

# Realism, Liberalism and the Possibilities of Peace

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## Realism, Liberalism and the Possibilities of Peace

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HAMZA JEHANGIR, FEB 19 2012

*"Only the dead have seen the end of war" – Plato*

*"We can understand that there will be war, and still strive for peace. We can do that — for that is the story of human progress; that is the hope of all the world; and at this moment of challenge, that must be our work here on Earth" – Barack Obama*

When Plato said that only the dead have seen the end of war, his remarks echoed the history of his time. War was all too often of an occurrence in ancient Greece, so much so that it might've been considered a necessity in some cases but a menace in others. From Plato's time to the contemporary period of political science and international relations theorizing, philosophers and theorists have been primarily concerned with discovering human nature, its role in social and political life as well as ways and means of giving meaning to human life. Peace has been central to this process of inquiry and thought which has led humanity to its present condition. Theories of peace and war have been central to this cognitive exercise. However, in the last three centuries, relations between nation-states have taken the central stage. Theories have come to light which illuminate our understanding of how nations interact, what causes them to go to war, what motivations might they have to establish peace and how these causes and motivations might be managed to reach a stage where peace is not "an armistice in a war" as Thucydides (431 BCE) stated but "a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice" as Baruch Spinoza (1670) considered it to be. Nonetheless, there are still considerable obstacles that remain in the pursuit of peace. Theorists have outlined them and literature has shed light on these hurdles whereas in some cases the pre-occupation with peace has also led towards a more hostile state of international affairs amongst nations as well as peoples.

To understand the prospects for peace in international relations, one must understand as to why war is such a reoccurring event in the history of nation-states and also the nature of international affairs and the determining factors which cause action, reaction, cooperation, hostility and peace between states in the international system. Establishment of nation states in the 16<sup>th</sup> century raised issues about whether human freedom and independence was central or the establishment of the state and its survival was the primary aim of political discourse. Two theories which take these arguments forward towards peace and resolution of conflicts in international theory are realism and liberalism. Over the last two centuries, realism and liberalism have accounted for much of what has taken place in the international arena and they continue to offer prescriptions of state behaviour and its possible effects on peace in-between nation states. This essay will elaborate on the possibilities for peace in the international system which have been put forth by realism and liberalism and their neo-variants in particular and then their critical analysis will be presented. The core features and assumptions of liberalism and realism will be outlined along with the possibilities for peace put forth by both the theories, followed up by critical discussion on of these prescriptions for peace and their possible implications for nation-state dominated international system. Firstly, liberalism's core concepts and foundations will be explained followed up by what liberal's put forth as their formulas to achieve peace in the world system. After that, realism's foundations will be brought to the forefront of the discussion and the theory's prescriptions for peace will be elaborated upon. Eventually, an analysis of suggestions for peace put forth by liberalism and realism will be scrutinized via a critical eye for contradictions and theoretical pitfalls that exist in both the theories.

Liberalism can be crudely defined as the "freedom for the individual" as it believes that human's are good natured

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beings. Liberalism's core ideals stress individualism, human rights, universality, freedom from authority, right to be treated equally under the protection of law and duty to respect and treat others as "ethical subjects" as well as freedom for social action. (Doyle, pp.206-207; Fukuyama, 1992, p. 42) Closely connected to these individual freedoms is the concept of representative government as well as the importance of the ownership of private property, right to free economic activity without state interference. (Doyle, 1983, p.208; Fukuyama, 1992, p.44) Liberal scholars such as Kant (1675) focused on harmony between people overseen by institutions such as judiciary and the representative form of the government where leaders exercise their authority with the consent of "free people existing in a political order". (Doyle, 1983, p.209; Kant, 1675) As the liberal state is represented through sovereign government of the people, its sovereignty and integrity is not subject to any external control such as an authority. (Doyle 1983, p.213)

