

A THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICAL REALISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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***Abstract:** The article assessed the relevance of realism in understanding our contemporary world. It looked at the meaning of a theory of international relations and some of the basic ingredients that underpin political realism. Drawing from realist postulations, the article noted that international relations are best understood in the context of power politics. This is because many of the principles that guide realism such as the state, power, balance of power and self-help are visibly present in contemporary international relations. That is not to say, however, that realist postulations have gone unchallenged. The activities of non-state actors and idealist principles are very assertive but do not diminish realists' postulations. Hence, there can be little doubt that realist theories rightfully retain a salient position in international relations. More fundamentally, it is evident that realism has something to offer to the world it attempts to describe and not a few people will agree with it.*

Keyword: Theoretical, Empirical, Understanding, Political Realism, International Relations and Contemporary World.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Westphalia Treaty of 1648, states are seen as essentially but not exclusively the dominant actors in international relations. As a result, scholars such as Kegley (2007) have tried to unearth the reasons why sovereign states behave the way they do. Students of international relations have sought to understand the real motive that guides the behaviour of states in their relations with one another. Thus, international relations as a field of study have too many theories that facilitate the understanding of the subject matter of the field. Some of these theories are the liberal-idealist theory, political realism, the bureaucratic decision-making theory, Marxist theory, social constructivism, post-modernism, feminist theory, post-colonialism, integration theory, among other numerous approaches to the study of international relations. Political realism which is one of these theories has come under serious theoretical attack for some years now facing charges of irrelevance to, and simplification of the world it tries to describe and systematize (Burchill, 2005). Yet, it is too soon to talk about the demise of realism no

matter how vehemently its critics try to prove to the contrary. It is true that, like any other theory of international relations, realism has its own imperfections and cannot claim to be able to present universal solutions to universal problems. Nevertheless, like any other theory of international relations, it is able to make a contribution to understanding the contemporary world and addressing the challenges it now faces (Greg, U.D).

The realist theory of international relations continues to endure even in the face of the changing nature of the nation states which are gradually diminishing but not disappearing in its centrality in the analysis of international relations as a result of the emergence of other non-state actors. This is so because of the claim by some scholars such as Jeffrey and Andrew (1999) that realism, the oldest and most prominent theoretical paradigm in international relations, is in trouble of extinction. The position of this article is that political realism still offers much in understanding our contemporary world despite numerous changes in international relations that tend to vitiate realists propositions. This is because Realism remains the primary or alternative theory in virtually every major book and article addressing general theories of world politics, particularly in security affairs. The article is designed to assess the relevance of realism in understanding our contemporary world. To achieve this objective, the article is divided into five sections with this brief introduction as section one. Section two briefly explained the meaning of a theory of international relations. Section three explored the realist theory with its variants. Section four assessed the relevance of realism in our contemporary world, while we concluded in section five.

THE MEANING OF A THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The question of understanding the behaviour of nation states is a question that requires a theory of international relations. A political theory is "an explanation of what politics is all about in a general understanding of the political world, a frame of reference. Theory helps us identify what is happening in a particular case of politics" (Bluhm, 1978:1). Again, a political theory in the words of Subrata and Sushila (2007:1) "is a personal endeavour to understand and experience the present reality and also to evolve a mechanism in order to transcend the present imperfect society leading to perfection and a more just order". A theory is a cause-effect logical explanation of a phenomenon and prediction of its subsequent development; the highest level of generalization in a scientific discipline, containing all the essential elements of the explanation at particular stage of knowledge and embodying within it the laws, principles and hypotheses that clarify issues at corresponding levels of analysis (Igwe, 2003:443). According to Kegley (2007:25) a theory is "a set of hypotheses postulating the relationship between variables or conditions, advanced to describe, explain, or predict phenomena and make prescriptions about how positive changes ought to be engineered to realize particular goals and ethical principles". Put simply, a theory of international relations should be able to account among other things the varying actions of actors at the international level. It should be able to interpret, describe, explain and predict developments arising from the interactions of

actors in global politics. It should serve as a useful instrument for interpreting and understanding why and how international actors act the way they do and the conditions that determine their behaviour. It attempts to provide a conceptual framework upon which international relations can be analyzed. A theory of international relations must account for a logical cause-effect explanation of phenomenon and predict its subsequent development. This is because a theory is generalization of experience and intertwined with practice. A theory of international relations tries to enquire upon random phenomena and the objective bases of their diverse manifestations. We need theories to make sense of the blizzard of information that bombards us daily in international politics. The true position is that international relations cannot be studied in a haphazard manner. Whether we accept it or not, everyone comes to the study of international relations with preconceptions, experiences and beliefs which affect the way they understand the subject matter.

