

Why are Regimes and Regime Theory Accepted by Realists and Liberals?

Written by Stoyan Stoyanov

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Regimes gained popularity during the 20th century as states began increasingly to get involved in international agreements and rules. Globalization has aided interaction in the international realm and greatly contributed to their establishment and mass popularity. Regimes have created a framework within which states and NGO's follow the same rules and norms, which in turn facilitate interstate relations. There are different definitions of the term regime, but the one formulated by Stephen Krasner in the 1980's has prevailed as standard. He defines them as "sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations" (Little, 2001, pp. 373-374). Regimes and the scholars studying them, in particular, have been strongly influenced by two mainstream theories: realism and liberalism.

The political philosophy of realism traces back its origins to the writings of the Greek philosopher Thucydides, who documented the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta (Behraves, 2010, p. 3). Though developed 25 centuries ago, realism still offers clear explanations, regarding states and the decisions that propel them to conduct certain state policies. In its core beliefs, this particular school of thought views the state as the main actor, whose objective is to survive in the anarchic international realm. Realist scholars also put great emphasis on self-help as they see the state operating in an anarchic system with no higher form of authority to regulate inter-state relations (Dunne & Schmidt, 2001, pp. 162-164). The other philosophy that proved very influential in shaping regime theory is liberalism. It was established in the aftermath of the collapse of the feudal system in Europe, which was quickly substituted by a market orientated capitalist system. Liberalism managed to fill the power vacuum that was created at the time, with a growing middle class that had shared its aspirations and lacked representation. Among its central ideas are equal rights, individual freedom, justice and tolerance. Liberalism quickly managed to establish itself as a preferred philosophy that best reflects the needs and preferences of the West (Dunne, Liberalism, 2001, p. 190). In his essay the "End of History" Francis Fukuyama argues that the end of the Cold War, symbolized by the collapse of the Soviet Union, marks an "end point in mankind's ideological evolution". Fukuyama views liberal democracy as the theory that presents the best form of government reflecting the needs of the people (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 2).

Liberalism and realism have evolved through the centuries under the influence of globalization and societal changes. Different branches of both theories have emerged, but the core ideas and beliefs of the classical versions have remained intact. Both schools of thought have expanded their horizons to take into consideration regimes and their impact on international relations. Nevertheless, their places have been taken by neo-realism and liberal institutionalism which give a clear explanation of regimes. They agree on some aspects concerning the former and disagree in relation to each other's viewpoints. This contrast is the result of the strong influence both political philosophies have on the theory and also their individual interpretation of events. This essay will critically discuss the common assumptions the two theories share and where they differ in their views regarding regimes.

Both theories agree that states are rational actors despite operating in an anarchic system. As such, liberal institutionalists encourage cooperation between states with mutual interests which would result in absolute gains for all participants. Neo-realists on the other hand differ in their views. They believe that one state should have a comparative advantage in comparison to another. Nevertheless that does not stop them from cooperating as long as they prevent each other from gaining more power and resources (Lamy, 2001, pp. 215-216). An example of those

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views is the dramatically improved relations between the US and the Russian Federation in the field of arms control. Agreements like the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) have established greater limitations on nuclear arsenals. The establishment of satellite surveillance and onsite inspections has insured that both sides are adhering to regulations and norms determined by the treaty (Operations, 2005, pp. 1-3).

The two mainstream political approaches also share the same view with regard to the international system. They both see it as being in a state of anarchy with no higher authority to supervise and enforce any regulations on states or other actors. According to both theories, the state of anarchy in the international system makes cooperation more difficult and encourages states to embrace self-help policies (Lamy, 2001, pp. 205-220). This is where the two schools of thought differ in their viewpoint regarding regimes. Liberal institutionalists see them as means to collaborate and facilitate in international relations. Ernst Haas argues that they are established to solve problems, which can be overcome only through collaboration (Haas, 1990, p. 2). Oran Young maintains the viewpoint that international regimes manage to cooperate and surmount their problems through strict norms and rules (Young, 1989, p. 15). Liberal institutionalists emphasize on the usefulness of the latter and view them as a way to cope with problems such as pollution, overfishing, and trade barriers brought on by anarchy (Little, 2001, p. 377). The liberal viewpoint emphasizes on the necessity of cooperation and trust. It considers the Prisoner's Dilemma game theory as being capable of explaining the visibly irrational behavior of states in the anarchic world. Liberalism explains the presence, or lack of cooperation for that matter, in the international realm. It depicts a situation with three different scenarios and their potential consequences. In the first scenario countries A and B decide it's in their mutual benefit to cooperate and adopt, for instance, a fishing quota. In the second scenario, if either country A or B decides not to abide by the fishing quota, this will increase the cheating country's revenue at the expense of the other. In the third scenario, both states refuse to cooperate and this results in a suboptimal outcome. Game theory argues that states acknowledge the benefits of cooperating but cannot afford to be cheated (Inghsm, 2004, pp. 64-65).

