requires (Kirshner 2012, 60). Rather, the US should balance itself in response to the rapid growth of China (Rosato and Schuessler 2011, 813). Within the view of classical realism, China, driven by its interests, will definitely strive to rise further to gain a more prominent position in international affairs. The US would definitely respond to that as a stimulus alarmed by their self-interests as the current world leader (Rosato and Schuessler 2011, 813). In any case, classical realism prompts both actors to act on their own interests in the given situation without harming themselves towards demeaning consequences that could relegate them to a lower position (Kirshner 2012, 71).

As per synthesis of the above-mentioned analysis, classical realism stands as the most suitable theory that explains the contemporary relationship between the US and China (Kirshner 2012, 57). Neorealism, with its focus on structuralist constraints and anarchy, resembles offensive realism since the latter is also a structurally premised theory that presupposes utopianism on the part of the actor that will execute the approach – in this case, the US (Rosato and Schuessler 2011, 813). For neoliberalism, it would most likely find itself out of this context due to its orientation on absolute gains (Baldwin 2007, 5-6). Furthermore, interdependence is not apparent between the US, China, as both nations see their relationship as a rivalry with conflicting interests (Rosato and Schuessler 2011, 813). Thus, classical realism provides

a more adequate reasoning for the current state of US-China relations, compared with neorealism and neoliberalism (Kirshner 2012, 71).

Conclusion

Competing theories have since emerged to characterize the entirety of international relations. Each theory has a particular set of assumptions within which their ideas emerge. Yet, as per assessment of three of those theories - classical realism, neorealism and neoliberalism classical realism has presented itself sufficiently as the theory that could best explain international relations. Such is because classical realism applies best to the current state of international relations. Its regard for an international system governed by laws defies the anarchic viewpoint of neorealism and neoliberalism, in that the formation of international organizations provides for the leadership of the international community. The focus on state power is much fitting for describing international relations, especially with the trend of globalization that defies anarchy but highlights the prominence of actors with more powerful means of advancing their interests at the same time (Williams 2004, 656). Neorealism focuses on the premise of anarchy and the prominence of the state as the only viable unit of analysis acceptable throughout time, while neoliberalism posits for a more optimistic viewpoint of international relations based on economic advancements. Both do not sufficiently apply to the status quo (Williams 2004, 639-656; Nye 1988, 238-250). Classical realism, while being somewhat inadequate, explains the state of international relations in the best way, in that the primacy of the interest of actors in shaping international policy has come into play to characterize

power struggles provided by political interests shaped in a pluralistic manner. Yet, there is an understanding that classical realism is not mutually exclusive, in that it also recognizes possible conjunctions with other international relations theories such as constructivism and neoliberalism (Sylvest 2008, 451-452). Thus, the scope and adaptability of classical realism makes it a viable theory for understanding international relations.

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