

Foreign policy and national interests essay sample



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Question 1: Foreign policy must be formulated in accordance with the national interest'. Evaluate this claim which is attributable to realist thinking on foreign policy. According to realist thinking on foreign policy, international relations and politics are formulated in accordance with national interest. This presupposes that the key actors in International Relations are sovereign states that behave similarly regardless of their type of government. As well, a state of anarchy is at the fundamental core of this argument and national interests of egoistic states as the main outward presence in international realm. Classic Realism, originally emerged from the European concert of aristocratic diplomacy. By evaluating this claim, this essay will reassert the position and importance of Offensive and Defensive Realism in our contemporary post 9/11 world. These are respectively neoclassical realism and neorealism. Firstly, a detailed account of realism will be produced highlighting the emergence of national interest as the fundamental feature or goal of sovereign states.

This is done either through the maintenance of a status quo or aspiration of accumulating influence. It will be concluded that Defensive Realism or neorealism is the principal theoretical sub-school in according this claim any legitimacy. Secondly, a general evaluation of neorealism in post 9/11 world will be provided; and a comparison, and ultimately an association of anarchy and interdependence (emerging from neoliberalism) will be enunciated. Finally, resulting from the discoveries of the evaluation of realist foreign policy, principally on national interest, from neoliberal critiques; a subsequent new theoretical school will be expressed; Liberal Realism. This is demonstrated by Christopher Hill. To evaluate the claim that foreign policy

must be formulated in accordance with national interest, it is necessary to clearly define what realism is exactly and its theoretical sub-schools.

Realism is a school of thought based on three core assumptions: groupism, for humankind to survive above subsistence level humans need cohesion to be provided by group solidarity; egoism, a political behavior driven by self-interest essentially rooted in human nature that can be applied to any social setting where groups interact; and power centrism, a fundamental feature of politics where human affairs are marked by great inequalities of power.

Under the assumption of Groupism, nation-states are the most important human groups within which nationalism is an important source of in-group cohesion. It carries no assumption concerning the nature of politics. The consequences of realism's core assumptions are that humankind will unlikely ever wholly transcend power politics through the progressive power of reason. Additionally, necessity as the group interest or national interest defines it will trump any putatively universal morality and ethics.

It can be deduced from these assumptions and their consequences, that groupism is essentially the states' national interests and international politics are regarded as wildly anarchic unless central authority exists. This leads onto the development of Realist Theories and their following sub-schools.

There are many theoretical schools of realism. For the purpose of this essay, Offensive Realists and Defensive Realists theoretical schools will be considered and examined in relation to the question. Offensive Realists or neoclassical realists are more concerned by conflict-generating foreign policy and the structural potential of anarchy itself. On the other hand, Defensive Realists or neoliberals concern themselves with the security dilemma and

its impact on the means of states' survival in international politics. However, both emanate from the classical theoretical argument that anarchy renders states security problematic, potentially conflictual (key underlying cause of war) Since in the international system there is no central authority to enforce agreements, no state can rule out prospects that another state will take up arms.

This eventually leads on to the primacy of national security as the most viable and primary national interest. The primacy of national security and its relation to realist foreign policy is best examined and comprehended by Brian C. Schmidt. For realists, the fundamental national interest when considering foreign policy of all states is national security. " While significant differences exist among realists, Dunne and Schmidt (2005) argue that realists of all stripes subscribe to ' three S's - statism, survival, and self-help - that together help to account for the primacy of national security" Having established the basic premises of realism, the following paragraphs will discuss Defensive and Offensive realist's state motivations and the possibility of reaching a systematic realist approach to state motivation with regard to national interest in the formulation of foreign policy. According to realists, the ultimate actor is the state and sovereignty is the distinguishing trait. The primordial goal or national interest is to secure the state because the states are the central actors and are united in their understanding that states are the referent object of foreign policy in general and security in particular.