One particular brand of liberalism, which is known as liberal institutionalism came into prominence after the First World War when the President of the United States of America, Woodrow Wilson laid down the foundation for the League of Nations. This liberal gesture by Woodrow Wilson in fact held its foundations in Kant's concept of Perpetual Peace which laid down three articles of peace, the first of which stressed that the constitution of the countries must safeguard the essential freedoms of their citizens. (Williams, 2006, p.25) The second article paid attention to the concept of pacific union and alliance between liberal states, Kant termed it as "a treaty of the nations among themselves" which "maintains itself, prevents wars, and steadily expands." (Doyle, 1983, p.226) The third article called on states of this Pacific Union to treat civilians and visitors from other countries with respect and dignity, this has hence forth been known as the cosmopolitan law. (Doyle, 1983, p. 227; Williams, 2006, p.25). Despite the fact that the League of Nations failed to deliver on promises of peace and the criticism that liberalism received from the likes of Carr (2001), it re-emerged a reformed doctrine in shape of Neo-liberalism/Liberal internationalism.

Neoliberals share some of their assumptions about the international system with neo-realists, as the newest brand of liberalism has come to be known deals mainly with institutions and their effect on state behaviour in the international system. At the heart of the liberal internationalist ideology is its belief that states can be made to cooperate with each other in economic terms even if they exist in a system where there is security competition. Such cooperation can translate into interdependence entailing mutual benefits for both the parties involved, something that reduces the risk of war and increases the prospects of peace amongst nation-states. (Keohane & Martin, 1995, p.45; Martin & Simmons, 1998, pp.732-735) Neo-liberals emphasize absolute gains for states as their insecurities can be resolved by the use of institutions which help decision making by providing valuable information about cooperation (McMillan, 1997, p.34, Keohane & Martin, 1995, p.45-46) A central proposition for liberalism and neo-liberalism in the post-cold war period lies in the democratic peace theory. The democratic peace theory takes its foundations from Kant's work and builds towards the conclusion that democracies rarely fight with each other. Liberals argue that democracies are inherently peaceful states which do not go to war easily and between two democracies, the occurrence of war has been a rather rare occurrence. It has been stated that, the assumption that democracies hardly ever go to war with each other is "as close as anything to an empirical law in international politics". (Levy, 1989, p.88)

The traditionalist version of the democratic peace theory builds on the belief that democracies are a by-product of progression of history influenced by dialectic discussion between societies influenced by Kant's thesis of asocial sociability, where people learn from their past mistakes and eventually come to cooperate with one another by leaving war and conflict behind. (Fukuyama, 1992, pp. 58-64) Other Liberal theorists such as Doyle (1983) argues that democracies are intrinsically peaceful as the people are indirectly ruling their own country through a representative government and they stand to suffer the consequences of war. Jervis (2002) has further clarified that in a democratic system of government, the power is not concentrated into the hands of a single autocratic leader and that there are several veto groups which prevent a hasty decision to go to war with other states. Furthermore, it has also been elaborated that democratic values such as respect for human rights, rule of law, accommodation of multiple interest groups inside the state as well as a belief in reconciliation, makes compromise with and between democracies unproblematic as the democratic states appear to be non-violent. (Jervis, 2002, p.4)

Additionally, it has also been contended that as leaders in a democracy derive their power from a public electorate, thus it is not only in the public's interest but also in the leader's own interest that he or she practices restraint in aggressive policy formulation which might lead towards conflict and war and consequently extinguish his/her

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chances of getting elected in the future. Moreover, White (1990) has argued that as democracies are transparent and accountable systems of government which work towards “free flow of information” and thus reduce the risk of being misunderstood and mistaken as exploiters by other states. (White, 1990, pp.227-235) One more reason as to why democracies rarely go to war with each other is attributed to their commitment to free economic activity which translates into free trade as it is a method of exchange and maintenance of communication correspondence between people from different states. (Fukuyama, 1992, p.212) Furthermore, theorists have also pointed out that the cost of war is usually high thus trade between countries presents a much more viable method of gaining wealth which promotes economic interdependence between democracies who are as responsible for security of the country as its economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Jervis, 2002, p.5)

