Critical Evaluation of Realism and Neo-Realism

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Abstract

Neo-Realism is an important theoretical framework in the study of international politics. It is considered providing a parsimonious explanation of the phenomenon at the international level. Realism has always been associated with a plethora of the most distinguished and productive theorists of international relations, such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, E.H. Carr, Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. There is a growing consensus on the basic features of international politics in the intellectual community of international relations given by realism. There are differences among the realists, but this paper is discussing and critically evaluating the common features of the realist school of thought. Realism has a critically important and academically significant position on the fundamentals of international politics. It is not essentially an exaggeration to say that realist theoretical paradigm has given the framework, which initiated debates in the field of international relations. Therefore, any criticism of realism cannot undermine its significance; it only further strengthens the weak aspect of this predominant approach to the study of international politics.

Introduction

Neo-Realism is an important theoretical framework in the study of international politics. It is considered providing a parsimonious explanation of the phenomenon at the international level. Realism has always been associated with a plethora of the most distinguished and productive theorists of international relations, such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, E.H. Carr, Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. There is a growing consensus on the basic features of international politics in the intellectual community of international relations given by realism. There are differences among the realists, but this paper is discussing and critically evaluating the common

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features of the realist school of thought. Realism has a critically important and academically significant position on the fundamentals of international politics (Ashley, 1984, p.227). It is not essentially an exaggeration to say that realist theoretical paradigm has given the framework, which initiated debates in the field of international relations. Therefore, any criticism of realism cannot undermine its significance; it only further strengthens the weak aspect of this predominant approach to the study of international politics.

Realism says that there is an international system among states that is anarchic by nature. It also poses that the principle of order is anarchic unlike the domestic one, which is hierarchic. In the anarchic international state, the only factor that determines relationships among states is the distribution of capabilities (Waltz, 1979, p.88). It says that in the international anarchy power determines the position of a state in the global ranking system. It says that the unit of the system is the state, i.e. only states are a member of the international system. It further narrows the focus by exclusively concentrating on the major powers (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.25). It also argues that only great powers are important and playing crucial roles in the change of the international system. Realism stresses as well that states are always struggling to maximise their power. Power is the supreme value in the ethics of international relations. Security is the top priority of a state; states are increasing power to ensure their survival. The only guarantee for survival among states in an anarchic international system is power (Mearsheimer, 2001). Self-help is the principle for action. States are increasing their capabilities to protect their territorial integrity and national sovereignty without depending on other states. Therefore, it assumes that states' national interests and identities are fixed and determined. It is further urging that these are the basic ingredients that determine policies and behaviours of a state. It is important to understand that these are the common points among realists. They do not have any differences among themselves on these fundamental principles (Jackson & Sorensen, 2007, Glenn Herald, 2002).

Conceptualisation of Neo-realism

This article analyses neo-realism on the basis of its assumptions, predictions and conceptualisations (of Values). It does not criticize the work of an individual writer or any specific section of realism. It says that realists' assumption regarding international anarchy is very specific. It does not reflect the true state of relationships among various states. Anarchy is a more complex and difficult concept than realists assumes (Milner, 1991, p.69, Keohane & Nye, 2001, Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). It is not comprehensible for a student of international politics to accept the 'sameness' of anarchy

among states in Europe and South Asia. Furthermore, it is true that Kenneth Waltz has given a scientific version to the explanation of international structure, but it had already been identified by realists during the Thucydides era (Ashley, 1984, p.235). This research paper claims that it is a simplification of international politics to assume that the international structure is the only explanation of states' behaviours. It does not deny the importance of international structure, but simply contests the claim that it is the only factor responsible for a state's behaviour. It also criticizes realists' other major concepts like balance of power, power, self-help and security. It says that these are very vague and general concepts and that they do not give any specific guidelines to policy makers at the decision-making level. Therefore, these general concepts are responsible for the gap between theory and practice in the field of international politics. There are strong resentments in the circle of academics that people at the corridor of power and at the helm of affairs do not have required respect for theories of international politics (Mearsheimer, 2001). The main reason behind this dilemma is realism's general claims and vague explanations of patterns of interactions among states.

