



Classical realism vs structural realism

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Abstract

The two realism theories are compared and contrasted throughout this research paper, with an emphasis on how differently they explain the forces that influence state behaviour. Additionally, the study talks on neo-realism, a key idea in structural realism that was popularized by Kenneth Waltz. The paper explores Waltz's claim that the international system is anarchic and that states exist in a self-helping mode, depending on their own resources to survive. The essay also examines the sub-schools of structural realism, including defensive and offensive realism. The overall examination of Classical Realism and Structural Realism in International Relations provided in this research paper is thorough. It contributes to the current discussion over the nature of state behaviour in that it illustrates the benefits and drawbacks of each theory of the international system.

Keywords: liberalism, realism, treaty, offensive realism, security, dilemma balance of power, neo-realism, hegemon

Introduction

When we read the word - International Relations, our minds instantly conjure up a picture of well poised relations among all the individual states and territories with a natural harmony presiding over them. But let's not get ahead and think that this organized society that our eyes can see today is a work of overnight discussion. The whole idea has its roots with the Westphalian Peace Treaty of 1648. The famous political scientist Henry Kissinger has described this treaty as the building block of today's nations. He wrote in his book the World Order "The treaty of Westphalia represented the first attempt to institutionalize an international order on the basis of agreed rules and limits and to base it on a multiplicity of powers rather than the dominance of a single country" (World Order).

The principle of a system of international relations took place to avoid a recurrence of total war at the global level. After the end of the Second World War, it has become a primary concern of all the states to treat their fellow nations as international citizens who are free to maintain their own culture, politics, religion and internal policies. With the advent of this, many philosophers came forward with their different theoretical perspectives. As there was a need to understand and to make sense of all that was going on in the global sphere, they provided us with different theories or multiple lenses to look at.

Among them were Thomas Hobbes, Hans J Morgenthau, Niccolo Machiavelli, Immanuel Kant etc. Traditionally there were two theories of IR- Liberalism and Realism. But due to the paradigm-shift, theories are always growing and emerging. Same happened with IR, now there are 5 key theories out of which liberalism and realism still hold the centre stage.

Realism is considered as a dominant theory because it provides us with the most clear and vigorous explanation for the state of war which is the regular condition of life in the international system. It is a normative theory i.e it is concerned with the world as it actually is rather than how it is ought to be and gained momentum after the end of Second World War when it appeared to give a convincing explanation for how and why the worst conflict in the

history took place after a period of supposed peace and optimism. The root of this particular theory can be found in Thucydide's history of Peloponnesian war which raged between 431- 404 BCE. Thucydides' writing was not exactly a realist theory because IR theories did not exist in a name form until the twentieth century. However, when looking back from a contemporary point, theorists detected many similarities in the thought patterns and behaviours of the ancient world and the modern world.

Realists have looked as far as the Holy Roman Empire to detect similar patterns of human behaviour as those are seen in our modern world. So what exactly is this 'human behaviour' we have been talking about?

Classical realism

Hans J Morgenthau has been crowned as the father of classical realism. In his Politics Among Nations, he has explained the tragic nature of politics and how it's deeply rooted in the selfish nature of a human being. The lust of power has been defined as the most powerful instinct that drives men to commit certain actions. In his views, politics is a never ending struggle of power and a platform where men always try to impose his will upon and dominate others. Morgenthau asserts that "There is no escape from the evil of power, regardless of what one does." The important thing for him is, first, to recognise that there are some objective laws which have their roots in human nature and, second, to devise the most appropriate policies that are consistent with the basic fact that man is a flawed character. Classical Realism speaks about a permanent inner struggle that a man endures during his life. The inescapable urge to do evil while acting in the public sphere is the fundamental block of this theory. Power is the paramount factor and the only priority of the state is to survive this power struggle that rages at the global level. The job of a leader is to understand the tragedy of politics and act in such a manner that will reap the maximum benefits for his state. For this sole purpose only, he needs power. The concept of power has been defined by explaining how a state needs to be the best and most powerful when it comes to protecting itself as you never know when your neighbouring nation might

attack you. Thucydides- a famous historian has tried to explain this by citing the example of conflict between two great powers in the ancient Greek world- Athens and Sparta. According to him, the underlying cause of the war was 'the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta'. This is an apt episode of the impact that anarchical structure of international politics has on the behaviour of state actors. Some famous major supporters of this theory are- Thucydides, Machiavelli and Morgenthau.

