

# Neo-realism and Structural Liberalism: Can Anarchy Really Be Transcended?

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VICTORIA FAJEMILEHIN, JUL 20 2015

### **INTRODUCTION**

Reiterative happenings in the world today show that states' security challenges have moved beyond border infiltration, country espionage and military attacks to twenty-first century cyber bullying, digital oppression, telecoms hacking and terrorism. In this wise, trends validate the neorealists' argument that states are power-driven and world politics falls short of unrelieved chaos (Waltz, 1979). With force employed as primary resort rather than *ultima ratio* in international politics, how does the structural liberal argument of overcoming anarchy apply?

Anarchy can be defined as the absence of an overarching central government in the world (Inis, 1971). According to Deudney and Ikenberry (1999: 180), the challenges of the anarchical world order include "economic rivalry, security dilemmas, arms races, hyper-nationalism, balancing alliances, and ultimately the threat of war". Similarly, Ikenberry (2003) affirms that the immediate implication of anarchy is a deep sense of insecurity among states. While neorealists agree that these consequences are justifiably prevalent in inter-state interactions, structural liberals argue that these effects can be effectively managed.

With special focus on security, I critically examine each school's argument and comparatively analyse their merits, considerations as well as oversights in four sections. The first section focuses on competition, survival and institutions; the second explores the theme of balancing, co-binding and hierarchy. The third section examines the relationship between increased economic capability and military might and the fourth section analyses hyper-nationalism and hegemony. After careful scrutiny of both views, I conform to the most persuasive argument: the structural liberal argument that, in light of current global dynamics, anarchy can be transcended, at least, to an extent.

### **STATES, SECURITY AND ANARCHY**

Based on Machiavelli's theory of *Realpolitik* (Machiavelli, 1995), neorealism presents the international sphere as one naturally devoid of harmony. Hence, the argument that states are constantly manoeuvring, bargaining, or fighting for survival (Waltz, 1979). Structural liberals, on the other hand, state that cooperation, though desirable, is not automatic (Oye, 1985) but its attainability, subject to states' pursuance of absolute gains and institutions' management of world affairs (Deudney, 1996). Still, realists maintain that international politics is a struggle for power (Morgenthau, 1966, p.25), one where alliances are short-lived (Snyder, 2004) and "the state of nature is a state of war" (Waltz, 1979, p.102). In all, the end result of this predicted zero sum game bears semblance to the Hobbesian world of anarchy: insecure, brutal and bloody (Hobbes, 1651).

#### **1. ON COMPETITION, SURVIVAL AND INSTITUTIONS**

In a positivist approach, neorealists argue that prior to institutions, states were merely defensive in nature. Clustering however births aggression and cause states to act offensively and the international system is characterized with fear, suspicion and survival tactics (Waltz, 1979). Nobility of intentions does not guarantee state insurance because,

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according to Rousseau (1762: 290-291), "It is not impossible that a Republic, though in itself well governed, should enter upon an unjust war." Consequently, state intentions are believed to be malign by default. Existing "in the absence of government" (Fox, 1959, p.35), the international system conditions states to operate under "the brooding shadow of violence", failure of which could cause disappearance (Waltz, 1979, p.102).

Neoliberals argue that weak states do not necessarily have to disappear as institutions help constrain the excesses of powerful states by 'locking them in' (Deudney, 1996). With institutions regulating state behaviour, impacts of anarchy become minimal and the neorealists' prognosis of war becomes reversed. Axelrod and Keohane (1985) confirm that international regimes do not substitute reciprocity but reinforce and institutionalize it.

I argue that the neorealist argument is substantive as interstate frictions have existed pre and post-Cold War. However, the rate of interstate war has consistently declined in recent years (Beehner, 2014). So while Mearsheimer (1994: 11) argues that "it pays to be selfish in a self-help world" and Waltz (1979) confirms that the international system is a high-risk one, in reality, institutions have forced states to think more profitably, not just in terms of relative power and competition (Glaser, 1995), but in terms of increased gains and cooperation in the globalised economy (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999).