POLITICAL REALISM: PROPOSITIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

As a rebuttal to the idealist-liberal school which affirms that international law and organizations are competent to handle the differences between states and arrest the scourge of war which it never did, the realist school emerged. The apparent inability of liberal internationalists to cope with events leading up to the second World War, suggested the need for a new conceptual apparatus. The realists therefore, insist that despite the existence of League of Nations, the Second World War broke out as a result of the pursuit of national interest of states which is defined in terms of maximization of national power. To them, the central focus of international relations is power. Harvesting from the works of Thucydides, Nicollo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes which emphasized the dark side of human nature, the realists such Car (1939) noted that liberal doctrine of the harmony of interests glosses over the real conflict that is found in the international system which is between those that controls the means of production and those who do not. This makes conflict inevitable. However, the post-war dominance of realism owes much to the works of Martin (1946); Nicholas (1942); Kennam (1952). However, the key realist figure in that period was Morgenthau a German-Jewish émigré to the United States in the 1930s who published his most celebrated work entitled: *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* in 1948.

According to classical realism, it is fundamentally the nature of man that pushes states and individuals to act in a way that places interests over ideologies. Morgenthau (1948:4) argued that international politics, "like society in general is governed by objective law that have their roots in human nature". Thus the principal trait in man is an endless pursuit of power and domination, which shapes relations not only among individuals but also among states. Therefore, for most realists, international relations is a struggle for power. Here, the state is seen as the principal unit of analysis. This is a typical classical realist thinking. For the classical realist, power decked in national interest is what statesmen pursue in international politics. This arises as a result of the essential attributes of man

such as fear, competition, selfishness and war. Furthermore, they argues, that circumstances of time and space are the guiding principles of relations between states and not universal moral principles. To ensure peace and security, realists place much emphasis on increase in the military powers of states. Through this endless jockeying for military power, no one state will enjoy a preponderance of power over other states and by so doing bring about a "balance of power"—a military strategic policy which ensures power parity, acts as a deterrent to war, and promotes the possibility of a stalemate or an assurance of either a slowed victory or delayed defeat if war cannot be avoided (Igwe, 2003:35). Deriving from classical realism, structural realists agreed with the notion that international politics is essentially the struggle for power but do not agree with classical realism that this arises as result of human nature. Conversely, structural realists attribute it to absence of overarching authority above states and the distribution of power in the international system. Instead of human nature, its focus is predominantly on the anarchic structure of the *international system*. States are primary actors because there is no political monopoly on force existing above any sovereign. While states remain the principal actors, greater attention is given to the forces above and below the states through levels of analysis. The international system is seen as a *structure* acting on the state with individuals below the level of the state acting as *agency* on the state as a whole

Structural realism is commonly associated with Waltz's work entitled: *Theory of International Politics* (1979). For the structural realist, "it is not human nature, but the anarchical system which fosters fear, jealousy, suspicion, and insecurity" (Tim and Brian, 2005:166) in international system. According to Waltz (1979) because of the anarchical nature of the international system, and the sensitiveness of great powers to the military capabilities of other states, states are worried about their survival, and power serve as a means to end this dilemma. Waltz, further noted that the essential difference between domestic and international politics is the structure. In international politics unlike domestic politics, states have no higher authority to defend them and counter the use of force. In this situation, peace and security can only be realized through self-help. In an anarchic structure, "self-help is necessarily the principle of action" (Waltz, 1979:111). In fact, "in an environment as dangerous as anarchy", those who ignore realist principles "would ultimately not survive" (Sterling-Folker, 1997:18). In this kind of situation, the security of one state becomes the insecurity of another. This is called the security dilemma—a situation in which a state's actions taken to ensure their own security threaten the security of other states (see Herzt, 1950 for more on the security dilemma). The response of other states in deploying more military power will therefore threaten the security of the first state. This will automatically lead to arms race. In this kind of situation, a balance of power will emerge as other states moves to acquire military power to counter the other.

