

REALISM

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Summary

The anarchical system of world politics, i.e., the absence of an international government, has compelled states to protect themselves by their own. The power states seek to gain for their defense in turn appears to be threatening to others, and states have constant fear and an incessant need to acquire and exercise power. Political realism in international relations has emphasized the “struggle for power” environment, where ethical and moral considerations are undermined by the states’ need for survival. Examining major theorists of the twentieth-century realism, this article discusses compatibility and incompatibility between the pursuit of power and the maintenance of morality in their accounts. It argues that they do not abandon moral elements entirely, and that an account of international politics that ignored everything other than egoism, anarchy, power, and interest would be a misleading oversimplification. The realists recognize the ethical and moral side of the egoistic human nature and politics, although emphasizing their subordination to power and security. They certainly criticized the utopian idea, but the criticism points to the utilitarianism that the pursuit of individual preferences naturally produces the happiness of the whole people. They also differentiated individuals and groups, and claimed that the former has moral characteristics in itself, but the pursuit of power manifests itself in the latter groups where the egoistic human nature becomes more salient. The account of realism also argues that the “struggle for power” stems from the natural characteristics of politics where interests are defined in terms of power as opposed to economics where interests are defined in terms of wealth. To whatever the egoistic human nature is attributed, realism leaves some hedges of moral elements, which has made realism more “realistic” in the literal sense of the term.

1. Introduction

Over the centuries, there have been three types of world politics; a world imperial system, a feudal system, and an anarchic system of states. In a world imperial system, one government is dominant over the others in world politics. In a feudal system, human loyalties and political obligations are not fixed primarily by territorial boundaries. Instead, individuals have obligations to a local lord, but might also owe duties to some distant noble or to the Pope in Rome. The political obligations occur across as well as within the territories, which could cause non-territorial loyalties as well as conflicts.

The anarchic system of states consists of states that are relatively cohesive but with no higher government above them. The term “anarchy” in international relations does not mean chaos or the complete absence of order. Rather, it is the absence of political rule, of a hierarchical political order based on formal authority. In 1648, the Thirty Years’ War ended with the Peace of Westphalia, which gave rise to the sovereign territorial state as the dominant form of the international system. Thus, when we speak of international politics today, we usually point to the territorial state system, defining international politics as politics in the absence of a common sovereign or an international government, that is, politics among sovereign states with no ruler above them.

Since international politics has the anarchical characteristics, the term realism used in international relations has the following four key assumptions. First, states are the principal or most important actors. States represent the key unit of analysis, and the study of international relations is the study of relations among these units of states. Supranational actors such as the United Nations (UN) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other non-governmental, transnational organizations engaging in peace movement and economic development are assumed to have only the secondary influence. Second, the state is viewed as a unitary actor. Realists view the states as a metaphorical hard shell, and a country facing the outside world is assumed as an integrated unit. Although it is clear that public administrations, political parties, and interest groups affect foreign policy decision-making, realists deal with states as given to advance their argument. Third, given the emphasis on the unitary state-as-actor, realists argue that the state is essentially a rational actor.

A rational foreign policy implies that a decision maker considers all feasible alternatives in terms of existing capabilities available to the state for maximizing the state’s benefits (see *Actors in World Politics, International Regime*). Fourth, realists emphasize policies based more on practical power considerations and less on moral, normative, or ethical considerations. It stems from an account of human nature that emphasizes self-interest and the egoistic passions and an account of international relations characterized by international anarchy.

For instance, George Kennan, the father of containment policy during the Cold War era, argued that the primary obligation of the government is to preserve the interests of the national society it represents. For him, military security, the integrity of its political life, and the wellbeing of its people are the unavoidable necessities of national existence that needs no moral quality.

As a result, the emphasis on such elements as power, egoism, and international anarchy is the realists' tradition that defines the basic structure of their argument on international ethics. Articulating the characteristics and concepts of major realists, the following discussion seeks to explain and compare the accounts of the twentieth-century realists, i.e., E. H. Carr, Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans J. Morgenthau, Henry A. Kissinger, and Kenneth N. Waltz. It will also delineate their account of moral impacts on international relations, along with their emphasis on the egoistic human nature and rational decision-making. In this context, the realists' compatibility and incompatibility on morality in relation to their emphasis on power, egoism, and interests in the realists' tradition will be also examined.

2. The Pursuit of Power

For realists, international society is a society without central authority to preserve law and order. Individual states must attain the preservation and improvement of their power position in the international society as its foreign policy objectives. Realists insist on the importance of struggling with other states to preserve and maintain the survival of its own state, and the pursuit of power must be a primary objective of every actor in international relations.

Despite the emphasis on the pursuit of power, even among realists there is no clear consensus on how to define the term "power." Some argue that power is the sum of military, economic, technological, and other capabilities at the disposal of the state. The substantial way of measuring capabilities suggests that a state's influence to other states is determined by the capabilities relative to the others. A statement of Thucydides, the author of *The Peloponnesian War*, that "[t]he strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept," indicates that how much power a state gains and maintains determines its freedom of action in relation to other states.