Ironically, in place of interstate wars, intrastate conflict has become prevalent, examples include cases in Libya, Syria and Eastern Ukraine. According to United Nations report (Weiss, Forsythe and Coate, 2004), over 80 percent of UN missions since 1988 have been focused on addressing intrastate violence. The trend contradicts the neorealist argument of imminent war in anarchical structures. Apparently, in this system where "none is entitled to command and none, required to obey" (Waltz, 1979, p.88), cooperation has been thriving.

Still, neorealists doubt the ability of institutions to broker world peace. They believe institutions are a reflection of the distribution of power in the world and have no significant bearing on state behaviour. Instead, institutions "reflect state calculations of self-interest" and intentions of other states are never clear (Mearsheimer, 1994, p.13).

Structural liberals argue that liberal institutions provide a platform for "transparency, access, representation, and communication" (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999, p.186). Modelled after the Wilsonian structure, communication helps abridge effects of anarchy. According to Jervis (1985: 73-74), "extensive communication makes it easier for states to explain how and why they are behaving as they are, and to understand what others are doing". When states communicate more, the probability of conflict greatly reduces. Hence, the end result of the liberal international system bears semblance to the Kantian's version of world peace which, in theory, does not rule out the inevitability of perpetual peace but constantly pursues its possibility (Kant, 1991).

As convincing as the structural liberal argument is, I disagree with the allusion that institutions will eventually replace states in the international system. According to Deudney and Ikenberry (1999: 186), transnational relations are "the beginnings of a system expected to eventually displace the state". I argue that states remain the basic primary component of international systems, without which institutions cannot exist. Therefore, to claim that states would, at some point, be replaced by institutions is spurious, instead, tolerance and increased collaboration will increase.

## **2. ON BALANCING, HIERARCHY AND CO-BINDING**

Acknowledging anarchy as "the permissive cause of war", structural realists argue that elements of anarchy can be overcome by strategically structuring balance of power (Waltz, 1959, pp. 232-234). Herein, the chances of conflict are reduced with states clustering to balance against threatening states, thereby, replacing anarchy with hierarchy.

Countering this claim, structural liberals make a case for co-binding as an alternative to balancing. According to Deudney and Ikenberry (1999: 182), "liberal states practice a more mutual and reciprocal co-binding that overcomes the effects of anarchy without producing hierarchy". They argue that while balancing aggravates effects of anarchy and makes inter-state disparity more pronounced, co-binding provides a system of mutual constraint. Moreover, they argue that the international system does not have to be particularly anarchic or hierarchic. According to Jervis (1985: 65), none of these strategies ascertains easy or automatic cooperation, however, "Woodrow Wilson saw the balance-

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of-power system as one of the main causes of World War 1". He therefore argues that in the absence of balance-of-power assumptions, "the incentives shift so that anarchy and the security dilemma no longer provide a powerful stimulus to undesired conflict." (*ibid.*, p. 79)

I argue that despite the preponderance of co-binding institutions in the world, states still practise balancing. The balancing though, in recent context, I would refer to as 'grouping', as states form a subtle alliance, not to pursue world peace, but mainly for selfish reasons. Using the Libyan crisis as a case study, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates support the House of Representatives while Qatar, Sudan and Turkey provide cash and weaponry assistance to the General National Congress (Wehrey and Lacher, 2014). These states' intervention further fuels the crisis, making the possibility of a peaceful settlement between both factions harder to achieve. Far from intervening for altruistic reasons, these states intervene by reason of what they stand to gain from the oil-rich state. Ultimately, the rise in intrastate war could be a confirmation of the neorealist argument that "states, at minimum, seek self-preservation, and at maximum, universal domination" (Waltz, 1979, p.118).