Liberalism also argues that stability and relative peace can be achieved in the international system via a hegemon who sets the agenda for global institutions by playing an active part in international politics. (Nye, 1990, p.153; Doyle, 1983, p.223) This theory which is known as the hegemonic stability theory holds the view that a hegemon in the international system of states who has more economic and military power than other states can produce economic stability which is seen as a collective/public good in the international system and all the states benefit from it. The hegemon can do so without disregarding its own security interests because other countries benefit from the economic stability that is produced regardless of whether or not they contribute to it. (Webb & Krasner, 1989, p.184, Kindleberger, 1973, p.205) Nye (2004) further adds to this argument in the post-cold war world and emphasizes the nature of soft power that can be used by the United States of America, as the hegemon to control political environment and “getting others to want the same outcomes as it wants” which will decrease conflict of interest and promote stability in the world. (Nye, 2004, p.110) For the hegemonic stability theory to function the hegemon must, put lead trade liberalization, stay committed to an open market economy in recession and also encourage development in underdeveloped areas of the world. (Webb & Krasner, 1989, p.185)

In contrast to liberalism, its theoretical opponent realism does not attempt to paint an optimistic picture of international affairs; in fact realism’s main drive in international relations theory is to highlight the anarchic nature of international politics. Classical realists who are also known as traditional realists, held the view that international politics is an amoral exercise which is blighted by war and conflict because of human nature. Thomas Hobbes (1985) put forth the view that man operated in a state of nature where no law existed above him to prevent him from acting immorally or according to a specified set of rules. This state of nature shaped human nature which according to Hobbes was characterized by “competition, diffidence and glory” amongst humans. (Hobbes, 1985, p.185) For classical realists, the characteristics of human nature were put into practice in international politics where every state is functions to garner safety and as there is no power to keep states moral, they indulge in competition which often results in “war of all against all”. (Hobbes, 1985, p.185b) This realist thinking was given perspective in a much more formalized manner by Morgenthau (2006) who outlined six principles of political realism by stating that realism held it’s foundations in human nature, thus further cementing Hobbes hypothesis.

However modern realism which is known as neo-realism separates itself from the political rules which are situated in human nature and its characteristics and takes the view that the structure in which states exists in international relations is anarchic due to the absence of an overarching authority sovereign. (Waltz, 1979, p.103) Neo-realists thus explain that state’s serve their own interests in the international system by following a strict code of self help due to the absence of any authority above them. Moreover, as all states exist in a state of anarchy in the international arena of politics, they all pursue self interest and try to acquire power to secure themselves and ensure their survival in a system where no other state or authority will come to save them if they fail to do. (Waltz, 1979, p.104) Theorists such as Waltz argue that it is the structural effect of the system which shapes the way its residing units act. Waltz argues, “because some states may at any time use force, all states must be prepared to do so-or live at the mercy of their militarily more vigorous neighbours”, however this does not apply that there is constant warfare and conflict amongst states in the state of anarchy but as Mearsheimer (1994) explains that there is not constant war but “relentless security competition with the possibility of war looming in the background”. (Waltz, 1979, p.102; Mearsheimer, 1994, p.9) In such a situation, no one state can trust another therefore cooperation is limited and unstable when it occurs. States function on a zero-sum principle because they are present in a structure which compels them to seek security which results in competition between states and creates the possibility of state’s cheating their way out of an alliance to gain more power and security. (Mearsheimer, 1994, p.11; Waltz, 1979, p.106) Thus due to anarchy in the realm of

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international relations, realists view states as unitary rational actors and the principle movers in the game of international politics, states seek self-preservation at a minimum but if given the chance they also dominate other units in the structure to make themselves more secure which creates a security dilemma as all the states exist in a self-help system of anarchy, positive moves can be deciphered as offensive ones amongst states due to the lack of trust and heightened suspicion that exists between them. (Waltz, 2001, p.181-188; Mearsheimer, 1994, 11-14)