Neo-realism and Anarchy

Anarchy has always been awarded a central role in international politics especially in the writing of neo-realists like Kenneth Waltz, Robert Gilpin and Robert Jervis (Milner, 1991, p.69, Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 2001). They all have based their explanation of world politics on the concept of anarchy. Robert Gilpin defines international politics as a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy (Gilpin, 1981, p.7). For Kenneth Waltz, it is the central feature of an international system which determines the importance of every other variable. The element of anarchy provides the baseline for the game theories of neorealism and neo-liberalism. It is considered as a fundamental factor in differentiating the international system from the domestic one. Waltz says that the international system is anarchic, whereas the domestic one is hierarchic (Waltz, 1979, pp.103-104). This claim of Kenneth Waltz's will be tested, whether the distinction is cleared, pellucid and transparent or blurred, obscured and foggy.

It is theoretically important and practically significant to have a clear understanding and meaning of anarchy, which is the fundamental concept in realists' school of thought. First, one has to have a precise meaning of anarchy, whether it means lack of order, absence of government, or use of force. Then, it is essential to comprehend them in relating with the domestic system. It is very difficult to make an assumption regarding international

politics with a universal implication. The question that strikes everybody is whether anarchy is serving the same function between India and Pakistan as it is between France and Germany. It is important for the above three meanings of anarchy, which differentiate the international system from the domestic one, to be elaborated in further detail.

International politics is a delicate realm where misconceptions and misunderstandings bear dire consequences for the system. Let us assume that the meaning associated with anarchy is "lack of order" (Bull, 1977, p.8). It is essential to explain what kind of lacking constitutes anarchy. According to Hedley Bull, order in the form of international society has always been present in the modern international system. There have always been some institutions, norms, customs and agreements in the international system. This nature of order has a great significance in determining the relationship between states. Lack of order can lead to various kinds of systems. If there are customs, laws and socialization then states would be having more harmonious relationships. The nature of anarchy would also be less chaotic and destructive (Keohane & Nye, 2001, p.31). Therefore, it is extremely essential to explain the nature of anarchy to understand the context rather than categorically assuming that similar anarchy prevails everywhere.

Kenneth Waltz and Anarchy

Many prominent neo-realists consider anarchy as the absence of government: Kenneth Waltz uses anarchy as absence of central government and Martin Wight describes anarchy as a multiplicity of power without a government (Waltz, 1979, p.101 and Wight, 1978, p.101, Ruggei, 1983). It is again important to define the meaning of government for each of them. It can be legitimacy over the use of force, monopoly over the use of force or presence of institutions and norms for example. It is very difficult to have a single definition of government. Monopoly over the use of force is not always true everywhere. Large numbers of states in the developing world do not have monopoly over the use of force. Similarly, the legitimacy of using force also is a very controversial subject. There sometimes is the use of force at the international level which is having support of United Nations and a majority of states. On the other hand, some states' use of force is not considered legitimate even at the domestic level. If the presence of institutions is important then they are present at the international level as well. It supports the constructivists' claims that international anarchy is what states make of it (Wendt, 1992, p.395). It is not something fixed, rigid and solid; it changes with the change of situation. Realists have to define it precisely to give it a useful meaning within the international system.

The other important variable according to realists that differentiate anarchy from hierarchy is the occurrence of violence. Realists assume that violence is more frequent in an anarchic system than in a hierarchic one. Kenneth Waltz says that "[a]mong states, the state of nature is a state of war. War may at any time break out. The hope that in the absence of an agent to manage or to manipulate conflicting parties the use of force will always be avoided cannot be realistically entertained. The occurrence of violence distinguishes international from national systems" (Waltz, 1979, p.102). If the occurrence of violence is a key variable in differentiating anarchic system from hierarchic ones then it is very difficult to find a common level of violence across the world (Milner, 1991). There are more occurrences of violence at the national level than at the international one. States in underdeveloped world are using force more frequently and ruthlessly than at the international level. Some of its best examples are Israel's use of force against Palestinians, India's use of force against Kashmiris, Pakistan's use of force against its tribal people and Iraq's use of force against the Kurdish minority. On the other hand, it is rarer to find the occurrence of violence in the Western Europe, North America, South America and even Africa. States are having more cordial relationships with each others. It shows that it is an exaggeration to say that the international system is anarchic and anarchy is chaotic.

