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The Strengths and Weaknesses of Realism as a Security Theory

JCSP 47

Exercise Solo Flight

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 47 – PCEMI 47
2020 – 2022

Exercise Solo Flight – Exercice Solo Flight

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THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF REALISM AS A SECURITY THEORY

“The strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept”.

Thucydides

INTRODUCTION

The international political system is marked by anarchy and states continue to find themselves in a perpetual ‘security dilemma’¹ characterized by uncertainty and distrust. Whilst there is no single theory that can explain the wide range of international interactions, both conflictual and cooperative, Joshua Goldstein purports that realism as a theoretical framework has traditionally held a seminal position in the study and understanding of international relations.² The theory of realism emerged after the First World War as a counter to idealism, which placed focus on understanding the cause of war rather than finding solutions to it. Realists argued that the idealist approach was flawed in several ways as it failed to acknowledge the role of power; overestimated the degree to which human beings were rational and mistakenly believed that nation states shared a set of common interests³

¹ Montgomery, Evan Braden. “*Breaking out of the Security Dilemma: Realism, Reassurance, and the Problem of Uncertainty.*” *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 151–85, 2006. Realist such as Montgomery define ‘security dilemma’ as a political science situation in which actions taken by a state to increase its own security cause reactions from other states. The ‘security dilemma’ is considered the most important source of conflict between states

² Goldstein, Joshua S. John C Pevehouse. *International Relations 4th Edition*. Longman, 2008.

³ Baylis, John, Smith, Steve and Owens, Patricia. *The Globalization of World Politics, An Introduction to International Relations*, 4th ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Although realism as an international relations theory took root after the First World War, its theoretical foundations have strong historical antecedents. The basic canons of the theory were first articulated over two thousand years ago in the writings of ancient Chinese military strategists, such as Sun Tzu, who instructed national leaders on how to survive in an era when war had become a systemic instrument of power. Sun Tzu's writings articulated how power ought to be manipulated to advance not only national interests but also to ensure state survival. During this same era, Thucydides wrote an account of the Peloponnesian War where he focused on relative power among the Greek City states. In those writings, he stated that 'the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept'⁴.

THESIS STATEMENT AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of this essay is to explore the strengths and weaknesses of realism as a security theory and determine if it is still relevant and applicable as a 'timeless' theory in the prediction of states' behaviour. In putting forward the arguments, the paper will first define the main tenets of realism, and then examine the major strengths and critical weaknesses of realism. Thereafter it discusses whether the theory is still relevant and applicable in explaining contemporary security challenges.

THE THEORY OF REALISM

Ray and Kaarbo have articulated a comprehensive definition of realism, expressing that it is a theoretical perspective for understanding international relations wherein emphasis is placed on states as the most important actors of global politics. From this theoretical

⁴ Thucydides, and Rex Warner. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Baltimore, Md: Penguin Books, 1968

perspective, the international system is considered anarchical in nature and all state action is geared towards the pursuit of power to secure states' interest.⁵ Realists have developed three major sub-theories that explain its fundamental ideas and beliefs, namely, classical realism, structural realism and neo-realism.

In his explanation of classical realism Baylis (2008) states that the drive for power and the will to dominate are believed to be instinctive aspects of human nature; and the behaviour of the state as a self-seeking egoist is understood to be merely a reflection of the combined characteristics of the people that comprise it. Baylis therefore reasons that it is from the nature of man that the essential features of international politics such as competition, fear and war are explicable.⁶ Conversely, structural realism argues that it is not human nature but rather the anarchical system that breeds jealousy, fear, suspicion and insecurity. Baylis posits that anarchy leads to the logic of self-help in which states seek to maximize their security. In this scenario, the most stable distribution of power in the international system is bipolarity.⁷ Neo-realism propounds that the anarchical, self-help international system compels states to maximize their relative power position. This realist perspective further suggests that world leaders and their perception of the international distribution of power acts as an important intervening variable in global politics.⁸ Despite the broad areas of theoretical thinking and postulations by realist scholars, Baylis argues that there are three core tenets of realist thinking that all realists subscribe to, namely 'the

⁵ Kaarbo, Juliet and Ray, James. *Global Politics*. Retrieved from the webpage on March 30, 2022. <http://gavilan.edu/mturetzky/pols4/TheoreticalPerspectivesLiberalismRealism>.

⁶ Baylis, John, Smith, Steve, and Owens, Patricia. *The Globalization of World Politics*. An Introduction to International Relations, 4th ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁷ *Ibid.* Bipolarity in international relations is a distribution of power in which two states have the majority of economic, military, and cultural influence internationally or regionally.

⁸ Baylis, John, Smith, Steve, and Owens, Patricia. *The Globalization of World Politics*. An Introduction to International Relations, 4th ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

three Ss' - statism, survival and self-help.⁹ Whilst the three Ss' provides a consensus point and, it is submitted, act as the main strengths for realists, like any theory that seeks to explain a phenomenon there are also theoretical weaknesses.

