

Liberal and realist theories: international arms



There are many different theories regarding international politics. Two of these principal theories include liberalism and realism. Liberalisms' basic insight is that the "national characteristics of individual States matter for their international relations." (Slaughter). The liberal theory focuses on a concept of democratic peace, meaning that "liberal states are remarkably peaceful in, but only in, relations with other liberal states". (MacMillan, 2004). International organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union are most important in liberalism, as they represent the success of cooperative organization of international relations. (Nolt, 2016). In contrast realist theory is the belief that states act as self-sufficient powers in their own interest. The only thing that matters among the nations is power, not rule of law. (Nolt, 2016). In this theory it is the states with the most economic clout and military power that are decisive. Therefore, defensive realists' state that a balance of power systems, where the power is roughly equally distributed among the States, ensures that one will not attack the other. (Slaughter).

Both of these theories can be applied to the issue of international arms trading. According to the United Nations, irresponsible arms transfers can destabilize security in a region, enable the violation of Security Council arms embargoes and contribute to human rights abuses. (UNODA) As stated previously, the liberal theory considers international organizations, like the United Nations, very important. In January of 1952, the United Nations created the United Nations Disarmament Commission (UNDC). This commission is mandated to "prepare proposals for a treaty for the regulation, limitation and balanced reduction of all armed forces and all

armaments, including the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction” (UNODA). The conference on disarmament meet annually, with 65 countries represented around the world, there are five geographical groups that take turns assuming the chairmanship of the group. (UNOG). Since the establishment of the UNDC there have been several treaties signed regarding international arms. Including the Arms Trade Treaty, which regulates the international trade in conventional arms, from small arms to battle tanks, combat aircraft and warships. This became effective 24 December 2014. (UNODA). Under the treaty’s provisions, national governments will need to examine the risk of these arms being used to commit or facilitate serious acts of gender-based violence or serious acts of violence against women and children (Delgado, 2015). The different treaties and the United Nations Conference on Disarmament that includes 65 countries is an attempt at liberal international politics, to create democratic peace.

Alternatively, there is the International Defence Exhibition and Conference, otherwise known as IDEX. IDEX is an international exhibition, which demonstrates the latest technology across land, sea and air sectors of defence. (IDEX). The last conference was attended by over 105, 000 people from 142 countries. (IDEX) According to DW News, this is held at the same time as the United Nations annual Conference on Disarmament. Even though there is an Arms Trade Treaty that has been signed by several countries, there are still weapons ending up in the arms of militia (DW). Per DW news, these weapons have origins from Germany, United States, United Kingdom, Austria, Spain, Switzerland, Belgium, Serbia. (DW) According to the UNODA


all these States have signed the Arms Trade Treaty. (UNODA). The fact that countries can go to an exhibition and conference to buy weapons, even for defense, proves the realist theory that the only thing that matters to States, is power, and whomever has the most, wins. Power is the key variable, because only through power can States defend themselves and hope to survive. (Slaughter) “ Realism assumes that interests are to be maintained through the exercise of power, and that the world is characterized by competing power bases” (Political Realism, n. d.).

Both theories seem to have the same end point, to have a peaceful world. The liberalist theory attempts this by having an international organization, made up of a multitude of countries to come up with a collective agreement. In this case it is the United Nations Disarmament Commission and creating treaties between countries, in which there would be no reason to go to war with each other. If the liberalist theory can be implemented throughout all countries, the need for weapons will be diminished, if not completely eliminated. According to International Relations, “ values such as respect for human rights, rule of law, accommodation of multiple interest groups inside the state as well as a belief in reconciliation, makes compromise with and between democracies unproblematic as the democratic states appear to be non-violent” (Jehangier). In contrast the realist theory attempts to have peace by each country trying to have the most power, specifically military power. In this case it can be shown by the IDEX conference where weapons are being sold to any country that can afford them, thus giving their country more power. According to the realist theory if a single state has a predominance of power, this is most conducive to establish a stable, open

international system (Webb & Krasner, 1989). If the realist theory is believed to be the most accurate in current international politics, there may never be an end to international arms trading. As one of the bases of the realist theory is that “ man operated in a state of nature where no law existed above him to prevent him from acting immorally or according to a specified set of rules” (Jehangier).

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