Nonetheless, even though neoliberals maintain co-binding as better alternative, I disagree with their argument that co-binding "reduces the necessity for states to have strong military apparatuses" (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999, p.183). In a system veiled violence, a comatose military is a risky take. I disagree with the notion that states need to downplay the preparation of their forces for eventualities. According to Waltz (2001: 160), "Arms breed security not war, intentions is the pacifier" (sic). Therefore, rationally, if co-binding were to work, it would require individual states' military capacity to effectively deliver on its mandate. The United Nations, for instance, has no army of its own, it depends solely on member-states' military apparatuses to deliver on its missions (Weiss, Forsythe and Coate, 2004).

Moreover, states stand to lose nothing by having an army ready for war at all times. In the worst-case scenario, in the absence of war, their increased capacity can come in handy for other states in distress, an example is Nigeria's military instrumentality to the resolution of the Liberian crisis (Salami, 2013). Better still, a state's increased military capacity can become an economic advantage in its interstate dealings. This leads us to our next point: does increased economic abilities equal higher military capacity?

### **3. ON ECONOMIC ABILITIES, FREE TRADE AND MILITARY CAPACITY**

Both the neorealists and structural liberals argue that economic ability and military capacity are correlated, however, neither gives reasons for causality. Why do states struggle for profit maximization and what do these gains imply about state security in the anarchical world setting? Waltz (1979) argues that states are sceptical about other states intentions and earnings. In this wise, cooperation and interdependence differ from integration as states constantly worry about external threats. This insecurity worry conditions their disposition to cooperation as disproportionality in gain may portend a risk for the lesser earning state.

I argue that going by the neorealist argument, in reality, if every state were to adopt the relative gains stance, interactions would repeatedly reach a dead end (Axelrod, 1984) as no state would be willing to compromise at the expense of courting vulnerability. Contradictorily, interstate cooperation has been on the rise in the past few decades with more states putting aside relative gains to pursue collective benefit, cheating or no cheating.

Furthermore, not every interstate interaction has an easy gain-loss distinction. An example is the recent U.S.-China agreement on cutting greenhouse-gas emissions in their respective countries (Taylor and Branigan, 2014). This policy consensus has no clear calculative measure. Even though developing countries argue about the adverse effects of this climate campaign on their development (Najam, Huq and Sokona, 2003), calculative distinction still cannot be made.

Thus, does economic superiority always equal military precedence? With no evident macroeconomic indicator in place (Waltz, 1979), it is logical for states to reason that the more economic resources a state has at its disposal, the increased chance there is, that the state will invest heavily in arms. As "military weaponry allows for rapid shift in balance of power" (Mearsheimer, 1994, p.13), the fear of this advantage being used at the expense of other states, either for coercion or aggression, is understandable.

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Structural liberals promote economic openness as a mitigating factor to the effects of anarchy in the system. To repress economic rivalry, they argue that Western capitalism and economic interdependence incentivise states to choose absolute gains over relative gains. According to Deudney and Ikenberry (1999: 191), "In a world of advanced industrial capitalist states, the absolute gains to be derived from economic openness are so substantial that states have the strong incentive to abridge anarchy".

Nevertheless, this argument begets the question: is free trade really free? Despite the economic merits of transnational trade, do states really depend on other states who have comparative advantage in production? Taking the United States as a case study, the U.S. consumes about 9.4 billion metric tons of sugar annually but its importation is restricted to 2.2 billion tons. By implication, American consumers have to pay twice the world price for sugar, costing each American about \$8 (Perry, 2010). The question is, why would America maintain this import quota if, in 2009 alone, the policy cost the country approximately \$2.5 billion? Though the U.S. Senate states job creation as justification for this policy, the answer is obvious: security.

For a critical staple commodity like sugar, the United States cannot afford to risk high reliance on any country. Rationally, it would appear cheaper for the U.S. to increase its import quota for sugar, but security-wise, this move might prove to be too costly. At all costs, America would avoid intrinsic economic ties with other countries and maintain self-sufficiency in the event of war. This, to a large extent, upholds the realist argument that states are willing to forego relative gains if it means greater gains for other countries (Mearsheimer, 1994).