Therefore, according to Buzan the realist foreign policy is devoted to " protecting the four component elements of a state: its physical base

(population and territory), the idea of the state (nationality and organizing ideologies), its institutions (the machinery of government), and finally, its sovereignty” The attribute of sovereignty acting as the legitimacy of the state, provides both security and order to the political community within the state. “ Internally realists operate under the assumption that the problem of order and security is solved ...” Externally, neorealism attributes security, competition and war to the absence of world government and relative distribution of power in the international system resulting in anarchy. “ Waltz explains that ‘ competition and conflict among states stem directly from the twin facts of life under conditions of anarchy: states in anarchic order must provide for their own security, and threats or seeming threats to their security abound’ (1989: 43)” This illustrates the security dilemma in the anarchic international system and the realist argument that national security is a widespread concern of states and explains why survival ultimately is the central goal of all foreign policy formulated according to national interest.

The Versailles order according to the realist observer was torn apart in a clash between revisionist and status quo states, all seeking the survival or the expansion of their national interests. E. H. Carr, noted in 1939, “ order had been blind to the fact that “ morality is the product of power” and that no one should be surprised that “ dissatisfied Powers” declared war on “ sentimental and dishonest platitudinizing of satisfied Powers” Therefore, state motivation was made the central concern of realism. There are three basic types of foreign policy that can be formulated in accordance with national interest “ a ‘ policy of the status quo’ aiming to keep power; a ‘ policy of imperialism’ aiming to increase power; and finally a ‘ policy of

prestige' aiming to demonstrate power" The subsequent implication of realist analysis of domestic politics was that power was regarded not as an end (i. e.: inherent goal in human nature) but rather as a means relative to predominant values of society. Therefore, foreign policy is decisively shaped by unique national situations or interests which created a particular challenge as policy making would be a direct result of the free will of domestic politics. Furthermore, foreign policy making would be unconstrained by environment and power politics.

Realists responded to this joint challenge in very distinctive ways. Defensive or neo-realist states would be mainly motivated by security; and offensive or neo-classical realists would argue that the defensive realists' argument introduces unnecessary bias towards status quo. Thus, they would seek to comprehend in more detail revisionist states and argue states mainly seek the accumulation of influence. However, both subschools of realist foreign policy, offensive and defensive realism, are flawed and need to be completely evaluated in comparison to neoliberal institutionalism. To evaluate the claim that national interest formulates foreign policy is essential to assert neoliberalism claims on the subject and their suggested alternatives and interdependence. Some general observations on the limitations of realist foreign policy include its unaccount of progress and change in international relations or the understanding that legitimacy can be a source of military power. " Realism has provided a number of arguments about international cooperation ... but to date it has not offered an explanation for the tendency of states to undertake their cooperation through institutionalized arrangements."

Furthermore, regarding the balancing of power and hegemonic tendencies of neorealism, one important criticism can be raised: its uncertainty. No nation can be sure that its calculations of the distribution of power are correct at any particular point in time. For example during the July Crisis of 1914, “Austria was resolved to change the balance of power in Balkans in its favor ... Russia was yet ready to strike, its power was on the increase ...

postponement of decisive action would make the distribution of power less favorable” to Austria. This eventually led to preventive war declared from both the Triple Entente and Alliance, whilst only reassurance from status quo and revisionist states concerning the distribution of power was necessary to prevent a grave conflict. Nonetheless, an evaluation of 21st century realist foreign policy would be more appropriate. Realist foreign policy formulated from national interest explains some aspects of post 9/11 world. The theory explains why the US responded aggressively to terrorist attacks, protecting offensively its national interests and security. As well, the inability of international institutions to restrain military superiority and dominance over the foreign policy making process is expounded. “When a state grows vastly more powerful than any opponent ... use that power to expand its sphere of domination, whether for security, wealth, or other motives.

The United States employed its military power in what some deemed an imperial fashion in large part because it could.”. Thus, “In liberal democracies, realism is the theory that everyone loves to hate ... realism claimed to be an antidote to the naive belief that international institutions and law alone can preserve peace ...”. This emerges as neoliberal critic aimed at challenging mainly national interest as the main element of foreign

policy making. This is mainly due to the failing of realism to explain the importance of non-state actors (i. e.: Al Qaeda) and ideology in balancing US power. For example, armed resistance “ by U. S. foes in Iraq, Afghanistan ... constitute the beginnings of balancing against U. S. hegemony.” permitted French and German enmity towards US policies. Nonetheless, this did not undermine US military and material dominance instead “ states have tried to undermine U. S. moral legitimacy and constrain the superpower in a web of multilateral institutions ... not what standard realist theory predicts.” Essentially, neorealism has wide theoretical gaps to fill.