On the other hand, realists regard regimes as tools that enable states to coordinate. The only problem that faces states is the lack of communication, which results in unrealized goals. Communication proves vital in today's highly globalized world. Realists use the concept of the Battle of the Sexes to explain how they deal with the challenges brought by globalization. In its essence, the Battles of the Sexes describe situations of miscommunication due to misunderstandings and lack of common language. Having transformed this example to suit international relations, one can come up with numerous instances where treaties, and the presence of effective communication, have aided states in reaching certain outcomes. For example, international regimes like the International Civil Aviation Organization, which was established with the sole purpose of standardizing air travel and facilitating communications, help countries across the world build a global transportation network. This particular agreement has led to the establishment of rules under which all international pilots must be able to speak English (Little, 2001, pp. 381-382). Imagine a situation in which an aircraft, performing an international flight, cannot reach the air traffic tower due to lack of common language for communication. Most certainly, the result would be a disaster. However, thanks to the rules and norms set up by the International Civil Aviation Organization, pilots and air traffic controllers are expected to communicate in an international language to avert disasters and to ensure successful conduct of business.

Another point on which both theories agree is that states are responsible for establishing and maintaining regimes. However they have their own philosophical views on what motivates states. Neo-realists regard power as a key feature in establishing and maintaining treaties. Waltz and Morgenthau see power as a key factor in dealing with the hostility in the international realm (Pashakhanlou, 2009, p. 2). They accept the existence and necessity of the former and recognize their usefulness as an instrument in the hands of states. They believe that states create and support treaties as long as they serve their agendas and do not give other states any relative gains or advantages (Lamy, 2001, pp. 216-217). In the book "Regime Theory and International Relations" Robert Keohane argues that in order to see whether the rules established by international regimes are followed, states should be observed when it's inconvenient for them to comply with the given rules and regulations (Keohane, 1993, pp. 32-33).

An example of this is North Korea's withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. As a reason for withdrawing, that every state is obliged to give, North Korea stated that it perceives the US as a threat for its national security. This was brought on by America's hostile policy towards the Asian state involving threats such as a

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blockade or a military intervention. Liberal institutionalists would condemn North Korea's actions which would have a negative result on absolute gains and might even result in the suspension of bilateral agreements. From a neo-realist perspective, North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT could be justified on account of the fact that it did not serve its national interests anymore and because it had to restore the balance of power in the region (Kirgis, 2003). This situation is best explained by the Security dilemma game theory, which illustrates the reasoning that leads to this type of situations and their outcomes. The theory elucidates that if state A perceives state B as stronger it will start rearming itself. State B will interpret that as a threat to its own security and will start to acquire arms as well. This will reassure state A that its initial assumption about state B is correct and it will continue its initial efforts. Jervis defines the theory as a scenario in which "the means by which a state tries to increase its security decreases the security of others" (Glaser, 1997, pp. 5-6).

Liberal Institutionalists agree with the neorealist viewpoint that states are responsible for the establishment and maintenance of regimes. They explain that through the development of two different approaches. In the first approach, liberal institutionalists argue that a hegemon operating in the market system could financially afford to promote public goods. This statement is best explained through the Hegemonic Stability theory which gives a clear insight into that. Susan Strange explains the notion of the theory in her article "Strange Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony" utilizing two concepts: "strong" and "weak". The "strong" version argues that the hegemon will promote stability in the world society and economy. The "weak" version on the other hand argues that the hegemon is adequate but not necessary to preserve and promote order (Strange, The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony, 1987, pp. 5-6).