STRENGTHS OF REALISM

An eminent strength of realism is that since it envisions the world as an anarchic system, it views security as a central issue. The theory reasons that, to attain security, states try to increase their power and engage in power balancing for deterring potential aggressors. It is from this perspective that Mearsheimer argues that 'in a self-interested attempt to preserve national security, states will pre-emptively act in anticipation of adversaries.'¹⁰ To illustrate this point, he cites the United States of America's (US) persistent push to expand the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to the East and its 'courting' of Ukraine as directly contributing to not only the likelihood of war between two great powers but more importantly, laying the foundation for Vladimir Putin's bellicose attitude towards Ukraine. The concept therefore of pre-emptive or retaliatory state action, as theorized by realists, contributes to a powerful explanation of how and why states will likely react when they perceive an existential threat to their national and/or regional security.

A cardinal strength of realism is that it recognizes every state as a sovereign rational actor and therefore provides a basis from which to understand the states' behaviour in maximizing their power to ensure state survival. Grieco (1990) argues that as a rational

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ The Economist. *John Mearsheimer on why the West is principally responsible for the Ukrainian crisis*. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/11/john-mearsheimer-on-why-the-west-is-principally-responsible-for-the-ukrainian-crisis>. Accessed 25 May 2000.

player, every state makes decisions that seek to protect its own citizens, property and interest.¹¹ From the realist perspective, survival is the ultimate national priority that all political leaders must strive for, as it is a precondition for the attainment of all other national goals. It is in furtherance of this perspective that Baylis quotes former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger who stated, ‘a nation’s survival is its first and ultimate responsibility it cannot be compromised or put to risk.’¹²

From a realist perspective, the notion of state survival provides a convincing explanation with respect to North Korea’s actions in pursuing its nuclear program in response to what has being perceived as threats to its state survival by the US, dating back to the Korean War. Today, despite sanctions levied by the US, the European Union and other states, as well as the United Nations, North Korea remains relentless as it continues to develop its nuclear weapons program. As noted by Popoola et al, (2019):

Unfortunately, ...the nation has always anchored its actions on the exigency of national security and the security of the Korean Peninsula. As far as the leadership of the country is concerned, the military/ national security of North Korea takes priority over any other consideration, and it could not be left at the mercy of any other state. Hence, none of the state’s resources have been spared in pursuing this objective. The actions of the Korean leaders can be understood from the perspective of political realism which states that nations should act on the basis of interest rather than ideals...survival is the basic goal of national policy and the best way to ensure survival is to enhance the nations power.¹³

Another notable strength of realism is its profound explanation and rationale for the concept of self-help. Waltz (1979) articulates that in the absence of trust and a higher authority in the

¹¹ Grieco, J.M. *Cooperation Among Nation*. Ithaka, New York: Cornell University Press. 1990.

¹² Baylis, John, Smith, Steve, and Owens, Patricia. *The Globalization of World Politics*. An Introduction to International Relations, 4th ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹³ Popoola, Michael and Oluwadara, Deborah and Adesegun, Abiodun. *North Korea Nuclear Proliferation in the Context of the Realist Theory: A Review*. European Journal of Social Sciences. 58. 75-82. 2019

international system, a need arises for states to ensure their own protection.¹⁴ Baylis, in offering support for this position articulates that, ‘states should not depend on other states or institutions to ensure their own security.’¹⁵ Realists contend that state protection is achieved through power, which for realists is defined in terms of military capabilities. States therefore must seek to maximize or balance their power relative to that of other states. A classic example of this ‘power’ was demonstrated during the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks when the US responded decisively and quickly in the interest of its own security by invading Iraq. During that period, it was suggested that the US’ actions were unilateral and with the existence of the United Nations, of which the US is a permanent member of the Security Council, the matter ought to have been brought to the Security Council for approval. However, relying on customary international law, the US proceeded to act unilaterally and in keeping with realism’s core tenet of self-help.

WEAKNESSES OF REALISM

A critical weakness of realism is the fact that it lacks flexibility with respect to its core principle of state centrism wherein the state is regarded as the main actor in the international relations arena. This preoccupation with the supremacy of the state as the only important actor within the international system is a misnomer. In today’s global security environment non-state actors such as multinational corporations, transnational actors, terrorists and non-governmental organizations now play significant roles in the international system. It is in keeping with this perspective that Goldstein posits that these non-state actors play a key role

¹⁴ Waltz, Kenneth. *Theory of International Politics*. New York: Random House. 1979.