The assumption of anarchy is the basis of debate regarding the centralization and decentralization of the international system. Waltz says that "[d]omestic systems are centralized and hierarchic [...] [whereas] [i]nternational systems are decentralized and anarchic" (Waltz, 1979, p.88). It is not always as easy to distinguish the international system composition from the domestic one. It also is not very clear what are the true meanings of centralization and decentralization. It again depends on the stability of any system, issue under discussion and time under consideration. Sometimes, it is very difficult to locate the centre of authority within any country than internationally (Milner, 1991, 75). It is not clear in Pakistan's foreign policy who is the real player and where is the centre of authority. Constitutionally, parliament is sovereign and has monopoly on decision-making, but practically Pakistan's army and intelligence agencies have a far greater influence on important foreign policy issues than the political elites. On the other hand, distribution of capabilities at the international level created a hierarchical order on some issues. The best example is nuclear 'have and have-nots'. Some states are having a monopoly over the possession of nuclear weapons and do not allow other states to acquire nuclear weapons. They established their supremacy via an international regime: Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). There is an order at the international level on this specific issue and the nature of

this order is hierarchic. It shows that it is simplifying the problem to assume that the international system is anarchic without thoroughly examining it.

Waltz's differentiation of the international system from the domestic one on the basis of anarchy regarding the use of power is also contested even among realists. According to Waltz, power is operational internationally, whereas there are institutions, law and administration domestically to counter the excesses of power (Waltz, 1979, p.46). On the other hand, Morgenthau says that "[t]he tendency to dominate, in particular, is an element of all human associations, from the family through fraternal and professional associations and local political organizations, to the state" (Morgenthau, 1985, p.40). E.H. Carr also sees power politics both domestically and internationally. He says that law is the manifestation of power. It again depends on the growth of a system how developed institutions are to check the misuse of power (Carr, 1964, p.41). The struggle for power is present within and among nations. In some states the situation is more anarchic than within the international community. It is not difficult to find examples of anarchic states and hierarchic international order, therefore the realists' claim that power is useful only at the international level does not make any sense.

There is a fundamental difference between structuralists and reductionists on the state behaviour; why states behave differently in similar situation and similarly in different sitautions. Neorealists says, "Nations change in form and purpose; technological advances are made; weaponry is radically transformed; alliances are made; (Waltz, 1979, p 69). And yet, "similarity of outcomes prevails despite change in the agents that produce them..... Clearly, system level forces seem to be at work" (Waltz, 1979, p39 & Ruggie, 1983, p263). Kenneth Waltz model of neorealism is structural; it doesn't include domestic level factors, because he has taken identities and interests exogenous to the system. Second important element is selection of variables. All three important factors; order of the system, sameness or similarities of their functions (units) and distribution of capabilities, are operational at system level. It shows from his assumptions that he was only interested at determining factors at international level. Waltz justifies his position while saying that his theory is about international system, not regarding foreign policy. "In his words, "a theory about foreign policy is a theory at national level." But why are demographic trends transnational flows, and military technology that affect all states assigned to the unit level? It is particularly odd to see nuclear technology described as unit characteristic that has had "system-wide" pacific effects." (Nye, 1988, p 243) It shows that Waltz explanation of international phenomenon only at the structural level is simplification of a problem. It doesn't criticise Waltz

descriptions of contemporary politics, but his claim of explaining international politics.

Constructivism and anarchy

Constructivists' assumption regarding international anarchy is an interesting concept. They say that it is an inter-subjective set of norms and practices that constitute the international system (Wendt, 1999, p5). There is no anarchy between states; anarchy is what states make of it (Wendt, 1992, p.395). It says that actors develop their relations with an understanding of other through the exercise of norms and practices. One needs to know the culture, norms, institutions, procedures, rules and social practices that constitute the actors and the structure alike (Hopf, 1998). According to constructivists, anarchy does not have any specific features that are exogenous to the system. Anarchy is a social construction that depends on the identities and interests of the constitutive states (Wendt, 1987). It is the result of practices and norms among states. Self-help and competitive politics which are considered important features of anarchy are rejected by constructivists. They believe that self-help and competitive politics are separate institutions. They are created when states have particular identities characterized by security concerned and interested in power maximization (Wendt, 1992, p.396). Constructivists' definition and description of anarchy is broader and more relevant than realists'. Realists can explain a particular domain, where identities and interest are formed according to their description of world politics based on self-help, power politics, and security dilemma. Constructivists' anarchy is having more explanatory power and better reflection of world politics.

