

Realism and neorealism essay



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The President of the United States of America has two primary responsibilities aside from the usual routine of governing a country. The first one is to develop and execute domestic policies. The second one is to develop and execute foreign policies. The domestic policies that will come out of the White House will determine the destiny of the nation and will impact the citizens of the US as well as every sector of American society. The foreign policies on the other hand help to influence global events and how the rest of the world will come to view America. This paper will take a closer look at how US presidents discharge their duty in terms of developing the two aforementioned two streams of policymaking.

But to ensure that the discussion will not digress this paper will simply analyze an article written by Moore and Lanoue entitled “ Domestic Politics and US Foreign Policy: A Study of Cold War Conflict Behavior. ” In this article Moor and Lanoue describe the basis for creating policies and it is surprising to know the assumptions held by many that past US Presidents create policies in order to save their administration and not for the sake of truth, righteousness, or sense of duty. In this regard Moore and Lanoue argue the opposite saying that the commonly held assumptions are problematic to say the least. Furthermore, the second reason for analyzing the said article is also its relevance in studying important concepts in international relations – realism and neorealism.

And more specifically the article is the right vehicle to test principles embedded in neorealism theory. Tools for Analysis In order to accomplish the objectives set out earlier there is a need to breakdown the article and try to understand the context that Moore and Lanoue used as a framework to write

the article. It is also, imperative to provide an overview of Realism and Neorealism theory and to show how principles gleaned from examining the theory are used to understand foreign policy and international relations. Aside from the article mentioned above the proponent of this study will also use the works of Ashley Tellis, B. Buzan et al.

, and Bruce B. de Mesquita. These two authors will help clarify the issue and at the same time provide support to the arguments made by Moore and Lanoue. Read about Policymaking No man or woman in the full bloom of adulthood and one in his right mind would wish to become the next president of the United States of America.

Thus, it can be assumed that those running for the White House are men and women having an extraordinary sense of duty. This is because there is no other explanation as to why someone would volunteer to carry a very heavy burden. The power to develop and approve policies that will impact the lives of hundreds of millions of Americans and this does not even include the policies that will transform the physical aspects of the US such as environmental laws etc. Wag the Dog On top of an already pressure-packed job of deciding over domestic matters there is an added problem of dealing with international policies and international relations. In this regard, Moore and Lanoue pointed out a disturbing assumption that past administrations would not hesitate to use foreign policy to change the perspective US citizens and make them less critical of a inept President. In fact, Moore and Lanoue went further as to say that many believe past administrations used force to or provoke other nations just so the people will be united and focus all their energy towards a new and foreign enemy.

Realism & Neorealism Based on the pronouncements made by Moore and Lanoue there is no other school of thought that can come close in explaining the relationship between domestic and foreign policies other than the realism and neorealism theory of international relations. Now, Moore and Lanoue were not only successful in explaining the principles found in the two theories but they were also able to use it against the sick claim that a sitting US president will not hesitate to fire a guided missile into the heart of a foreign power just so he can protect his image or much worse, just so he can secure a second term in office. Before going any further it is imperative to first analyze the intricacies of both realism and neorealism theory. Realists According to Ashley Tellis “ realism” is a tradition of explaining political behavior and it is focused on the following assumptions: 1. Every single geopolitical nation, together with its its current leadership struggles for power and wants more of it; and 2. Every single geopolitical nation, together with its its current leadership struggles for security and wants more of it (Tellis, 1996, p.

). If this theory is to be believed then every nation will have to be always on the move to either defend their territory, creating an alliance with others, and at the same time scheming to find ways of expanding territory or to usurp other lands. This a problematic set of assumptions because not every nation has the capability to do all three. It is also problematic for those who advocate just war theory although it is a topic for another discussion. So all the authors that will be mentioned here agree to the fact that the traditional view of realism has to be modified and thi is the reason why “ neorealism” came to be.

Neorealists In a nutshell neorealism is a modification of “ realism” and its advocates prefer to see the world as a bit more complicated than what was previously thought as possible. For instance the fundamental view that the each state or geopolitical nation is only looking at its own selfish interest is still the basic premise here but for a neorealist there is more than meets the eye. It is true that a political nation will strive for more power but it has to balance it with another fundamental need which is security. Due to the fact that a state requires power as well as security then the major international policy that will come out from the drawing boards will be those that will allow the nation to get more power and territory if the risks are acceptable. According to this theory no political leader will risk the safety of his people.

