

NEO-REALISM: AN OVERVIEW

Sumit

M.Phil Scholar,

Deptt of Political Science,

Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra.

Email: sumitlathwal7@gmail.com

1.0 Introduction

Political realism is the oldest and most frequently adopted theory of international relations. Like most of other theories or approaches, realism has two faces. It is a general orientation rooted in a central substantive focus (power). It also, is a body of explanatory theories, models, or propositions (emphasize anarchy and balance of power).ⁱ

Realists believe that power is the currency of the international politics. Great power pays careful attention to how much economic and military power they have relative to each other. It is important to have a sufficient amount of power, but also to make sure that no other state sharply shifts the balance of power in its favour. For realists international politics is synonymous with power politics. There are substantial differences among realists; the most basic divide is in the answer to the important question: why state wants power?

For classic realists like Hans J. Morgenthau, the answer is human nature. Everyone is born with a will to power inherent into themⁱⁱ. According to Morgenthau, man and woman are by nature political animal: they are born to peruse power and to enjoy the fruits of power. Morgenthau speaks of the human lust for power. The human lust for power inevitably brings man and woman in conflicts with each other. That creates the condition of power politics which is at the heart of Morgenthau realism. "Politics is a struggle of power over man and whatever its ultimate aim may be, power is its immediate goal and modes of acquiring maintain and demonstrating it determines the technique of political action. The struggle between states leads to the problem of justifying the threat or the use of force in human relation. And that's the central normative doctrine of classical realism.

The leading neo-realistic thinker Kenneth Waltz seeks to provide a scientific explanation of the international political system. He takes some elements of classical realism as a starting point- ex: independent states existing and operating in a system of international anarchy. But he departs from that tradition by giving no account of human nature and by ignoring the ethics of statecraft. His explanatory approach is heavily influenced by economic models. In Waltz view the best IR theory is one that focuses centrally on the system, on its interacting units, and on the continuity and the changes of the system. In classical realism, state leader and their international decisions and actions are at the center of attention. In neo-realism, the structure of the system that is external to the actors, the relative distribution of power is the central analytical focus. Leaders are relatively un-important because structure compels them to act in certain way.

According to Walt's neo-realist theory is a basic feature of international relation is the decentralize structure of anarchy between states. Neo-realists found international system anarchic, where there is no higher authority that sits above the great power and where there is no guarantee that one will not attack the another, it makes good sense for each state to be powerful enough to protect itself. For their survival, state competes with each other for power. Structural theorist ignores cultural differences in regime type, mainly because the international system creates the same basic incentive for all great powerⁱⁱⁱ. Whether a state is democratic or aristocratic, matter little for how it acts towards the other states. Structural realists treat states as if they are "Black Boxes": they are assumed to be like, save for the facts that some states are more or less powerful than others.^{iv}

There is significant divide between the structural realists that is due to question that concern realists: how much power is enjoy?

Defensive realists like Kenneth Waltz, whose book is discussed as a feature text, maintain that it is unwise for states to try to maximize their share of world power, because the system will punish them if they attempt to gain too much power.

Offensive realist like John j. Mearsheimer take the opposite view, they maintain that it makes good strategic sense for states to gain as much power as possible and if the circumstances are right to strive for hegemony.

2.0 Waltz and Structural Realism

Structural realism set to set aside those features of international relations that depend on the character of the actors. Political structure, waltz argue, are defined by their ordering principal, differentiation of functions and distribution of capabilities; how much units are related to one another, how political functions are allocated, how power is distributed.^v

Waltz argues that there are two basic ordering principal, hierarchy and anarchy. Units either stand in relations of authority (hierarchy) or they do not (anarchy). And this is structurally central because differences exist “between politics conducted in a condition of settled rules and politics in a condition of anarchy”^{vi}

States are all alike in all basic functional respects- i.e., in spite of their different culture or ideologies or constitutions they all have to perform the same basic tasks. Anarchy, waltz consider, largely eliminates the functional differences between the units. States differ in regard to their varying capabilities. In anarchic order, every unit must “put itself in a position to be able to take care itself since no one else can be counted on to do so”^{vii}. Differences that exist between the states are of capability, not of functions. Every state performs some kind of functions but in various degrees.