The above way of measuring state capabilities, however, assumes a static view of power. A more dynamic definition focuses on the interactions of states. In this argument, a state's influence is determined not only by its capabilities but rather by its willingness to use the capabilities and perceptions by other states of its willingness. For instance, the "negotiating power" can be sometimes exercised by a state that has less capabilities than its opponent. It happens when the state is more willing to exercise influence over others with its own limited capabilities. Historically speaking, Henry A. Kissinger, while he was the assistant for national security in the Nixon presidency, utilized estranged relationships between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, and sought to gain offshore leverage over the two communist adversaries. Moreover, Britain's offshore balancing policy in the nineteenth century produced leverage over France, Germany, and other European countries without devoting much energy to gain a relative strength.

For the realists, pursuit of power, moral and ethical considerations are given an instrumental political role. Justice, fairness, and morality can be used as moral justification for the power quest. In the realists' world, the search for power is not made for the achievement of moral values, but moral values are used to facilitate the attainment of power.

3. International Anarchy and States' Need for Survival

Realists have emphasized anarchy and the distribution of capabilities (or power) among states as critical components of the international system. The so-called system-level attributes are viewed as both incentives and constraints on decision making. In the international anarchy, states are sovereign and ultimate actors. They have the right to be independent of other states and to exercise complete authority over its own territories. Despite the differences in a state's capabilities in international relations, none claims the right to dominate other sovereign states (see *International System*).

The most influential advocate of the impact on state policies of the anarchical international system is a structural realist, Kenneth N. Waltz. In his doctoral dissertation in the 1950s, published later as *Man, the State, and War* (1959), he already claimed that conflict is bound to occur with no system of law enforceable among sovereign states, and with each state judging its grievances and ambitions according to the dictates of its own reason or desire. In order to achieve a favorable outcome from the international anarchy, states have to rely on their own devices, the relative efficiency of which must be a concern. He made a sharp contrast between domestic and international orders, and argued that the absence of the ultimate authority in international relations naturally (and structurally) invites the higher possibility of conflict than cooperation among sovereign states.

States in international anarchy face a profound "security dilemma". Given the absence of an international government, each state must protect itself through "self-help". States must determine the areas and contents of their self-defense rights, establish their own military, and always monitor their borders for their adversaries so that the adversaries cannot trample their own sovereign rights. Such power, however, even if intended entirely for defensive purposes, will appear as threatening to other states. The power they are compelled to gain in turn will appear threatening to other states, which will respond in a similar way to the states strengthening their power. As long as states seek to maintain their security by strengthening their power, it is impossible to escape from the "security dilemma," where the pursuit of one's security endangers other states' security (see *Peace and Security*).

States thus have constant fear and an incessant need to acquire, maintain, and exercise power. In anarchy there is no automatic harmony, and a state must use force to achieve its goals if it values those goals more than it values the pleasures of peace. Given that all states engage in the power struggle, the only method of maintaining peace will be to attain the balance of power. From the perspective of the structural theory emphasizing the confrontational expectations about state behaviors and outcomes, we usually predict that states will engage in balancing behavior, whether or not balanced power is the end of their acts. In this context, structural realists argue that the balance of power is the natural result of states' pursuit of power, impelled by the anarchical characteristic of international relations.

The systemic theory makes it possible to exclude any normative arguments. Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979) lacks attention to moral considerations. The structural realists seek to explain state behavior only in terms of changes in the

international systemic structure, in which it is axiomatic that states compete with one another for scarce resources or their own survival. State leaders must choose to behave immorally in international politics in order to preserve the state, while at the same time to abandon their moral obligation to ensure their state's survival and to follow preferred ways of acting in international politics. By articulating the structural incentives and constraints on state behavior, they advanced a scientific analysis of foreign policy, and argued that the pursuit of power and interests would result in the balancing of power among states.

In his classical work entitled *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes stated that “in all times, kings and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators, having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another.” It implies that there is no Leviathan or superordinate power to impose order. Applying this logic to interactions among states, realists argue that the condition of anarchy structurally induces states to maintain its own survival, leaving moral and ethical imperatives out of their considerations.

Along with Hobbes as a classical theorist, E. H. Carr, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Hans Morgenthau are three founding figures of the twentieth-century realism. While attacking ethics and morality in international relations, the earlier generations of realists emphasized the pursuit of power and interests as a norm in the conduct of foreign policy. Referring to how the twentieth-century realism was born, the following focuses on the realists' devotion of their energy to explain the dangers of moralism in foreign policy.

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Biographical Sketch

Dr. Go Ito is a professor of international relations at the School of Political Science and Economics, Meiji University, while at the same time a research fellow at the Japan Forum on International Relations. His research covers IR theories, security issues in the East Asia-Pacific region, and Japan's peacekeeping operations. His publications include "The Expansion of the US-Japan Alliance," in *Changing Japanese Politics* (New York: Nova Science, forthcoming), and "Japan's Normalization with North Vietnam" in *Japanese Political Science Review* (1997).