Possibilities for peace in the neo-realist perspective which is pragmatic in its view of international politics amidst anarchy and security competition are limited. Unlike their neo-liberal counterparts, neo-realists are pragmatic when it comes to discussions of peace in international politics. Regardless, there have been suggestions that pursuing realist policies can lead to a more stable world where there is lesser conflict. Despite the dark brooding world of neo-realism in which states can't trust one another and must always be prepared to gear up for conflict, Desch (2003) argues that states can act to serve moral purposes but only when their security interests are not being threatened and that scepticism which fills the realist view of the world produces more "just and humane policies". (Desch, 2003, p.417) Desch suggests that NATO involvement in the Balkans, driven by international cooperation and the moral compulsion to safeguard human rights to fight ethnic conflict between Serbs and Muslims in Bosnia had disastrous results for the Muslims. The international community asked the Bosnian Muslims to take refuge in U.N protected camps rather than descend into Muslim areas which eventually resulted in the deaths of thousands of Bosnian men and children when the camps themselves were overrun by Serbian militia in Srebrenica, ignoring the realist plea to abandon the policy of multi-ethnicity and form two separate states for muslims and Serbs each. (Desch, 2003, pp.421-422) Additionally, policies designed to avoid war and to look after the larger interest of the world community have backfired previously and resulted in casualties of genocidal proportions as suggested by Morgenthau (2006) when the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain attempted to put regional peace ahead of national security motivated by "good motives to preserve peace" as he decided to avoid conflict with Germany and adopted a policy of appeasement towards Adolf Hitler. (Morgenthau, 2006, p.6) Unfortunately as per the dictates of history, Nazi Germany went onto conquer France, Austria and Poland, amongst other states in the Second World War which followed.

Neo-realism also puts forth a theory for relative peace to be achieved by suggesting the concept of mutually assured destruction based on the fundamental principles of nuclear deterrence. A concept which helped maintain peace during the cold war between the Soviet Union and the United States of America courtesy of their possession of the nuclear weapon. (Sagan & Waltz, 2010, p.91) However nuclear deterrence never proposes to establish world peace, nonetheless it does work towards the maintenance of relative peace between two nuclear powers. As states are seen as maximizers of security, nuclear weapons are its last resort to seeking security in a world which offers none on its own. If a state feels sufficiently scared or threatened by the actions of another state in the system of anarchy, then it can pursue nuclear weapons as they are the ultimate deterrent and providers of security. (Sagan & Waltz, 2010, p.92) The concept of mutually assured destruction functions on the basis of fear of whole scale destruction between two nuclear weapon states. If one state launches its nuclear weapon, it can be assured that the other one will respond in kind via its second strike apparatus and thus ensuring destruction of both the states in question courtesy of the highly destructive powers of the weapon in question. (Sagan & Waltz, 2010, p.92b) Since, the Second World War, no two nuclear states have fought against each other and the example of India and Pakistan is seen as a primary one in this regard outside of the deterrence which existed between U.S and the Soviet Union. Despite fighting three large scale wars against each other since 1947 over the territorial dispute of Kashmir, Pakistan and India have not fought against one another since 1998 when both the countries achieved nuclear strike capabilities, something which goes onto further elaborate on the "peaceful" powers of nuclear weapons and the theory of mutually assured destruction.

The balance of power theory is yet another one which sheds light on the possibility of peace inside the neo-realist paradigm. The balance of power theory stipulates as to how states can achieve a balance of power against their rivals in the anarchic system of politics by internal and external efforts. Internal efforts include increasing economic and military strength whilst external factors include alliance formation. (Walt, 1979, p.118) The balance of power once achieved puts both the alliances/competitors on equal footing and thus from there on in, it is a game of preserving the balance of power to ensure survival and preservation for unit actors such as states. However for such equilibrium to be formed, states who are in an alliance must accept the restraints on them due to the framework that

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they are a part of to achieve mutual goals and interests. As Waltz states, “only if states recognize the rules of the game and play for the same limited stakes can the balance of power fulfil its functions for international stability and national independence”. (Waltz, 1979, p.120)