So if an international order is anarchic and there are minimum differentiations in their functions, then international political structures differ only in their distributions of capabilities. International order varies according to the number of great power, that is the polarity of the system.

3.0 How Much Power is Enough?

There is a disagreement among structural realists about how much power is enough for the state.

Defensive realists recognize that the international system strong incentives to gain additional increments of power, but they also consider that it is foolish to pursue hegemony. They consider state should not maximize but should strive for what Kenneth Waltz call an “appropriate amount of power”^{viii}. The restraint is largely the result of three factors: Defensive realists consider that if any state becomes too powerful, balancing will occur, other state will form a balancing coalition that will leave the aspiring hegemony lee-secure.

Secondly, there is an offense-defense balance, defensive realist argue that the offence-defense is heavily weighted in the defenders favor and thus any state that attempt to gain the large amount of additional power is likely to end-up fighting a series of losing wars. Accordingly state will recognize the danger offense and concentrate instead in maintain their position in the balance of power.^{ix}

Defensive realists further argue that, even when conquest is feasible, it does not pay: the cost out-weigh the benefits. Because of nationalism, it is especially difficult, sometimes impossible, for the conqueror to subdue the conquered.^x

On the other side, offensive realists argue that state should be looking for opportunities to gain more power and should do so, whenever it is feasible. State should maximize power and their ultimate goals should be hegemony, because that is the best way to guarantee survival. Offensive realists consider that, threatened state sometime opts for “buck passing” rather than joining a balancing coalition. They attempt to get the other state to assume the burden of checking a powerful opponent while they remain on sideline. This kind of behavior creates opportunity for aggressor.

Offensive realists also take the issue with the blame that offenders have a significant advantage over the attacker and the offense hardly ever pays.^{xi} They explained it by historic record saying that the side that initiated the war wins more often than other. For all these reasons, offensive realists expect great power to be constantly looking for opportunities to gain advantage over each other with the ultimate price being hegemony. Mearsheimer, like other realists, believes that his argument has a general application to all places all times. There will always be a struggle between nation state for power and domination in the international system. There has always been conflict, there is conflict and there always will be conflicts over power.

4.0 What Causes Great Power War?

Structure realists recognize that state can go to war for any number of reasons, which make it impossible to come up with a simple theory that point to a single factor as the main cause of war. But one principle contribution of structural realism lies in the analysis of the impact of distribution of capabilities. Some realists argue that the key variable is the number of great power in a system, a third approach look at how changes in the distribution of power affect the likelihood of war.

4.1 Polarity: There is long debate between realists, whether bi-polarity is more or less war prone than multi-polarity. Neo-realists Kenneth Waltz consider that “bi-polarity is less war prone than multi-polarity”^{xii}

Neo realists who think bipolarity is less war prone offer three supporting arguments.

Firstly, they maintain that there is more opportunity for great power to fight each other in multi-polarity. There are only two great powers in bipolarity, which means there is only one power versus other power. But in multi-polarity number will increase. So states have more opportunity to fight because number of opponent increase in multi polar world.

Second, there tend to be greater equality between the great powers in bipolar world because the more the number of power in system, the power will be distributed unevenly among the great powers. And, when there is power imbalance the stronger often have opportunity to take advantage of the weaker.

Third, there is greater potential for miscalculation in multi-polar world and miscalculations often contribute to the outbreak of war. Specially, there is more clarity about potential threats in bi-polar system because number of great power is less. Those two state focuses on each other, reduce the possibility of miscalculations.

5.0 Balanced or Imbalanced Power

Some realists explain the outbreak of war, by studying how much power is state control. Power can be distributed more or less among the great powers. The power ratio among all the great powers affects the prospect for peace. Balancing is said to be more efficient, when power is evenly distributed in bipolar system, because here each state has no choice but to directly confront the other state. After all there is no great power than can do the balancing.^{xiii}

Some realists maintain that the presence of an exceptional powerful state facilitate peace. A hegemon state is likely to feel secure because it is so powerful relative to its competitors, there for, it will have little need to use force to improve its position in the balance of power. Moreover, non of other power is likely to pick a fight with a leading great power because they will certainly lose. War among lesser great power is still possible, because each state want to increase its power. But even then, if the preponderant power believes that war might upset a favorable international order, they go to war.