Constructivists' assumption regarding identity and interest formation in an anarchic world is making more theoretical sense than realists'. It is important to understand that realists have neutralized many important variables in their analyses of world politics. They have taken states identities as exogenous to the system. Nye states that "[h]ow states define their interests and how their interests change, has always been a week area in Realist theory. One of the most thought provoking questions in international relations is how states learn. How do national interests become defined, and how do those definitions change?" (Nye, 1988, p.238). Realists' argue that all states are having similar identities, and their interests are survival and maximization of power. By taking states, identities, interests and structure as given, they have ignored important and delicate aspects of world politics. Their over-estimation of self-help has undermined the realistic scope. Realists can explain politics of a specific region, where states are interested in self-help and defining their identities by negative association of "other" against "self"

without any prior process. It is true that most of the states are having self-interested identities in the contemporary world and it is very difficult to change those identities. There are apparently two reasons that states are resisting changing their identities. They are first of all comfortable with their existing identities, and second they cannot afford the cost of breaking commitments with the domestic constituencies and foreign allies (Hopf, 1998, p.174). On the other hand, constructivists are offering an explanation of identity and interest formation that has a bigger scope and a better understanding of the contemporary world.

Constructivists unlike realists take identity and interest formation as dependent variables. They say that states are producing and reproducing their identities through social practices. There are different internal and external factors responsible for an identity creation of a state. As Hopf states, "[i]identities perform three necessary functions in a society: they tell you and others who you are and they tell you who others are. In telling you who you are , identities strongly imply a particular set of interests or preferences with respect to choices of action in particular domains, and with respect to particular actor" (Hopf, 1998, p.175). Identity of a state becomes a fundamental factor in determining its interests: "[w]ithout interests, identities have no motivational force, without identities interests have no direction" (Wendt, 1999, p.231). It shows that states are having different identities and interests. A state can be a secular, leader of the third world, model of democracy and promoter of human rights. Their preferences depend on their commitments to a particular identity more than another. Pakistan prefers its Islamic identity to that of member of the South Asian Association Regional Conference (SAARC). It is always promoting through media and other propaganda means its identity as a Muslim country, because it serves well its interest on the Kashmir issue against a Hindu majority India.

In constructivists' world, every state has an image of the other state. The image of a state is dependent on its identity or the identities associated with it. Identities offer each state an understanding of other states, their nature, motives, interests, probable actions, attitude, and their role in any given political context. It depends on the decision makers to understand which identity of the other state is more important at any given time: "[...] another state may not be seen as another "state" at all, but instead as an ally, friend, enemy, co-guarantor, threat, a democracy and so on" (Hopf, 1998, p.194). Constructivists have brought back domestic politics and the cultural factor in international politics. It says that states' domestic structure, norms, culture, law and history play important roles in developing any state's

identity that would be reflected in their social behaviour. The production and re-production of these social practices reinforces the opinion held with regards to any state. It says that a change of identity and interest is very difficult, because it bears consequences and states cannot afford the shift in international structure.

Realists' obsession with anarchy as a key factor in international system has deprived their model from considering other important aspects of international politics. One of the major element that is absent in realists' analyses of international politics is interdependence. Interdependence is not necessarily the opposite of anarchy. It is also an aspect of international system. There is anarchy in international system, but states do not exist in isolation from each other. They are interacting with each others through various channels. The nature of these interactions depends on their national interests; it could be either cooperative or conflictual. When a state's behaviour is affected by the choices of another state, it creates a situation of strategic interdependence (Schelling, 1960, p.5). They enter into a relationship that could either be equal or asymmetric. Both states then have an interest in maintaining the relationship because a break-up would cost both of them (Baldwin, 1980). In such a world where interdependence replaces anarchy, it then changes the entire paradigm assumed by realists. It is not correct to say that power does not have any importance in strategic interdependence, but it becomes less important. It is one of the many important variables that are affecting the strategic relationships between states. Pakistan's and the US policy differences on domestic terrorism in the war on terror could be explained with the help of strategic interdependence theory.

