

# Is realism realistic? essay



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Is realism 'realistic'? Realism by its very name indicates that it emphasises a realistic approach to international relations theory, however the extent to which this is true is thoroughly debated amongst scholars in contemporary society. Realism revolves primarily around the struggle for power amongst self-interested states, with particular emphasis on the desire of survival for each state. Neo-realism became prominent through Waltz and Morgenthau during the early twentieth century to explain the emerging bipolar power balance.

The balance of power between states is central to neo-realist theory; however recent changes have uprooted the delicate balance of power. The end of the Cold War, the rise of international institutions and the growth US hegemony has placed liberalism as the predominant international relations theory, displacing great thinkers such as Morgenthau and Waltz from their post WWII political pedestals'. Realism, as a state centric theory, proposes three main ideas; that of statism, self-help and survival, essentially meaning that the state is the highest form of authority and states have to ensure their own survival rather than relying on external support. Many political theories begin with analysis of human nature; in the case of realism human nature is primarily concerned with selfishness resulting in life being 'solitary, poor, brutish and short' (Hobbes 2007: Part 1, Book 13). In order to overcome this, groups of people come together to form states which have the 'absolute authority and credible power to protect [the people] from both internal disorders and foreign enemies and threats' (Jackson and Sorensen 2007: 65) who then act out the same individual anarchy on a global scale, hence the classic realist security dilemma.

Neo-realism is essentially an expansion of the definition of power as a means to security rather than just in regard to militaristic superiority, an attempt to contemporise realism. There are two fundamental problems with realist and neo-realist theory and its application to contemporary society; the rise non-state actors, particularly post 9/11, and the ending of the Cold War resulting in US power hegemony. The rise of idealist organisations such as the inter-state Al Qaeda and their ability to strike at the state without military means seems to undermine the distribution of power and undoubtedly illustrates that there are actors other than states. Bush's acclaimed "War on Terror" forced many realists to reconsider international relations theory as many of them would shun the idea of declaring war on a concept or idea, as Snyder states 'It is harder for the normally state-centric realists to explain why the world's only superpower announced a war against al Qaeda, a non-state terrorist organization. (Snyder 2004: 55) Some game theorists have successfully argued that suicidal bombing and international terrorism relates strongly to a realistic approach to international relations theory; 'what nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland' (Pape 2005: 4).

I believe that if realism were combined to some extent with elements of constructivism, it would help to explain the rise of ideological movements from a realist perspective. In contemporary society the idea that human nature is centred on progress and co-operation rather than selfishness has become essential to both theoretical and practical politics. The presence of

legally binding institutions, such as the EU, and powerful economic institutions, such as the World Trade Organisation, questions the anarchical international assumptions made by realism. The rise of liberalism and the growth of free trade and Transnational companies capable of transgressing state borders has seriously questioned the assumptions of state hegemony.

Many realists would refute the concept of an “ international institution” from a theoretical stance arguing that organisations such as the UN are unable to prevent hegemonic powers from “ minding their own business”. For example in 2003 the UN was unable to prevent the US from invading Iraq on the pretence of WMD’s clearly showing that US authority is somewhat unrestrained and that realism still plays a major role in US foreign policy. The failure of realism to account for non-state political actors is key to its peripheral relationship with contemporary society. If the definition of a state was more loosely applied, allowing revolving business organisations and ideological movements to become a part of what it means to be a “ state”, then realism may become more applicable to current international relations theory.

The ending of the cold war relates to a wider issue regarding the balance of power and the growth of a monopolar world, ‘ standard realist doctrine predicts that weaker states will ally to protect themselves from stronger ones and thereby form and reform a balance of power’ (Snyder 2004: 56) however on the current international stage ‘ no combination of states or other powers can challenge the United States militarily’ (Snyder 2004: 56). Some scholars have made reference to moral attacks and military resistance towards US hegemony however I believe, along with some nuclear strategists, that

although no military balance can be achieved the presence of nuclear weapons invalidates the need for traditional military dominance. The condition of M. A.

D. Mutually Assured Destruction) still exists today as a remnant of the Cold War ‘ the logic of deterrence retains its hold on bureaucratic thinking and planning in both countries’ (Dunn 2007: 27) so to some extent a balance of power still exists. Furthermore I believe economic interdependence cannot be ignored in relation the balance of power, particularly between the US and China. As of May 2011 China held 16% of total US public debt and in 2007 the US imported approximately 40% of all its consumer goods from China, with an increase of 293% from 1997 to 2004; perhaps this economic performance helps to reinforce and secure a multipolar system. Therefore if the definition of power were to be expanded and links were established with liberalism then realism can, to some extent, account for change and shifts in the balance of power making it a more realistic theory. Both the definitions of “ power” and “ war” are outdated concepts in realist international relations theory.

Neo-realism has attempted to address the issue over power and its relative definition, arguing that power also encompasses economic security as well as militaristic security but still fails to account for irrational “ humanitarian intervention” as was the case in the Balkans in the late 1990’s, more recently in Libya. I believe “ power” can encompass many different themes, not just economic and militaristic, but numerous others such as culture, media and energy to name but a few; soft power is an essential part of modern society ‘ America’s popular culture, with its libertarian and

egalitarian currents, dominates film, television, and electronic communications. ' (Keohane ; amp; Nye 1998: 5) Secondly the definition of war is almost a medieval concept according to realists. I believe the concept of set-stage militaristic battles as a definition of war is no longer valid; cyber warfare, economic warfare and cultural warfare are all prevalent in the modern world. I agree with Waltz and his emphasis on the capabilities of the state however I would also combine this with Rye's idea of soft power in order to attain a diverse definition of power accurately reflecting the current system. Many criticisms have been levelled at realism, in particular classical realism, particularly since liberalism became the dominant international relations theory.

Realism cannot easily account for systematic transformation, for example the rise of non-state actors, and has often been referred to as Machiavellian in outlook. However realism is intended to be a realistic, pragmatic approach to international relations and in no shape or form idealist by nature. I accept many realist principles, particularly the balance of power, but still hold many idealist views. I believe that realism has become outdated in many respects, especially over its strict classification of power and the state; if realism were to combine elements of both liberalism and neoliberalism, with regard to economic interdependence and the definition of power, it would become a far more applicable theory. Even though realism has these clear flaws it is still widely used to explain global conflicts and predict shifts in power as well as being strictly enforced under Bush through the shroud of liberalism.

To conclude a world based solely on realist theory would remain trapped in an anarchical world rife with fighting and tension, we do not live in a world

like this however elements of our world do reflect certain animalistic characteristics. Therefore realism on its own is inaccurate but combined selectively with liberalism, neoliberalism and constructivism gives us a much clearer picture of contemporary society. In 1979 Waltz outlined two types of system regarding the balance of power, bipolar and multipolar, and structural realism became one of the many modifications to classical realist theories.