

How Realistic is Realism?

Written by James Whitcomb Riley

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JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY, MAR 2 2008

Realism is extremely realistic as a theoretical framework for analyzing conflict in the contemporary international system. Realism emphasizes the persistent role of sovereign territorial nation-states in international relations, although, it does not account for the emergence of non-state actors and violent terrorists organizations. Realism assumes that states practice 'self-help' to ensure the state's 'survival' by means of power, which is measured in terms of military capabilities, however, it does not acknowledge international institutions that are supposed to foster economic cooperation and reduce the need for power maximization. Realism's central theme of 'the balance of power' has been undermined in the post-Cold War, and more importantly, in the post 9/11 eras. However, Realism remains pertinent to international relations theory. Realism offers international relations theorists a pragmatic, and applicable framework in order to analyze violent conflict and security issues within the contemporary international system.

Realism's core concepts interpret power, the state, state behavior, and the nature of the international system. Realists define 'power' in terms of military capabilities possessed by the state; states will wish to maximize their 'power' relative to other states. Realism is 'state-centric' because realists view sovereign nation-states as the only legitimate monopolist over the use of force, which focuses solely on state behavior. Realism's proposes the ideas of 'self-help' and 'survival', which imply that states must fend for themselves and cannot rely on others for protection and that statesmen seek to preserve the existence of the state. Realists believe states strive to exist within a system characterized by 'anarchy', which means there is no 'overarching central authority' presiding over international politics. Realism predicts that 'anarchy' fosters hostile conditions in which states must inevitably merge into alliances with or against each other in order to balance asymmetrical power. This key concept is known as the 'balance of power' and is fundamental to Realism as a theory. These elements of Realism are at the root of its logic and are key to understanding realist's theory.

Realism presumes sovereign nation-states are key actors with a legitimate monopoly over the use of force in the international system, yet neglects the recent impacts caused by non-state actors (NSA) in the international system. Jack Synder claims. 'It is harder for the normally state-centric realists to explain why the world's only superpower announced a war against al Qaeda, a nonstate terrorist organization.' Terrorist organizations like al Qaeda have used violent terrorist attacks against civilian populations to affect state behavior and have forced states to acknowledge their existence. Terrorist networks create a political conundrum for realist theorists. Realism's emphasis on states alone may seem to have become irrelevant to international relations (IR) in analyzing the contemporary international system.

However, realists continue to emphasize the importance of the centralized power of territorial nations and argue that the focus on states persists to be a permanent feature in IR theory. Powerful states like the United States (US) continue to pressure other states to address terrorism within their borders and promise states that do not will face the consequences of state action and intervention. In reference to US foreign policy G. John Ikenberry writes, 'Moreover, countries that harbor terrorists, either by consent or because they are unable to enforce their laws within their territory, effectively forfeit their rights to sovereignty.' Therefore, it is states that continue to respond to terrorist's attacks with the authoritative use of military force and not non-governmental organizations; states that lack the power to deal with the perils of terrorism within their own borders will risk being invaded by more powerful states. Realism fails to account for the implications of NSA's, however; it does elucidate the reaction of states to terrorism and to

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states that sponsor terrorists.

Realism rejects the significance of international institutions like the United Nations (UN), which since 1945 has been meant to establish international norms, cooperation, and collective security. International institutions are supposed to reduce the likelihood for states to pursue aggressive policy that result in inter-state conflict, which validates their usefulness. Robert Keohane offers his criticisms:

“I propose to show, on the basis of their own assumptions, that the characteristic pessimism of realism does not necessarily follow. I seek to demonstrate that realist assumptions about world politics are consistent with the formation of institutionalized arrangements...which promote cooperation.”

First, Keohane proposes that realist thoughts are contradictory; secondly, he presumes that cooperation is in state's interests, therefore, rational state leaders pursuing their self-interests will acknowledge the benefits of these institutions, which realists should logically accept. The implications of Realism's ideas of 'self-help' and 'survival' may be less relevant with the debatable successes of international institutions.

Although, Realism's pessimism maintains that states, as self-interested entities cannot rely upon international institutions for the security of the state, therefore, it is necessary for states to retain the ability to act independently against threats. Realism proposes state's survival can only be realized through the security provided by a state's own military defense; unilateral offensive military strikes are not ruled out as a type of 'self-help' to reach state's national interests, which is ultimately 'survival'. An example of this is the recent US led invasion of Iraq. The US claimed Saddam Hussein obtained weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and was close to achieving nuclear capabilities, which was believed to be a national security threat to the US, hence, the US used its military superiority to topple Saddam's regime. In contrast, the inability of Iraq's military to forcefully fend off and withstand US forces proves that power in terms of military strength is still crucial to a state's survival. In 1991, the UN and the international community came to the aid of Kuwait, which had been invaded by Iraq, yet in 2003 the US unilaterally invaded Iraq and the UN was unable to stop the invasion.

Realism's main concept of 'the balance of power' has not been realized in the traditional sense since the end of the Cold War, which faces realists with the conundrum as to why unchallenged US hegemony dominates the contemporary international system. The US is disproportionately more powerful than most nations in the world, but as Snyder states, 'Yet no combination of states or other powers can challenge the United States militarily, and no balancing coalition seems imminent.' If this holds true the very backbone of Realism's theoretical contentions are snapped and left paralyzed. In light of these arguments it would seem that the difficulties Realism faces renders it obsolete as an IR theory.

In spite of this, Realists have argued that 'balance of power' political considerations are still relevant and continued to be applied in the contemporary international system. Realism offers two arguments in its defense. First, Realism predicts nations seeking to balance against the preponderance of another state may develop nuclear capabilities to secure their own survival. Recently North Korea has claimed that it holds nuclear weapons, which may signal to other nations not to consider an attack against their sovereignty. Robert Jervis articulates, 'Whatever these weapons can do, they can deter all-out invasion, thus rendering them attractive to any state that fears it might be in the Pentagon's gun sights.' Realism's emphasis on military power in this context is practical and realistic. Secondly, Realists argue the inability or reluctance of states to balance against US hegemony is because states are either not in the position to balance or do not see the value of balancing. Realism anticipates 'band-wagoning', which means states align themselves with the hegemon. Randall L. Schweller explains, 'The other states do not balance against the hegemon because they are too weak (individually or collectively) and, more importantly they perceive their well-being to be inextricably tied up with the well-being of the hegemon.' State behavior that deviates from Realism's logic does not disprove realist's theory. Realism's prediction of 'balance of power' may still be significant in analyzing the actions or inactions of state actors.

In conclusion, Realism remains a realistic theoretical analysis of the contemporary international system. Regardless of the violence caused by terrorist organizations Realism predicts state leaders will continue to view states as the key legitimate actors within the international system. States will continue to bolster their power in terms of military

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capabilities to secure the survival of the state. Realism's 'balance of power' remains to be a significant feature of international relations. Realism's pragmatic approach to analyzing the contemporary international system allows theorists to anticipate the incidence of war and foreign policy embraced by state actors pursuing relative power advantages.

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