Conscious of this fact, structural liberals construct their argument on a system of consent and reciprocity (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999). The existence of organisations like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) should allay the fear of states as the organisation negotiates agreement, monitors implementation and handles dispute resolution without bias. The enforcement capabilities of some of these institutions are however very limited and encourages non-compliance in states.

## 4. HYPER-NATIONALISM, AND HEGEMONY

As institutions are argued to be a cloak for the hegemon in the asymmetrical world order (Mearsheimer, 1994), we examine the role of the hegemon in transcending anarchy. Disputably the strongest state in the international system (Keohane, 2005), hegemons have proven to be critical to the maintenance of world peace. Using the analogy of a scale, the hegemon represents the middle piece ensuring balance between states: coupling convergent ideologies, regulating behaviour and ensuring a minimum standard is adhered to by all states.

I theorise that the hegemonic factor developed as a result of hyper-nationalism. According to Van Evera (1985), the notion of state superiority reigned in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with states considering themselves mythical with glorified national character. This practice poisoned international relations as each state claimed rightness of its own cause, forgetting that "its own past had often provoked the hostility it faced" (*ibid.*, p.93) and caused some states to think of their own security as paramount to that of others.

For neorealists, the hegemonic position is the ultimate aim of states because "security is always scarce, and can only be assured through maximizing more power than others" (Resende-Santos, 2007, p.54). Structural liberals, however, argue that the liberal American hegemony has an incorporative framework which allows for consensus in decision-making. As a result of which transnational relations have flourished post- World War II (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999).

I argue that the present hegemony, even though questionable and sometimes advantageous, has been critical to the maintenance of the current world peace. Referred to as "empire by invitation" (Lundestad, 1986, p. 263) and liberal leviathan (Ikenberry, 2011, p.10), the liberal feature of the United States has helped reduce the instances of states fall-out. Controversial in its bit, Schweller (2001: 178) argues that "the United States consistently violated the spirit of multilateral cooperation within its own alliance system" and Heisbourg (1999) argues that the United States is not a totally selfless entirety. Ikenberry (2001:18) highlights that the U.S. is on the verge of monopolising military-related research and development, spending roughly 80 percent of the world's total military expenditure (Wohlforth, 1999)

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and describes the trend as “dangerously out of balance”. Nevertheless, the U.S. has proven to rise to the occasion of a liberal and fair hegemon. A void in the hegemon space might disrupt the present world order and even if another hegemon were to emerge, the expectations are still unknown. Therefore, the structural liberal argument of the U.S. as promoter of liberal ideology is a merit to transcending anarchy in the world order.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the high possibility of conflict in international systems, I argue that anarchy can be transcended. The absence of a central government does not necessarily equal chaos because globalisation has created more incentives for interstate cooperation. Thus, even though alliances intended to be defensive might not necessarily be viewed as such by prospective opponents (Downs, Rocke and Silverson, 1986), the prospect of world peace is still worth pursuing.

While institutions play a major role in promoting communication and transcending anarchy, I argue that states remain nodal actors in the international system. Their duty, however, is to pursue integration without falling into the trap of overdependence because self-serving states are always at hand to stoke intrastate conflict if it does arise. Even though the liberal system of consent and reciprocal relations cause states to be on their best behaviour by locking them into mutually constraining institutions (Deudney, 1996), the international arena remains one of “power, of struggle, and of accommodation” (Waltz, 1979, p.113). Promotion of “deeper linkages” would, however, lead states to commit more (Ikenberry, 2001, p.5) and access the “opportunities of Locke” (Ikenberry 2011). Construction of open and rule-based relations does not always ascertain transparent transnational economic relations just as the U.S. hegemony does not totally solve asymmetrical challenges in the world order.

Finally, I submit that the relative peace enjoyed in the world today and the avoidance of a World War III in a total of seven decades, attest to the fact that states can work together to develop an international system with minimised effects of anarchy and, even though, the intentions of other states might always be elusive, the possibility of collectively pursuing world peace is always attainable. The structural liberal argument is more plausible: anarchy can, indeed, be transcended, at least, to a minimum standard.

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