The above strands of realism show that Realism, is not just a single theory but a family of theories—a “paradigm.” The above can be summed into four propositions.

1. The international system is anarchic.
 - There is no actor above states capable of regulating their interactions; states must arrive at relations with other states on their own, rather than it being dictated to them by some higher controlling entity.
 - The international system exists in a state of constant antagonism
2. States are the most important actors.
3. All states within the system are unitary, rational actors
 - States tend to pursue self-interest.
 - Groups strive to attain as many resources as possible
4. The primary concern of all states is survival.
 - States build up military to survive, which may lead to a security dilemma (Goodin, 2010).

THE RELEVANCE OF REALISM IN OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Arising from the above, one can easily infer that realist emphasis on power emphatically illustrates what guides the actions of states in international relations. Obviously, states are predominantly preoccupied with the issues of national security and power more than anything in international relations. For instance, United States of America (USA) under Bush (jnr.) administration had little or no respect for international law and the rules guiding international organizations because these did not provide enough restraint to moderate the behaviour of USA under Bush. The administration was a typical example of ultra-realism. The invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively without the support of the United Nations Security Council is still fresh in our memories. Again, the United States under the administration felt “that the only way for the United States to defend its national interest and prevent future terrorist attacks is by using America’s enormous military and economic capabilities” (Joshua and Jon, 2008:80). Evidence has also showed that without USA throwing her military weight about, that she’s still the target of terrorist organization. After all Obama’s multilateral and “peaceful” approach to international issues have not deterred terrorist from attacking USA. This goes to show that international relations are power politics.

The approach as far as our contemporary world is concerned, helps us to understand why states are fundamentally interested in power. It is an instrument that helps states to survive the hostile international system. Why USA and its allies have shown restraint in militarily attacking a nuclear ambitious Iran is not just because of international public opinion, but also because Iran has increasingly shown that military capability. Again, the nuclear ambitions of Iran and North Korea are premised on deterring USA from invading them. USA on the other hand, does not want a nuclearized Iran and North Korea so that its interest and that of her allies will not be threatened. This goes to show that security

which the realist see as the trigger of power politics is still much the issue in international politics. Realist thinking is also implicated in the monopolization of power by the veto-wielding states in the UN Security Council, UNSC. Though Russia and China are strong opposition to the US in the UN Security Council, however, they are all united in ensuring that they continue to determine the course of action in the UN. It is power politics that hinders the democratization of the UNSC. The Permanent members do not want its preeminent position in international politics to be challenged. The fundamental truth is that the five permanent members want to maintain the status quo, stick tenaciously to their advantage and checkmate the influence of other states and protect their vital national interest.

Again, the realist approach is correct by inferring that the state is the main actor in international relations. Some may argue that with the rise of non-state actors, that the state has lost its relevance as a central concept in international relations. The state for us will continue to be the main actor in international relations. In the words of Onuoha (2008:4):

It is difficult to conceive how any individual or groups will emerge as a dominant actor in international relations without the blessing and support of their nation-states. In fact, no multi-national corporation, non-governmental organization, or even powerful individuals, can play a dominant role without the explicit approval and support of the states of origin. Nothing can be done without their consent. As the most authoritative social institution, the state can mobilize all internal resources necessary to carry on international interactions. The state determines which NGO should be registered, which group to project internationally, and in most cases, what the individuals or groups should say at the international forum. When it comes to who leads in international relations, the state as the ultimate controller of all the legitimate coercive forces of a nation becomes indispensable...In fact rather than loose their relevance, the state will continue to determine who gets what, how and when in international system.