Whilst liberalism and realism both offer certain concrete proposals for peace in the international relations theory, both theories are not devoid of fault lines which actually exhibit some of the issues that lie within their arguments for peace. Taking the liberal democratic peace theory, which has been termed “almost as good as an empirical law in international relations”, has its weaknesses where it fails to address democratic states’ and their attitudes towards non democratic nations. (Levy, 1989, p.88b) Liberalist pre-occupation with a normative agenda such as human rights and their universal appeal has allowed liberals to disregard the sovereignty of countries where non democratic governments prevail. (Fukuyama, 1992, p.42b) Liberal’s such as Fukuyama have hurt the prospects of peace despite their belief in the democratic peace theory due to liberal democracy’s status as the end point of human civilization, which cannot be bettered. (Fukuyama, 1992, p.45) Fukuyama’s claim that Islam is “grave threat” to liberal democratic project as well as the belief that certain value systems are “hard to digest” have had a counterproductive impact on the maintenance of peace in other parts of the world where liberal democracies have taken it up on themselves to spread the universal idea of human freedom and dignity through coercive and in some cases outright militant means. (Fukuyama, 1992, pp.44, 235)

Realists have presented their own thesis with regard to the democratic peace theory and stated that the democratic peace theory’s assumptions such as democracies and their peaceful predispositions, decentralized distribution of power should hold when confronted with conflict of interests with non-liberal states. (Jervis, 2002, p.5b) However in a monadic perspective, where liberal states should act peacefully with other non-liberal states, democratic peace theory’s assumptions have turned up to be hollow, supporting the neo-realist view of security competition in the anarchic arena of international relations. Some realists such as Mearsheimer (1994) and Jervis (2002) have attributed democratic peace between democratic nations due to the security blanket provided by the United States of America, since the end of the second world war, nonetheless liberals have provided their own counter argument by pointing out the successful transfer of hegemony in international politics between liberal democracies such as Britain and the United States of America at the starting point of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a transfer of global power between both the states without any conflict and hostility between the two nations. (Doyle, 1983, p.223)

Pitfalls in the democratic peace theory are further highlighted by when liberal imperial interventions aimed at instilling democracy and restoring universal human rights in other countries around the world are taken into account. Doyle (1983) admits that liberalism has failed in third world countries whilst Fukuyama (1992) is quick to deflect the blame towards cultural dispositions in the places where liberal democracy has not yet flourished. (Doyle, 1983, pp.324-333, Fukuyama, 1992, pp.235-238) Additional critique has been presented by Mearsheimer (2011) as he outlined the problems in American project to bring democracy to third world countries in order to achieve an international peace as per the democratic peace principles. Taking the realist perspective, Mearsheimer argues that America’s liberal project has resulted in the superpower being at war for “two out of every three years since 1989”, therefore portraying that America’s liberal imperialist project to safeguard human rights and spread democracy has actually resulted in more global conflict by destroying the peace that it seeks to establish. (Mearsheimer, 2011, p.19) Downs & Mesquita (2004) have shed additional light on the problems of liberal imperialism and how social engineering in third world countries has been particularly unsuccessful for the United States of America. Regardless, liberals argue that the peace held together between democratic nations such as the European Union as well as the United States of America, Canada, Japan, Australia and India is directly attributable to the democratic peace theory, if not it’s monadic then certainly it’s dyadic effect, as peace still exists between two democracies

Similar problems emerge in the hegemonic stability theory which depends on a hegemon’s ability to lead the way in international relations, set the focal point for institutions and perform its duties as the benign or in some cases liberal hegemon. (Mearsheimer, 2011, p.19; Webb & Krasner, 1989, p.184b; Martin & Simmons, 1998, pp.732-735b) United States did take up its role as the liberal hegemon and used its soft power to spread liberal ideas around the world as Nye (1990) had urged it to do but this had negative impact on international stability as rather than encouraging peace it brought violence. In the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 when America came under attack from Al-Qaeda, the global hegemon turned imperial and adopted an aggressive stand towards those who did not

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agree with its liberal outlook of the world. This failed policy resulted in states such as Iran, Iraq and North Korea being termed as the axis of evil. America proceeded to invade Iraq in 2004 and due to the security threat North Korea declared itself a nuclear power whereas suspicions are rife that Iran is reaching nuclear capability as well. (Mearsheimer, 2011, p.30, Waltz, 2007, p.137) However convincing the realist arguments might appear to be, U.S's role as a global hegemon and the potential impact of the United State's withdrawing from its role in international institutions as a benign hegemon is captured by Kindleberger (1973) who attributes the great depression which lasted in the inter-war period to the failure of the United States of America to leading a more active international role and thus stabilize the international system in times of economic crisis.