Now, there are many instances in this country’s history that will tell of the opposite but all of that will be discussed later. Furthermore, there is one facet of neorealism that will play a significant role in analyzing Moore and Lanoue’s article and according to many experts it is called “ systemic-structuralism” (Buzan, et al. , 1993). In a nutshell this idea advocates the argument that the way nations interact in a global setting can be viewed within a system structure. System Structure Most of the time, the term “ neorealism” is mentioned in the same breath as the name Kenneth Waltz. This is because Waltz was able to improve upon the traditional view as to why nations go to war.

Waltz’s “ systemic-structuralism” view argues that it is not simply human nature that drives nations to fight one another but it more on the system structure. In this regard Waltz attracted critics who are not comfortable with the idea of placing international relations within the very restrictive box

called system structure (see Buzan, et al. , 1993). Many calls Waltz solution to a complicated international relations dynamic as helpful but at the same too narrow and restrictive. This will be elaborated in the following analysis of Cold War conflict using neorealism theory.

Moore and Lanoue From this point on the two theories mentioned above will be used to describe the domestic as well as the foreign policies of the US. So, all the ideas and concepts mentioned above will be tested with a basic knowledge of American history as well as the activities of the US presidency – at least those that are already known publicly. But Moor and Lanoue simplified the discussion much further by focusing on US policies during the Cold War between the United States of America and the former Union Soviet Socialist Republic (“ USSR”). Cold War The Cold War scenario is the best model that can be used to support the neorealism theory.

And it can even be argued that the proponents of said theory have perfected the concepts of neorealism during the time when the US was in a stand-off with USSR. For those who may have forgotten the situation a refresher is needed. And so, revisiting the past will lead to a time when there were two superpowers in the planet. This is indeed a bygone era because in the 21st century, the United States is the undisputed world leader.

The USSR and US standoff is not only characterized by two gigantic nations each possessing an arsenal of weaponry –including nuclear weapons – , a huge standing army, and great wealth to maintain such forces. No, there is more to it than military prowess; the Cold War was also the result of a conflict in ideology. The United States are advocates of democracy and free

markets while the USSR believes that world peace and equality can only be achieved through a socialist state modeled after the ideas of Karl Marx and Lenin. The Cold War was the byproduct of World War II when 1) Germany was neutralized; 2) Britain lost the motivation to lead after two bloody World Wars; and 3) the continued decline of France, Belgium and other European power. This left the US standing in the West and the USSR standing in the East, a face-off of mammoth proportions.

Both countries knew so well that if they go to war there will be no clear victor. The prospect of an all-out nuclear war is unacceptable to both parties and both are contented to be in a defensive position. As the Cold War continued its chilling effect, principles of neorealism began to emerge. First of all there is now a bipolar world – two extremes, Democracy on one end and Communism on the other. With the exceptions of a few countries all nations of the world gravitated towards the two poles. There are many who joined the Communists and this includes much of Eastern Europe, as well as China, Indochina, and North Korea.

The others joined the US hoping that they can find shelter under its might wings. And for a long time advocates of neorealism can boast that their theory works. In the Cold War there was no World War III that erupted. Each state conscious of the need to increase security had to mute out the urge to get more power, territory, and wealth. What the advocates of neorealism excluded from the discussion is that there were significant wars that occurred in between and these are the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

The US and USSR did not meet in the battlefields but their allies did.

Objections There is indeed a clear application of neorealism to the “ wag the dog” phenomenon as allegedly been the practice of past US presidents. But one has to say that it is an ingenious application of neorealism and one can even say that it is applying it to the extreme and when pushed further will contradict the said theory. In “ wagging the dog” a US president is forced on a desperate move to save the country from internal problems and infighting among US citizens. So instead of focusing on domestic problems, the president will create an international incident that will divert the attention of the people to domestic problems galvanize the people to take action against a common enemy.

If this is an application of neorealism then there are a few objections. First of all it contradicts a basic premise of neorealism that says the state is the principal actor and not the charismatic political leader. Secondly, attacking a foreign country without provocation will endanger the peace treaties and other agreements made with other nations. Thirdly, attacking a foreign country no matter how small will never result in simple capitulation; there is a possibility of a counter-attack. A small Arab State may not be able to afford a more glaring comeback and use a cruise missile but they can also be creative and hijacked an American plane instead and kill all US passengers.

And, finally another basic premise of neorealism is that nations will form alliances and that weaker ones will join with the most powerful block opposite America. So what is the assurance that the allies will not come to the aid of a small nation? More Objections Going back to the first implication as mentioned above, it is difficult to accept that a US president will not have

the decency to realize that it is wrong to simply kill hundreds of people – even if they belong to the opposing camp – if unprovoked. Bombing an Arab State will not make critics of the government to suddenly develop a paralysis borne from fear. It is easy to predict that the critics of the incumbent leader will ask the reason for bombing and if the president will not be able to give a convincing answer then his administration is finished. On the second implication, attacking a helpless nation or even a radical Arab State and violating rules of engagement will result in an international outcry.