Structural realism

When Kenneth Waltz published his Theory of International Politics, he took the world by storm as this highlighted a new concept of structural realism or 'neorealism'. Its most important premise is that the anarchic structure of world politics places all states under certain constraints. For Waltz, the international system is an anarchic one rather than a hierarchical one which he believes subdues over domestic politics. Since there is no higher power to protect the individual states, they are forced to fend for himself.

This anarchic nature compels nations to maximise their share of world power and to seek superiority above everything else, in order to make themselves more secure and thereby increase their odds at survival.

We have solidified the notion that a state needs power, now here the main question that arises is - How much power is exactly enough power? To answer this, structural realism branches out into two types- 1) offensive realism and 2) defensive realism.

Offensive Realists believe that power is the ultimate and the only thing that can guide and protect a state from being a target of its neighbours. John H Mearsheimer, takes this notion a little ahead and says that if the circumstances are right, then the state should try to achieve a hegemony as having an overwhelming power is the only way to assure one's survival.

The argument behind is that the more power a state will have, the stronger it will be and less likely it will be a target since weaker powers will think twice before challenging it. He explains how a particular state possesses two types of powers - material capabilities (i.e military assets and nuclear weapons) and the other one is latent power (i.e based on the state's wealth and size of its overall population). All in all, uncertainty about the intentions of the other states and the anarchical nature of the international system drives great powers to adopt an offensive and competitive approach whenever they get the chance.

Defensive Realists like Kenneth Waltz take the opposite view; they advise against the accumulation of a mammoth of world power as the 'system' will punish them if they attempt to gain too much power. They aren't against the idea of power, they just encourage the states to pursue a moderate and restrained power to ensure their survival and safety. The idea behind this is that if a state will try to achieve the stage of hegemony then it will provoke the "security dilemma" and the balancing will occur, hence rendering all their hard work unproductive. That is the other great powers will come together to form a balancing coalition that will leave the aspiring hegemon less secure.

Comparing classical realism and neorealism

On the face of it classical realism and structural realism almost look the same as both talk about the importance and the grave need of power for a state's survival, which both accept is the sole and the paramount function of statesmen or if we talk about the status-quo then it's the government. Realist theorists haven't left a single opportunity to cite examples of history where this so-called power has saved or defeated the necks of different territories. But let's not forget that despite these similarities, they both have stark differences.

The first and the most important one is that classical realists blame the imperfect human nature and it's deeping unsettling selfishness for the international conflicts. They believe that all the wars that have been fought are somewhere because of petty human behaviour. While structural realists have different views, they locate the roots of international conflict and war in the anarchic nature of the international system. Since there's no overarching authority, no state can ever be sure that it's out of the target zone and hence it takes all the precautionary measures that it can, which in result leads to disturbances between the states. The second difference is that the classical realists see power as an end in it-self, that is they define power in terms of military capabilities and nuclear weapons, while structural realists have a broader view in this regard. They consider power as a combined capability of state, which includes territorial area, population, military, political structure and economy.

Realism as a tool of explaining ir

The influence of realism can be studied while taking a look at the status-quo. As we all know, after the end of the Cold War in 1991, there has been US hegemony at the global level. 'Hegemony' is a concept which has been widely praised by the offensive realists.

They believe that a hegemonic state is the mightiest one and it occupies a centre stage as it holds all the power, no other power or state would want to mess with it. But if we bring the defensive theory into the picture then according to it, the other states should 'balance' to offset US unipolarity. This is the place where a concept called 'security dilemma' comes into the picture.

According to which if a state tries to heighten its security by increasing its military capabilities or nuclear weapons, then in response it can lead the other states into doing the same. This basically means that the tensions will arise between the said states and they can even give rise to conflicts and worse. Realists have tried to explain this conundrum by giving a lot of arguments.

The first one excuse the states from forming a balancing alliance against the United States because it says that the US advantage in power is so large and multidimensional that the second tier states recognise that balancing against it will likely reap no rewards. The only country which has the best chance to usurp the USA in the foreseeable future is China. But the troubling part is theorists don't trust China in following a moral code of conduct that the USA has been following since the last three decades. China's rise as a world power is something that should send chills up our spine as all the ways that it is using to usurp the USA and every other country in the world are blatantly unjustified.