In the same vein Rosenau (1998:18) noted that "...states are changing, but they are not disappearing. State sovereignty has eroded, but it is still vigorously asserted". The state in the foreseeable future will continue to be the dominant actor in international relations. Furthermore, criticism leveled against realist as serving ideological purpose by projecting that in relations between and among states, that might should be accepted as right is absolutely in tune with our contemporary world and reality. Relations between great powers and other states still retain this character. In many respects, international relations are a manifestation of power. In addition, the concept of balance of power derived from realism seems valid and workable to the present day. We can see the chain of events taking Europe as a starting point. The Treaty of Westphalia after the Thirty Years' War, the Congress of Vienna after the Napoleonic Wars, the world order established after the

Franco-Prussian War leading to a strong, unified Germany, the Versailles-Washington world order after World War I and the Yalta-Potsdam world order after World War II are those milestones that enable one to discern a certain logic in the historical process and some continuity in world politics (Buzan, 1996). In the same vein, there have always been great powers, coalitions, the struggle for power, balancing, equilibrium, and wars served as punctuation marks dividing different epochs and bringing into existence new ones. The actors (states, great powers on the international scene) changed but the script and decorations did not (Greg, U.d). In the words of Morgenthau (1973) it is called an "astounding continuity" in foreign policy. Besides, war has contributed to shaping the nature of the modern state, the state makes war and war makes the state. Hence, Greg (u.d:4) noted that:

Thus, realism seems to be still alive in present-day international relations since such everyday aspects of political life as the national state, sovereignty, legitimacy, power, national interests, security, and conflict, war have not sunk into oblivion. While it is obvious that realism can be easily challenged by other, more optimistic and humane, theories, it has the right to existence, at least because it can complement other perspectives and produce interesting results in combination with them.

In fact, realism serves as a "good starting point" for understanding the world since at least it can prove a good hindrance to "wishful thinking" (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 1981). Despite the obvious appearance of realist thoughts dominating states' behaviour in international relations, it is clear that the influence of non-state actors are hurting but not demising realist propositions. Most of today's international conflicts and wars are not fought by nation-states. "The reduced autonomy of the states in the face of globalized economic, technological, and social trends has encouraged people to seek psychological security in their roots. In doing so, they redefine "we" and "they" to emphasize identities other than those of citizen of a state" (Mansbach and Rhodes, 2006:378). Again, international organizations such as the European Union are fast eroding the influence of nation states, and have reduced the tendency for war among European states. The realist approach is unable to account for the cooperative approach among these European countries. This is because realists assume that relations between states are conflictual rather than cooperative as a result of divergent national interest. The Europeans has used the instrumentality of the European Union (EU) to show that war is self-destructing. Furthermore, international regimes-set of rules, norms, and procedures around which the expectations of actors converge in a certain issue area- are also helping to dilute realist influence in world politics. The convergence of expectations means that international actors have similar ideas about how best to solve their problems and expect each to play by the rules.

Despite the changing nature of international relations that tend to vitiate realist postulations, we still believe that international relations is best understood through the

realist lens. If there is any attack on realism, it can be argued that the theoretical core of the realist approach has been undermined by its own defenders—in particular so-called defensive and neoclassical realists—who seek to address anomalies by recasting realism in forms that are theoretically less determinate, less coherent, and less distinctive to realism. For instance, Realists like E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Waltz sought to highlight the manipulation, accumulation, and balancing of power by sober unsentimental statesmen, focusing above all on the limits imposed on states by the international distribution of material resources. They viewed realism as the bulwark against claims about the autonomous influence of democracy, ideology, economic integration, law, and institutions on world politics. Many recent realists, by contrast, seek to redress empirical anomalies, particularly in Waltz's neorealism, by subsuming these traditional counterarguments. The result is that many realists now advance the very assumptions and causal claims in opposition to which they traditionally, and still, claim to themselves (Jeffrey and Andrew, 1999:6).

CONCLUSION

The article assessed the relevance of realism in understanding our contemporary world. It looked at the meaning of a theory of international relations and some of the basic ingredients that underpin political realism. Drawing from realist postulations, the article noted that international relations are best understood within the context of political realism. This is because many of the principles that guide realism such as the state, power balance of power and self-help are visibly present in the relations between states. That is not to say, however, that realist thoughts have gone unchallenged. The activities of non-state actors are becoming assertive but do not diminish realists' postulations. Hence, it is, therefore, evident that realism has something to offer to the world it attempts to describe and there are some things that one can either accept or disagree with.

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