These gaps can be formulated from the neoliberalism critique of anarchy, resting on a Hobbesian state of nature, that national security becomes the fundamental national interest and thus the focus of foreign policy. The current tendency to overemphasize the centrality of anarchy in international politics impedes the conceptualizations of politics and thus the formulation of foreign policy according to national interests. The relation and centrality of the security dilemma and anarchy is a purely reductionist view overlooking another central fact about International Politics according to neoliberals. This central fact is interdependence. There are two related notions of interdependence “ First, the notion of “ strategic interdependence” implies ... situation in which the “ ability of one participant to gain his ends is dependent to an important degree on the choices or decisions that the other participant will make”. Therefore, breaking a relationship means each actor that was party can no longer obtain some values he or she wanted. This implies equality amongst actors, as noted in Neorealist Foreign Policy. Interdependence is not the opposite of anarchy (i. e.: absence of central

authority) since the two concepts represent different aspects of the international system.

There is a certain independence of national interest from each actor or state as dictated by their overall security dilemmas resulting directly from anarchy. There is, therefore, a particular theoretical advantage in combining two conceptually different aspects, anarchy and interdependence. From two unlike perspectives in Foreign Policy we further our understanding in International Politics. Furthermore the link between anarchy and strategic interdependence is not conceptual but empirical, as both are logically independent from one another. " Two coequal actors can be in a situation of strategic interdependence (i. e., can be unable to attain their goals without the cooperation of the other) just as easily as can two actors be in a hierarchical relationship" since " A priori one cannot determine the extent of their interdependence from the degree of hierarchy/anarchy present in their relationship, and vice versa". This highlights that there being anarchy is not the fundamental background condition of international politics but rather interdependence and anarchy. This leads on to the relationship between interdependence and power.

Since power or national power is the degree of a states' effectiveness in protecting or expanding his national interests; and both anarchy and interdependence are logically independent, it is possible for states to use strategic interdependence to accumulate power or influence over other international actors. According to Schelling, " Each gains from continuing the relationship, but the distribution of these gains involves struggle. Harmony is not the result of interdependence; rather a mix of conflict and cooperation

is.”. Power is an intrinsic element of interdependence. “ An actor involved in such relations can manipulate them in order to prompt the other actors involved to do what he/she wants ... asymmetric interdependence provide an essential means of exercising influence; the less vulnerable side can threaten... Relative gains and losses ... central means of exercising leverage” This is the case as well in symmetric relationships as the leverage and exercise of power is acquired through anticipated reactions (i. e.: US-Soviet nuclear deterrence relationship since the 1950s). It can be deduced from the above empirical logic that “ Power, in fact, is much more evident in interdependent relations than in situations where actors are independent or autarkic”.

The independent and autarkic status of states in contemporary international politics holds claim, as quite the contrary. By comparing strategic interdependence to an oligopolistic economic market, it is possible to draw the advantages of such international cooperation and thus establish a closer link with defensive realism. Ultimately, through anarchy and interdependence as conceptual tools in visualizing International Politics, both neoliberalists and neorealists arrive at the problem of survival, the recognition and prevention of the rise to power of revisionist states. It is at this point that balancing of power strategies become relevant and imperative in maintaining states’ national interest and security; and cooperation amongst sovereign states in the anarchic international system. However, as having evaluated the claim that foreign policy must be formulated in accordance with national interest and demonstrating the possible fusion of neoliberalist’s interdependence and neorealists’ anarchy theory into a new

conceptual tool in understanding foreign policy; it is necessary to evaluate the neoliberal institutionalism from defensive realism's perspective.