Realists' explanation of world politics is based on worst case scenario. They always presume that the other state will cheat and get their lion share of the gains (Waltz, 1979, p.106 and Wendt, 1992, p.404). Firstly, it is very difficult to assess from the beginning whether an agreement between two parties are in the interest of either state A or state B. Secondly, it is not always true that states are always fighting on their mutual gains. There could be a situation of mutual gains, where every party gets something from the agreement and cooperation. Thirdly, it is not always the extreme course of action. Every process of cooperation is always two sided and they are long processes consisting of various actions so that states can realize at the beginning whether the intention of the other state is good or bad (Wendt, 1992, p.404). To make a long story short, cooperation, which realists assume is difficult and problematic to sustain, is a very complex process, and has several dynamics, which intrinsically promotes the process of positive

interactions. The phenomenon of relative gain is only valid in a zero-sum kind of situation, where both parties have already acquired negative identities and associate any gain on the part of the other as a threat to its survival. The growing trade relationship between great powers in the contemporary world illustrates the weakness in realists' model (Jervis, 1978).

The constructivists' concept of social anarchy explains better than the realists'. Realism cannot explain a situation where the identities of states are cooperative and their interests are harmonious. It shows that a relationship among states is dependent on their expectations and perception of each other. When states are having a positive image of each others as well as having good expectations they produce cooperative results. Perceptions and expectations are two broad concepts which result from the internal and external environments. They are dependant on the behaviour of the other state. Every state's choice of options is dependent on the behaviour of the other state (Milner, 1991, p.83 and Axelrod & Keohane, 1985, p.25). As all states are rational actors, therefore they will not precipitate a crisis until they have stable identities and similar interests. Every system produces its own structure. The process in a system is more important than the structure. When identities are stable and interests are similar, it creates a cooperative process (Hopf, 1998, p.185). This process when repeated time and again produces a structure. Realists have given a well-defined theory of a structure, where identities are conflictual, order of the system is anarchic and principle of action is self-help. States are more concerned with their securities and survival and only power turns out to be the best guarantee against a threat to security. In hindsight, this situation is not always true since states are having other identities as well.

Conclusion

Realism is an important theoretical framework. It has profoundly contributed in the growth of theories in the realm of international relations. Its basic assumptions and presumptions regarding international politics become the fundamental catalysts in provoking an intellectual academic debate regarding theories in international relations. Its proposed theoretical model is, no doubt, a well-defined paradigm for explaining the intricacies of international politics characterised by self-help, competitive politics, security dilemma, and arms race. It is very difficult to criticise realism and neorealism description of contemporary politics, but their claims and assumptions are not immune from objections. International politics is a much wider and complicated arena, could not be explained by a single approach. It is wrong to compare politics with economic. In economics, it is

possible to examine the relationship between market and firms by neutralising some variables, but in politics the relationship between state and society is a very complex subject. It is concluded from the paper that in politics context is more important than any other variable.

The basic thing that is missing in realism particularly in neorealism is matter of parsimoniousness. It cannot define a situation or an identity clearly. It is not precisely comprehensible that what anarchy means in international politics. Does it mean lack of order, absence of government, frequent use of force or nature of violence? These are important dimensions of international politics. Second, the division of factors at national and international level and then exclusively focusing the international system as the only variable responsible for behaviours of a state is simplification of international politics. For understanding behaviours of a state, it is essential to understand other important factors such as type of regime, culture of a country, norms of society, balance between institutions, socio-economic conditions, literacy rate, decision-making process, historical associations, public opinions and influence of lobbies. Constructivists version of anarchy better represents realities of international politics generally than realists one. Last but not the least thing is identities and interests of a state. It is not useful to assume the identities and interests of states as given and fixed. It is important to first have an identity of state and explanation of its particular interest before theorising its interaction with other state. When states identities and interests are taken as exogenous to the system, it explains international phenomenon only with respect to international structure. Therefore, it is concluded that neorealism is a normative theoretical paradigm.

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