It will be a glaring demonstration that the US is only after its own selfish interest. It will result in rallying forces to the aid of the enemy instead of neutralizing the threat the US will create a monster. On the third implication the US cannot afford to make more enemies. Radical Arab extremists are using the propaganda that the US government is a regime of evil and bombing a small nation will definitely reinforce such ideas. Testing the Hypothesis As mentioned earlier there are many objections to the idea of “wagging the dog”, specifically creating an international incident to divert attention from a festering domestic problem.

To this argument, Moor and Lanoue will agree as seen in the following discussion. But there is more, the article was also able to prove that neorealism worked perfectly well in the Cold War conflict. At the same time they were able to show that the state will prove to be more important than the personality of the leadership and that foreign policy is shaped by actual needs in terms of creating better international relations with others and not as an instrument to improve domestic conditions. According to Moor and Lanoue they were able to find consistent results that will support their

hypothesis. By implication this means that Moor and Lanoue were able to prove – at least in the Cold War conflict in the period 1950 – 1980 – that the state will do everything in its power to come up on top. This also means that the US presidents will not endanger the country's reputation and status in the international stage only to save their own presidency or win a second term in office.

Conclusion Realism and Neorealism theory of international relations seek to explain why geopolitical nations behave in a particular manner. A casual survey of the wars that happened in Europe alone will make one realize that indeed it is human nature to desire for more power, more territory and more wealth. It is easy to predict the selfish ambitions that are in the hearts of men. And for those who are given the ability to lead they demonstrate the oft-repeated phrase that power corrupts and that being drunk with power does not result in a dazed posture but on the contrary it will make one determined to grab more power and surround himself with people that will help him or her hold on to authority for as long as possible. There are many who are uncomfortable with this overly simplistic view.

Again, another casual review of history will reveal that not all leaders are tyrants and that not all societies desire to usurp other lands. Not all people are warlike and blood-thirsty and so therefore there is a need to reformulate the assertion of a basic need to indulge in selfish desires. During the time of the Cold War an interesting theory began to emerge. It is an improvement on the conventional idea of “ realism” and aptly labeled as “ neorealism”.

This new theory states that indeed there is truth to the need for more power and security but the state or geopolitical nation is careful to balance the activities required to satisfy to diverging goals. In order to get more power and wealth a state will have to go to war and risk losing what it already has. Thus, the state will only go to war knowing that it is secure and powerful enough to do so. This is a triumph for the neorealist because it now explains the behavior of many states such as the US who apparently has enough firepower and resources to gobble up other smaller states but since it stopped its bid for global dominion after World War II neorealism is the convenient explanation. Neorealist even went further and using the evidence of a relatively peaceful planet in the decades of the Cold War, the advocates of this refurbished theory assert that all nations in the world will realize that there is a need to have bipolar division of power.

This simply means that if there must be at least two major nations on opposite ends of the battlefield so that others will rally to their sides – in the process crating two equal and opposite forces. The neorealist believes that all nations in the world will recognize the bipolar arrangement of the superpowers and they will then take their places. Each nation careful not to upset the balance of power and so each state will side with the least powerful in order not to create a very powerful force that has the potential to rule the whole world. Based on this predictable behavior, according to neorealist it can now be argued that the state makes decisions for the benefit of the state and it no charismatic leader will be foolish enough to make plans and decisions that will risk the security of the nation as well as the stability of global politics. Now, there are those who are going to the

extreme of this theory and they propose that past US presidents were forced to act on the basis of this theory. They claim that an embattled US president will not hesitate to shape a foreign policy that will rally Americans to a common cause.

If this theory is to be believed then it can be said that George Bush ordered the War on Iraq to commence at the same time when his approval ratings were plummeting. In the study made by Moore and Lanoue, the two researchers were able to hit two birds with one stone, so to speak. They were able to demonstrate the sound principles that can be found in the neorealism theory. A major implication of their study is the conclusion that not even the political blunder and turmoil within the presidency can force the hand of the president to shape foreign policy that will hopefully divert attention to domestic problems and instead shift it to the international arena. No, the president will not risk the safety of the US just to save his skin and this is an emphatic validation of neorealism that says the “ systemic-structuralism” of international relations will force nations to play it safe and not risk rocking the boat too much.