It's accumulating capital by setting up factory towns and economic belts all over the world And that capital is being used in giving out loans to those vulnerable countries who are in a dire need of financial sustenance. We all know that the mighty dragon doesn't do something just out of the goodness of its heart, hence the major objective of handing out these so-called-loans is to trap that said country in a vicious cycle of debt trap and then in the end when it fails to repay what it owns, that's when the dragon smiles its brightest and attacks i.e. it takes up the role of a neo-authoritarian state and starts sneaking up on the decision making processes of that country and completely take the wheel of its governance under its own control. The 99 years lease of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka is a good enough example to prove what has been cited above. China's dangerous growth is a classic realist example i.e it's doing all it can to achieve the highest of pedestals Now taking a look at the history, John H Mearshimer has described in his paper on Structural Realism as how the past behaviour of the great powers has been more in accordance with the predictions of offensive rather than defensive realism. He wrote "During the first half of the twentieth century, there were two World Wars in which three great powers attempted and failed to gain regional hegemony. The second half of that century was dominated by the Cold War, in which the US and the Soviet Union engaged in an intense security competition that came close to blows in the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)."

Another example of realism can be, the cause of World War is considered to have been caused by the lust for power by some individual leaders. For example, Kaiser Wilhelm II's behaviour is considered to be one of the causes of WWI. Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany is the one who urged Austria to declare war on Serbia.

In addition to being an established theory of international relations, realism has also attracted many criticisms. Critics have widely cited a lack of precision and contradiction surrounding the concepts such as 'power', 'national interest', 'balance of power'. Accusations have been made on how realists have provided us with vague definitions regarding these terms. Till now questions like- how much power is enough.

whether bipolarity is better than unipolarity, what causes great power wars etc. haven't been answered. It has failed to develop any kind of convincing theory in order to answer these questions. Neo-realism in particular has been criticised by many for assuming the rational behaviour of actors.

Moving on, with the advent of technology and globalisation has led to interdependence among the nations i.e now it has become way harder than before to deceive another state for its own benefit as nations have started dealing at agreeable levels of cost and risk.

Though the state continues to be an individual key factor in regards to its domestic politics, when it comes to the international level, it has to follow a moral code of conduct. Which brings us to our next criticism, which is the emergence of new players which go way beyond national territory - international organisations like the UN, WHO, non-governmental organisations and multinational corporations. Realism never predicted the origin of such international groups where individual states come and join hands in solidarity and in favour to prevail peace.

Conclusion

Realism has been a cornerstone of international relations theory. It has been a thriving approach in the broad fields of political studies and political theory. The theory claims to base its arguments upon the ancient tradition of thought such as Thucydides. Realism basically emerged after the end of the second world war, when thinkers came forward and saw deficiencies of idealistic thinking. In their analysis of international affairs, they make numerous assumptions like the states are unitary, act in a geographical boundary in an international system with no single authority overarching theme. Realism has a strong belief of putting the self interest of the state at the top most priority. The notion of power is the one which further divides structural realism into two branches- offensive and defensive realism.

Offensive realists believe that the states are fairly aggressive and hence being a target can only be avoided by gaining as much power as they can. On the other hand, defensive realists introduce the security dilemma explaining how gaining more power will induce the process of balancing and the said state would be at a disadvantage. Structural realism can be explained using the following assumptions - the state system is anarchic, states can't be sure about the intentions of the other states and some states have offensive capabilities.

Classical realism puts more emphasis on the role of human nature in the international system. It argues that the concept of power arises because of the selfish and hungry nature of human beings. The theory further states that humans are greedy, insecure and aggressive and hence fight each other over the scarce resources, which ultimately leads to conflicts and wars. In addition to that HOBBS identified three principal reasons of conflicts which are fundamental to every human being- competition, modesty and glory.

Power is a key ingredient for the realists and they argue that in order to survive, states need to accumulate power by internal development such as economic growth, technological bust, military capabilities, diplomatic relations etc. The example that has been given to support this is - The Peloponnesian war.

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