“Un-balanced multi-polarity, not balanced multi-polarity, increase the risk of great power war”^{xiv}

6.0 Balance of Power

A state should, according to realism, only rely on its own capabilities when it comes to national security. But as a state you sometimes have to rely on others by forming alliances in order to balance a more powerful state in international politics. A state can by forming an alliance strengthen its own national security by using its allies resources, and thus be able to balance a more powerful state. Balancing by forming alliances are called external balancing, and when a state balance another state by increasing its own military power, it's called internal balancing. This form of internal balancing is what can be applied to the Sino-Indian discussion, as both countries increases military spending each year. Waltz sees the balance of power as natural, and advocates that the balance-of-power theory is the most distinctively political theory of international politics. Further the theory of balance of power views states as merely concentrations of power in a system which is anarchic and thus put them in an environment of competitiveness. Further, Waltz argues that the constraints in the international system lead to the balance-of-power theory, where all states are confined in the international structure, which explains why a certain similarity in behavior is expected by the theory.

7.0 Mearsheimer, Stability Theory and Hegemony

Mearsheimer takes up the neo realist argument of waltz and applies it to the both the past and the future. He builds on the waltz argument concerning the stability of bipolar system as compared with multi-polar system^{xv}.

The question poses is: what would happen if the bipolar system were replaced by the multi-polar system^{xvi}?

The answer Mearsheimer gives is as follows: “the prospect for major crisis and war in Europe are likely to increase markedly, if... This scenario unfolds, and then next decade in Europe without the superpower would probably not be as violent as the first 45 year of this century, but would probably be more prone to violence then the past 45 years”^{xvii}

Mearsheimer argues that the distribution and nature of military power are the main source of war and peace. He says “the long peace” between 1945to1990 was a result of three fundamental importance conditions: the bipolar system, the approximate military equality between the two great powers and the presence of nuclear weapons.^{xviii}

So the cold war between the USA and USSR was principally responsible for transforming a violent region into a peaceful place. He argues that the emergence of a multi-polar system will produce a highly undesirable return to old ways of anarchy and instability and even a renewed danger of international conflicts, crisis and war.

Waltz considered that state must and do seek power in order to be secure and to survive. Mearsheimer speaks of Waltz’s theory as “Defensive Realism”.

Mearsheimer agrees with waltz that anarchy compels states to compete for power for power, but he argues that state seek hegemony, that they are ultimately more aggressive than waltz portray them. All major power strives for hegemony. But the planet is too big for global hegemony. The oceans are huge barrier. No state would have the necessary power; he argues that state can only become the hegemon in their region.^{xix} According to Mearsheimer all states want to become regional hegemon. He argues that Germany will become the dominant in Europe.^{xx} And China will emerge as a potential hegemon in Asia. So Mearsheimer talks about regional hegemon.