¹⁵ Baylis, John, Smith, Steve, and Owens, Patricia. *The Globalization of World Politics*. An Introduction to International Relations, 4th ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

in making our world a globally interdependent system characterized by integrated economic markets and telecommunications which have made it easier for ideas to penetrate state borders.¹⁶ This argument finds support from Dalby who argues that globalization has brought about two possibilities for the state: self-sufficiency or international interdependence.¹⁷

Global interconnection and interdependence have now become characteristic features of not only the security environment but also the political and socio-economic world. Haughton articulates that the works of authors such as Susan Strange and Kenichi Ohmae strongly support the argument of the declining nature of territorial boundaries and economic spheres of the state.¹⁸ Thus, the 9/11 terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda, a non-state actor, against the United States also demonstrates the ability of non-state entities to affect the international security realm, weaken global economic markets and ultimately start a war.

The new global security landscape has also exposed another critical limitation of realism, namely, the fact that it has confined security studies into examining solely the 'shifts in geo-strategic arrangements' as the only source of global systemic change.¹⁹ By taking this approach, realism ignores the role of multinational alliances and partnerships that have influenced security strategy and its study. NATO is a prime example of the multinational method of pursuing international security as the organization's liberal democratic principles have decisively influence its member states security policies and arrangements.

¹⁶ Goldstein, Joshua S. John C Pevehouse. *International Relations 4th Edition*. Longman, 2008

¹⁷ Dalby, Simon. 'Contesting an Essential Concept' in Kieth Krause and Michael C. Williams (eds) *Critical Security Studies* London: Routledge: 3-32. 2003.

¹⁸ Haughton, Suzette A. 2011. *Drugged Out: Globalization and Jamaica's Resilience to Drug Trafficking*. University Press of America.

¹⁹ Gheciu, Alexandra. 'Security Institutions as Agents of Socialization? NATO and the 'New Europe'' *International Organization* 59: 973-1012. 2005

The ever-evolving definition of security has also exposed realism's narrow scope of focus. Security studies must now shift its attention beyond the traditional realist realm of territorial security and into the new dimension of security to encompass issues beyond territorial conflicts and inter-state aggression. Realism theorists, by having such a "state-centric" approach, have failed to consider and account for contemporary global security issues such as human right abuses, cyber-threats, the rise in intra state conflicts, climate change and global pandemics etc.

DISCUSSION

Realism's domination over the language of security studies, specifically the reference to states as referent objects, aggression, anarchy and the use of force as key features of the international system has earned the theory a sacred place in international relations. The theory's core tenants of sovereignty, survival and self-help have proven to be useful in explaining certain contemporary security challenges such as war and aggression between sovereign states. However, as theorists, scholars and academic literature show, issues regarding security have become broader in nature as security transcends the traditional military realm and into the sphere of issues that were once considered as belonging solely to the world of social issues; a situation which has been further amplified by the effects of globalization.

In today's contemporary security environment, the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia is explicable from a classical realist and neo-realist's perspective. The US' ambition to expand the NATO began in the 1990s and sought to offer countries like Georgia and Ukraine the opportunity to join NATO. Realists, such as John Mearsheimer, avow that the

US' actions triggered a security quandary with Russia; and consequently, led to its invasions of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.²⁰

Furthermore, if we accept realism's state centric focus, how then would realists explain the Arab Spring and the frequency of inter-state wars with nationalist and ethnic overtones? Similarly, transnational organized crime, particularly illicit drugs and arms smuggling are contemporary security challenges facing the international community. Realist thinkers however highlight these security issues by essentially distinguishing between high politics and low politics and by asserting that it is more important to analyze the issues of high politics.

Compellingly, the sophistication of new threats such as cybercrime to include phone phreaking, hacking and malware shakes the core tenets of realism and reaffirms that the state is no longer the primary actor in the international relations theatre. It is in keeping with this perspective that many security theorists, academics and practitioners assert that realism is dead, inadequate or irrelevant and does a poor job of explaining particular events or types of event; and other theories, particularly those that embrace domestic politics, offer better explanations.²¹

CONCLUSION

Realism developed partly due to the inability of idealism to adequately explain the development of significant changes in international relations, chiefly the outbreak of World War I. In the studies of international relations, realists assert that realism is the main theory

²⁰ The Economist. *John Mearsheimer on why the West is principally responsible for the Ukrainian crisis*. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/11/john-mearsheimer-on-why-the-west-is-principally-responsible-for-the-ukrainian-crisis>. Accessed 25 May 2020.

²¹ J. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY, 1991)

that provides the most logical explanation for the global state of conflict. According to realism, states exist within an anarchic international system in which they are dependent on their own security capabilities, or power, to achieve their national interests. The most important national interest is the survival of the state, particularly, political systems and territorial integrity. Realists assert their theoretical strength on the basis that, as long as the world is divided into states in an anarchic setting, statism, state survival and maximizing power will remain the essence of international politics. From this perspective, realism presents a solid theoretical analysis of the contemporary international system. Notwithstanding theoretical weaknesses highlighted by intra state conflict and insecurity caused by non-state actors, realism predicts that national leaders will consider the state as the sole legitimate actor within the international system. Despite its limitations, realism's pragmatic approach to analyzing inter-state relationships allows theorists to anticipate conflict and analyze state foreign policy as they pursue relative power advantages.

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