An example of the "strong" version of the theory is the function that the United Kingdom fulfilled before the First World War and that fulfilled by the US after the Second World War (Strange, The Persistent Myth of Lost Hegemony, 1987, pp. 7-8). After the end of the Cold War the US has increasingly demonstrated a more hegemonic behavior. The Rome Statute could be regarded as an example of that. On the conference regarding the Rome Statute in 1998, the US and seven other countries voted against the establishment of the Statute of Rome which in turn would create the International Criminal Court (ICC). It would have a treaty based jurisdiction and could prosecute people for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. One of the main objectives the US had was that it would have to give the ICC authority to prosecute its nationals, emphasizing on military personnel – without a case by case approval by the government. This would be of great inconvenience for the United States as it has tens of thousands of soldiers engaged in military operations around the world. Another reason for objecting is that the ICC could judge the legality of military strikes under international law. It can also prosecute US nationals either military or civilian that ordered or carry out military strikes. This way America's actions would be judged by the ICC and not the UN Security Council where the United States has the power of veto (Leight, 2001, pp. 2-9). From the realist viewpoint by not participating in the ICC the US is not giving up any of its sovereignty and preserving the immunity of its military personnel in foreign countries. Liberal institutionalists would dispute that statement and argue that the actions taken by the former could result in its isolation and its deprivation of the absolute gain of equality. Eventually the US signed the Rome Statute and in May 2002 "unsigned" it during the Bush Administration (Shah, 2005).

Another example that depicts the growing hegemonic behavior displayed by the US is its withdrawal on the 29th of March 2001 from the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. This action was justified by the Bush Administration as a consequence of an initially flawed treaty, which in its core was established through political compromises, thus making it inefficient. In response to it, the Bush administration formed its own working group to tackle the global climate changes more efficiently. The initiative was based on free market ideas which made the solution both sustainable and innovative (Section, 2001, pp. 1-2). Realists would argue that the position taken by the US is justified, because by participating in the Kyoto Protocol it would have to give up a part of its sovereignty in order to reach a decision. By taking part it also loses the relative gain that its industries have over their counterparts in other countries. Liberal institutionalists on the other hand would criticize America's withdrawal from the treaty, because they believe this action can disturb the absolute gains all involved profit from.

The second approach explored by liberal institutionalists critically examines the Prisoner Dilemma theory. It states that the theory exaggerates the predicament around achieving cooperation in the anarchic realm. Another critique is that it presumes that the situation will take place only once, whereas, it would be a reoccurring event. Because of that

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liberal institutionalists argue it is worth taking a risk and cooperating in an area of mutual interest. Liberal Institutionalists put great emphasis on factors that could improve bilateral interaction and trust building (Little, 2001, pp. 379-381).

International regimes have proved very popular but also extremely controversial. In her article "Cave! Hic Dragones: a critique of regime analysis" Susan Strange critically discusses their impact on the global arena. She argues that the idea around the loss of hegemonic status by the US is misleading. According to her, this is a result of changes in America's global strategy and its future position in it. An outcome of that change was the increasing establishment of international treaties most noticeably since the 1970s in fields like trade, the military sector, and the economic sectors. This gave America the ability to create a global empire without conducting any territorial expansion. Another point made by Strange is that the term "regime" has a wide range of meanings and applications. This prevents it from having instant recognition and widespread significance. Furthermore she acknowledges that treaties in large part are for those who can afford them and not necessarily for those who need them. An example of that is the establishment in 1980 of an agreement by INMARSAT for the creation of the Future Global Maritime Distress and Safety System. It operates by utilizing a satellite to locate a ship when a distress call is made and automatically sends that distress signal to any vessel in that area. For the large part, only big ships and tankers could afford the installation of that system on their ships. In comparison, due to the lack of effective regimes that could solve the problem of famine that same year millions died due to lack of nutrition (Strange, Cave! Hic Dragones: A Critique of Regime Analysis, 1982, pp. 480-492).

In conclusion, both neo-realists and liberal institutionalists support regimes mainly because the latter reflects their ideological views and protects the interests of the former on the global arena. The two theories regard international agreements as tools that help states or NGO's to accomplish their goals. Both ideologies support them even though they have different views on the matter. The attitudes both schools of thought manifest on the subject can be best compared to a coin. On one side, neo-realists assume that regimes should support states and defend their interests. On the flipside of the coin, liberal institutionalists view the former as a tool that facilitates cooperation and ensures absolute gains. However, both sides of the coin present the public with a comprehensive, though controversial at times, image of regimes and their place on the international political stage.

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