8.0 Self Help

Structural realism, or neo-realism, is a cynical approach that provides the idea of a world where everyone is responsible for their own survival, meaning that you should only rely on your own capability. In contrast to domestic politics where public agencies have as duty to protect the citizens, and where the citizens not are allowed to enforce the law by themselves, the unitary actors in the international system on the other hand has to rely on themselves, as there is no higher authority to offer protection. This is known as the so called self-help, which has its roots in the doubt realists has towards institutions, international law and alliances. The structure of international politics creates insecurity in itself. That is what Kenneth Waltz claims in his work, Theory of International Politics, arguing that the anarchic system inevitably forces states to rely on self-help.^{xxi} Before moving forward, we have to make some definitions clear. First, states are unitary actors who, at a minimum, seek to survive, and at a maximum, strive for domination in the international system. The international system, thus, consists of sovereign states, all equal to each other, which also is referred to as, anarchy. These are by the neo-realism seen as units, thus no higher authority is present that can enforce any law, or maintain the security by preventing the use of force. The lack of an authority is simply how realists explain the anarchy in the international system. Moreover, is each state a separate, autonomous and equal unit, which in the end only relies on its own resources in order to realize its national interests. Logically, this leads to the conclusion that one state’s security is another state’s insecurity, in the sense that when one state strengthens its security, it will automatically create insecurity among other states, possibly leading to a security dilemma. The concept of self-help contributes to the explanation why realists generally are sceptical of cooperation with other states. If two states, equal in power, both would gain from a cooperation (absolute gain) it would still result in a relative gain, meaning that one state nevertheless is going to gain more than the other. Furthermore it would engender a destabilization between the states, as the balance of power is being shifted, and therefore might turn into a future threat. Allowing another state to have a higher relative gain in the cooperation, can therefore be more costly than missing out on the absolute gain the state would get from the cooperation. Another aspect of cooperation between states is the fact that agreements and future intentions not can be ensured by the word, or signature of other states, as the possibility of a state breaching an agreement could become a great risk to one’s national security. According to realism are morality and law subordinate to the overall struggle for power in the international system. Thus making agreements unreliable, even though it is an agreement enhancing regional security, it could make the state even more vulnerable, seeing that power weighs more than morality. Economic interdependence, according to Waltz, increases the risk of creating new conflicts. This argument is based on the idea

that all states are competitors, and that power is a zero-sum game. No matter how you look at it, there's always someone with the highest relative gain. Contrary, neo-liberalism argues that increased interdependence will lead to spill-over effects, which will enhance cooperation in other areas.

9.0 Regional Hegemony

Great power strives to gain power over their rivals and hopefully become hegemons. Once a state achieves their hegemonic position, it becomes a status quo power. A hegemon is a state that is so powerful that it dominates all other states in the system.^{xxii} no other state has the capability to put up a serious fight against it. So a hegemon is the only great power in the system. A state that is substantially more powerful than the other great power is not a hegemon. Hegemony means domination of the system, which is interpreted as entire world. If a state dominates the entire world that is the global hegemon and if a state dominates a particular region of a system is known as regional hegemon. So now it becomes easy to distinguish between a global hegemon and a regional hegemon. The United State has been a regional hegemon in the western hemisphere since a very long time.^{xxiii} Mearsheimer says that is virtually impossible for any state to achieve global hegemony. The main impediment to world domination is the projection of power across the world's ocean onto the territory of a rival power.^{xxiv} The best outcome a state hope for is to be regional hegemon and possibly control the other region that is nearby and accessible by land.

10.0 References:

-
- ⁱ Jack Donnelly, "Realism" in Theories of International Politics, Andrew Linklater (ed.), Palgrave Macmillan, new York, 2015, p.32.
- ⁱⁱ Hans J. Morgenthau, Politics among Nation, Kalyani publisher, New Delhi, 2014, p.4.
- ⁱⁱⁱ John J. Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism" in International Relations Theories, Tim Dunne *et.al.* (eds.), OUP, Oxford, 2015, p.78.
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v Jack Donnelly, no.15, p.37.
- ^{vi} Kenneth Waltz, Theory of International Politics, University of California, Berkley, 1979, p.61.
- ^{vii} Ibid, p. 107.
- ^{viii} John J. Mearsheimer, no.17, p.80.
- ^{ix} Ibid, p.81.
- ^x John J. Mearsheimer, no.9, p.268.
- ^{xi} John J. Mearsheimer, no.17, p.83.
- ^{xii} Kenneth Waltz, no.20, p.154.
- ^{xiii} John, J. Mearsheimer, no.17, p.85.
- ^{xiv} Ibid, p.86.
- ^{xv} Robert, Jackson & George Sorenson, Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches, OUP, Oxford, 2013, pp.82-83.
- ^{xvi} Ibid.
- ^{xvii} John, J. Mearsheimer, no.9, pp.142-143.
- ^{xviii} John J. Mearsheimer, Tragedy of Great Power Politics, W.W Nortran, New York, 2013,p.143.
- ^{xix} John J. Mearsheimer, no.32, p.236.
- ^{xx} Ibid, p.242.
- ^{xxi} Kenneth, Waltz, no.20.
- ^{xxii} John J. Mearsheimer, no.32, pp.40-42.
- ^{xxiii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiv} Ibid.