This is done by Joseph M. Grieco. Through the critique of neoliberal institutionalism by Joseph M. Grieco, it is possible to draw out the advantages of neorealism and the cooperation under anarchy. Grieco's critique of Robert Keohane's writing, *After Hegemony*, provides the core of the future realist understanding of international cooperation. Neoliberal Institutionalism's critique of neorealism is the point of departure for this analysis. Being "more cautious and daring", the New Liberals claim that anarchy impedes cooperation by creating cheating problems which institutions can alleviate. However, "neoliberalists see states as "rational egoists" ... realist view states as ... "defensive positionalists" interested in achieving and maintaining relative capabilities" consequently neoliberals "do not show ... realism's arguments about the difficulties associated with cooperation among nations are wrong, for there still remains the problem of relative gains" achieving only "partial understanding of realist theory" – by solely examining the role of institution in alleviating cheating problems.

In *After Hegemony*, Keohane examines the post-war cooperation among advanced democracies in trade, money, and oil. US leadership initiating and maintaining a high level of cooperation through the "General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the International Energy Agency (IEA)" concluding "more cooperation has persisted than the theory of hegemonic stability ... predicted" Nonetheless, according to Grieco, Keohane's bears at least five flaws. "First the basic empirical argument of the book prevents Keohane from undertaking an

effective competitive test of his ideas about institutions and realist arguments about the problem of international cooperation” and “ second major problem ... empirical analysis concerns his use of case-study methodology” By only concentrating on instances of high-level cooperation, Keohane’s theory is only tested with the easiest case. This allows for weak empirical findings and conclusions.

Thirdly, the usage of case material presents stern difficulties as he doesn’t “ provide us with clear empirical indicators ... provides only impressionistic evidence about the character of cooperation during the 1970s in trade, money and oil”. Fourthly, he “ has especially severe problems with what is supposed to be his best case: the IEA and the start of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980”. Ensuing this, only a very fragile claim that “ although it is to impossible to specify how much difference the IEA made in the 1980 crisis, it seems clear that it ‘ leaned in the right direction’. Finally, the empirical assessment of his argument is difficult, especially for the future.

It can be concluded from the critique of neoliberal institutionalism in terms of facilitating interdependence and cooperation that tough empirical tests are needed in establishing theories to achieve progress in order to explain how national interest formulates realist foreign policy. Both anarchy and interdependence have been analysed as two logically independent conceptual tools of the international system. To further our understanding, national interest and foreign policy in the 21st century, both neorealist and neoliberal theories must be emerged into liberal realism. This is essentially the conclusion of the evaluation of the claim from the essay question.

As Liberal Realism is not the main focus of this evaluation of foreign policy being formulated in accordance with national interest, not much analysis and scrutiny is needed on the matter. Conversely, it is important to highlight the significance of this merge between neoliberalism and neorealism as it eventually leads to an all-inclusive comprehension of international relations and foreign policy. It provides both domestic and foreign policy answers to the further comprehension of the state, its sovereignty and its foreign policy. This approach “ acknowledges the contingency and insecurity of world politics while being convinced that existential choice is possible ... state is not necessarily the defensive, paranoid military fortress ... often described” Essentially, its emphasis on national interest is on the survival of democratic states which are more appreciable and widespread today than at the turn of the 20th century. In conclusion, national interests are viable and primordial when formulating realist foreign policy.

This is due to the core assumptions of realism resulting in an anarchic international political system where the national interest lies in national security and survival. This is done by promoting the four main elements of the state. From state motivations, two subschools of realist foreign policy can be enunciated; Defensive Realism or neorealism, and Offensive or neoclassical realism. However, having established that national interests lies in survival of the state and not in the accumulation of influence for the purpose of this essay, status quo and balance of power strategies will be the main tools in achieving the goals of realist thinking foreign policy.

Secondly, the evaluation of neorealism in the contemporary context has to include neoliberal criticism. It is thus established that neorealism has major

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theoretical gaps in explaining the post 9/11 world. To establish the advantages of neorealism, the analysis of the weaknesses of neoliberal institutionalism by Joseph M. Grieco is necessary. Nonetheless, the evaluation of the concept of national interests, foreign policy and anarchy in comparison and in similarity to interdependence as a conceptual tool in understanding international relations has been pursued. It has been concluded that the merging of these two theories result in Liberal Realism which is more appropriate to contemporary foreign policy.

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