

A Review of Realism's Contributions to IR

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HANNAH JAMES, APR 26 2013

Can Realism Help Us to Understand Current Events in International Relations? Answer with Reference to at Least Two Contemporary Examples.

“Realism is widely regarded as the most influential theoretical tradition in International relations” (Burchill, 2001: 70). It is based on the view that states are made up of individuals who are self-interested and power seeking. Each state therefore acts in a unitary way, pursuing its own national interest (Mingst, 2004: 65). “There is no centralized authority... that stands above states” (Dunne et al., 2010: 79), therefore the international system is characterised by anarchy and insecurity. This essay will argue that realism and its main principles can be useful in understanding current events in international relations. Iran holds the potential to alter the balance of power in the international system if it acquires nuclear weapons. This can be understood, using realist principles, as Iran pursuing its own self-interest. Realism can also shed light on the lack of intervention in the Syrian uprising – a revolution sparked by the on-going phenomena of the Arab Spring. These two examples will be used throughout this essay, to highlight the usefulness of realist theory in understanding and interpreting international relations.

Since 2002 the United States has been on a collision course with Iran over the secrecy surrounding the latter’s nuclear program, as Iran has refused to give UN inspectors access to all of its nuclear sites (El-Khawas, 2011). This has led many countries to question Iran’s true intentions. President Barack Obama views Iran’s nuclear program as a threat to Israeli and US national security and wishes the program to be shut down, but President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has said his country will not relinquish its right to enrich uranium, which he asserts is strictly for peaceful purposes (El-Khawas, 2011).

This is a classic example of a country pursuing its own national interests – a key principle of realist theory. States will try to maximize their military power to ensure their survival; pursuing nuclear weapons is just one example of how this may be achieved (Bahgat, 2011). According to Kenneth Waltz, a member of the realist school of thought, “If states fail to emulate the policies of their successful neighbours they will fall by the wayside” (Sheehan, 1996). Iran is therefore emulating the United States, which has a huge nuclear stockpile, to ensure its own survival in the self-help world. “A key motive for a state to pursue military nuclear capability is its adversary’s acquisition of such capability” (Bahgat, 2011), as states are constantly focusing on gains, relative to other countries. No country wishes to be left at a disadvantage in the anarchic international system. The US too is acting in its own interests, for if it can prevent Iran from acquiring weapons, its survival will be better ensured.

Liberals on the other hand would turn to institutions such as the United Nations to prevent such a problem as a nuclear arms race. In the same vein, neo-liberals argue that “institutions can provide a framework for co-operation that can help to overcome the dangers of security competition between states” (Baylis, 2011: 237). However realists would argue that the United Nations is in no position to prevent Iran from acquiring weapons, as UN inspectors have already been denied access to some nuclear sites in Iran. Realists claim that this is because states have absolute sovereignty. “There is no actor above the state that can compel it to act in certain ways” (Baylis, 2011: 4). Thus Liberalism can provide only a limited understanding of current events in Iran, due to its emphasis on international institutions, which have very little power in this case. Liberals have however criticised those who favour a purely realist view, as all it can reveal is a naked struggle for power with no room for permanent cooperation (Burchill, 2001: 76).

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On the 9th November 2012 Iranian warplanes opened fire on US surveillance drones in the Persian Gulf. This brought home how easily tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear aims could lead to a military clash. Some Israeli leaders would like to see Washington drawn into conflict so that US forces can strike a crippling blow to Iran's nuclear facilities (Borger, 2012). This is an illustration of how temporary alliances between countries can aid the balance of power. Israel is clearly threatened by Iran's possession of nuclear technology, but an informal alliance with America can help to neutralise the threat Iran poses. "Alliances provide states...with a capacity for flexibility and rapid reaction to threats which they cannot find simply by looking to their own resources," (Sheehan, 1996: 55).

It is however not inevitable that Iran will arm itself. Nor is a military strike by Israel or the US the only alternative, and such assumptions could lead to further unnecessary conflict in the Middle East (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Survival is the main goal of each state in realist theory, and all other aims must take a backseat, (Dunne et al., 2010: 80). Consequently, Iran will not kindle further conflict unless it can be sure of its own survival, otherwise the country would be behaving as an irrational actor, jeopardizing its own existence in the international system. Therefore realism can explain Iran's motives behind developing nuclear technology as well as its reluctance to use it in conflict.

Realism can also be used to interpret the events of the Syrian uprising and the desire for—or lack of—intervention by neighbouring states. "The ruling Baath party has dominated Syrian politics for nearly 50 years. President Bashar al-Assad...has moved slowly to open up the economy, but his administration does not tolerate any dissent." (BBC News, 2011). "The conflict that has claimed an estimated 35,000 lives...erupted in March 2011" (Watt, 2012), and was influenced by the wider trend known as the Arab Spring, which has affected countries such as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen over the past two years.

In April 2011 to prevent the uprising, the Syrian army was sent to open fire on civilians and on average 100 to 150 people now die every day as part of the on-going conflict (Watt, 2012). Despite the atrocities being committed in Syria – particularly against civilians – Russia and China have used their power at the UN Security Council numerous times to veto plans for sanctions to be imposed on the Assad regime.

Liberals argue that human beings are all born with certain fundamental rights and protections that should be upheld through foreign policy (Burchill, 2001: 70), however the move by Russia and China to veto plans to challenge Assad's regime, opposes this principle. Liberal institutionalists believe that institutions such as the UN are important actors in international relations; however it is clear from this example that the UN does not have the power to challenge these two superpowers. From a realist perspective therefore, if the Russia and China are exercising their power to veto sanctions, it must be in their national interests to do so.

The US seems eager to impose sanctions on the regime in Syria however according to realist theory this is nothing to do with universal moral standards or human rights. Carr argues:

"International peace becomes a vested interest of predominant powers... nothing more than an attempt to enshrine an existing economic and political order which is favourable to ruling classes within dominant states." (Burchill, 2001: 74)

The US can be seen to be protecting its own dominant position. Russia too could be seen to be vetoing policies simply to challenge America and prevent it from becoming an overall hegemon in the international system; in a way that is reminiscent of the Cold War (Connolly, 2012). More specifically however, Syria provides a path to transport weapons from Iran to Lebanon and a safe haven for the leaders of the organisation Hezbollah (Rogan 2011).

Hezbollah is banned as a terrorist organisation in America and if Assad's regime collapses Hezbollah could also lose a valuable ally in Syria, which would serve America's interests. On 13th October 2007 an Israeli air attack was directed against a partially constructed nuclear reactor in Syria (Sanger, 2007). Syria was clearly developing nuclear technology and as the country is an ally to Iran, Syria could also be seen as a threat to America. If a new regime were to be enforced however, this alliance could potentially become weaker. For these reasons America is strongly pushing for UN intervention to impose a new regime that will not harbour terrorism and one that is not in opposition to America and its national interest. The BBC's Steve Rosenberg claims that "Moscow is...reluctant to endorse regime

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change... although this could change if it decides its own economic and geopolitical interests are better served by Mr Assad going" (BBC News, 2012). This is an example of how realist theory can be used to understand current events in international relations.

Employing realist principles such as the balance of power, sovereignty and self-interest can provide an understanding of the actions of nations in current affairs, which initially may seem unreasonable or irrational. For instance, realism can explain Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology, America's objections to it and how this too indirectly impacts Israel's national interest. Realist theory can also explain America's desire for intervention in the Syrian uprising and Russia's objections to it. All nations can be seen to be doggedly pursuing their own national interests rather than following liberalist principles such as the 'harmony of interests'. Countries will only intervene in international affairs if it serves their interests without threatening their survival.

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