On the economic interdependence principle, which the liberals claim increases cooperation in international relations by using institutions, theorists have outlined that states seldom trust one another in order to participate in an exchange of absolute gains because of the trust deficit which exists between one state and another due to the structure of anarchy. It has also been argued that the international institutions such as the United Nations and the WTO are just representations of the distributions of power that exist in today's world due to America's control over them and their function. (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 9-14) Neoliberals such as Keohane & Martin (1995) have accepted the fact that institutions will not be significant if a conflict of interest exists between two states at the international level as such a conflict cannot possibly be resolved by institutions alone due to the pursuit of interests by each state. However they do outlined that institutions can provide a mechanism through which states can cooperate and thus increase the possibilities of peace in international relations via solving the information dilemma between two states, which might help them cooperate and prefer long term gains over short term gains that they might be able to gain by "cheating". (Keohane & Martin, 1995, pp. 43-45)

On the other hand, realist theories which aim to provide relative peace have also appeared to be short of what their claims imply. Sagan contends the mutually assured destruction theory and argues that nuclear weapons in the post-cold war world have developed an unstable side to them with the emergence of non-state actors such as terrorists groups. Whilst realist interpretations of states as rationalist actors retains its value, such a luxury cannot be extended to terrorist groups who function on ideas of mass murder based on religious belief and thus stand to benefit from nuclear proliferation especially towards states who have a history of supporting such groups. (Sagan & Waltz, 2010, p.88) The realist reply contends that decision makers choosing to make use of nuclear weapons remain rational due to its power to cause mass destruction but they overlook the fact that certain states such as Iran and Syria have been continuously supporting terrorist groups and using such non-state actors to pursue their geo-political interests and therefore it is unwise to allow proliferation of nuclear weapons to such states. (Sagan & Waltz, 2010, p.89) Sagan (2010) also puts forth the argument that nuclear deterrence will still hold in a world where nuclear weapons have been dismantled because every state will know that if it can revert back its commitments to abandon nuclear weapons, other can do so as well, providing nations incentives to maintain a nuclear weapons free world. There is also the issue of a state over-estimating the amount of nuclear cover it can operate under. Waltz' deterrence argument holds true but nuclear weapons might actually result in overtly aggressive state behaviour on a regional as well as a global scale because hiding behind the curtain of deterrence, states can undertake violent ventures as illustrated by Pakistan's skirmish with India in 1999 was a result of Pakistani general's cover attempt to retake the territory of Kashmir via military action under nuclear cover. (Sagan & Waltz, 2010, pp.90-94) Realist response to the nuclear cover argument remains absent however Desch (2003) argues that United States can prevent nuclear weapons from falling into the wrong hands by engaging countries such as Pakistan and India and developing secure command and control protocol for the weapons in question.

Realist and liberal claims and theories for peace remain littered with loopholes and theoretical pitfalls which goes onto show the weak prospects for peace that exist in international relations. Despite strong claims by both sides backed up by empirical and theoretical arguments, both liberalism and realism are found lacking in their prospects for peace. Whilst realism does not make a claim to be a theory of peace, liberalism's claim towards peace between democratic nations and cooperation through economic interdependence remains largely relevant. Nonetheless, liberal interventions in other parts of the world still pose a threat to peace in both relative and absolute terms, something that is counterproductive for a theory which actually takes an optimistic and reformist outlook on the subject of international relations.

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Conversely, realism's claims of mutually assured destruction suffers imbalances when empirical evidence such as Pakistan's Kargil conflict with India is used to highlight the potential for nuclear blackmail under nuclear cover and the overestimation of deterrence. On the other hand, claims that realist policies actually lead to a more humane world should not divert attention away from the fact that realists still claim that security competition can lead towards war which is often the case in international politics. It has been argued that both realism and liberalism provide insufficient accounts and possibilities of peace in the international system. Liberalism with its focus on universalism and harmony makes for an unstable world; whereas realism and its pessimism does not say much about prospects for peace.

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