When Hard Power Shrinks: The Midlife Crisis of Realism

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This chapter scrutinises the midlife crisis of realism through its most essential theoretic construct: power. Having identified several problems in realism's conception of power, I argue that the theory has lost its momentum as a dominant theory in international relations. This chapter starts by reviewing the concept of power advocated by several schools of realism. This review is followed by a critique exposing realism's major 'power issues.' The case of China is then analysed as it seems to particularly challenge the realist concept of power. The analysis leads to a discussion about the (uncertain) future of realism.

Realism on Power: A Brief Review

The history of realism is a portrayal of power. Thucydides (460–400 B.C.), the father of realism, had already demonstrated in *History of the Peloponnesian War* that state's self-interested search for power or the need to balance against it was the true cause of a war (see Alker 1988). Machiavelli supported the idea that the ability to carry out an action (i.e. power) is a more important determinant of events than ethics or ideology (see Adams 1977, Lukes 2001). Hobbes argued that human beings' desire for power in the anarchic state of nature inevitably leads to wars unless the conflicting parties could establish a social contract (Hobbes 1994).[1]

To date, power continues to play a central role in the theoretical construction of the realism. Classical realists such as Schuman and Morgenthau argue that all politics is a struggle for power (Morgenthau 1954, 25; Schuman 1933, 491). They view the world in a chaotic fashion without overriding authorities among all nations; that is why sovereign states are compelled to seek power to ensure their survival.

Morgenthau's definition of power has psychological underpinnings. He defines (political) power as 'a psychological relation between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised (Morgenthau 1954, 27).' Meanwhile, Morgenthau suggests that power can be generated from material (e.g., geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military force, and population) and non-material resources (e.g., national character, moral, government, and diplomacy), although military power is considered as the most important means to carry out power. In his categorisation of power as military power, economic power, and power over opinion, Carr (1964, 109) makes it clear that 'the supreme importance of the military instrument lies in the fact that the *ultima ratio* of power in international relations is war.' Gilpin (1981, 13), who perceives power to be the military, economic, and technological capabilities of states, supports such a belief. Given its importance to the survival of a state, military power is not only used as a means, but also embraced as an end.

Prioritising military force in the conception of power offers several advantages for classical realism. Theoretically, it

justifies the argument according to which military force can best serve as the means for states to secure their survival and dominance in an anarchic world. Unlike other methods, the use of military power almost ensures immediate effect (regardless of the outcome). It is the most salient mediator to demonstrate a state's power. Methodologically, it becomes possible to measure power by calculating a state's military capacities in a reductionist fashion. It also serves as a reference in realists' attempts to identify the issue of polarity and balancing in international politics.

If both *classical* and *structural* realists share the view that international politics is a continuous struggle for power, the two camps show divides when it comes to the driving force behind this struggle. For the latter, it is the anarchic system in international relations, and not human instinct, which prompts states to pursue power in order to ensure their security (Waltz 1989, 43).

Waltz views power as a property and rejects it to be relational. He is convinced that power can be generated by national attributes such as the size of population, territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence (Waltz 1979, 131). These criteria enable Waltz to rank the overall capabilities of states and display the distribution of power in the international system. Despite his resistance against a relation-oriented power definition, he proposes that 'an agent is powerful to the extent that he affects others more than they affect him' – a notion close to Deutsch's (1953) relational power approach (Baldwin 2013, 285). Structural realists, like their classical counterparts, also privilege military force in their conception of power. Waltz argues that 'in international politics [military] force serves not only as the *ultimate ratio*, but also as the first and constant one (Waltz 1979, 113).' States' differences in military forces and other secondary elements result in a relative distribution of capabilities in the international system, which is the major independent variable explaining dependent variables such as wars, alliances, and the balance of power (Schmidt 2007, 54). As a result, power is a means to the end of security (Waltz 1989, 40).

The above view divides structural realists into two branches: 'defensive realism' because it perceives states to be 'security maximising-oriented' and as only seeking sufficient power to maintain this security; and secondly, 'offensive realism' because it sees states to be 'power maximising-oriented' in order to assure their survival in an anarchic international system. The latter branch goes so far to claim that all great powers have revisionist aims and pursue expansionist policies (see Mearsheimer 2001). Consequently, offensive realists embrace military power even more (e.g. the size and strength of the army) than their defensive counterparts do.

Several variants of realism maintain the assumption that the struggle for power and the anarchic world are states' motives for pursuing power, but they are on different level of analysis and independent variables when explaining international outcomes such as wars. Neoclassical realists, for instance, argue that the analysis of states' behaviours (mainly foreign policy) should take into account both domestic and structural levels (Walt 2002). Hence, Schweller believes that 'complex domestic political processes act as transmission belts that channel, mediate, and (re)direct policy outputs in response to external forces (i.e. changes in relative power) (2004, 164).'

Neoclassical realists also insist that military force is the major constituent of power. However, unlike their classical and structural counterparts, neoclassical realists claim that it is decision-makers' perception of power – rather than power itself – that matters in international politics (Wohlforth 1993, 2; Rose 1998, 147). Neoclassical realists moreover elaborate on the notion of 'state power' in reference to the ability of the government apparatus to 'extract national power for its ends (Zakaria 1998, 38-9).' Neoclassical realists inherit the idea from classical realism that a nation defines its interest in accordance to its power. That is, when the overall capability of a state increases, the state will pursue greater power in order to control the external environment, and vice versa. The struggle for power, to the neoclassical realists, is one important means permitting states to influence and control their living and external environment. In this sense, states are more 'influence-maximising oriented' than 'power-maximising oriented' or 'security-maximising oriented' (Zakaria 1998).

Overall, the realist conception of power demonstrates two characteristics. First, power is equivalent to military force. If realists acknowledge other sources of power, such as economic influence and technology, these sources are only of secondary importance. Second, power is property-oriented. That is, realists are solely interested in tangible, measurable materials as resources of power; they ignore the relational aspect of power (i.e. how A exercises power

over B in order to make B comply to his wishes).

The Midlife Crisis of Power in Realism[2]

Several scholars (Baldwin 2013; Schmidt 2007; Grieco 2007) have pointed out severe deficiencies in realism's conception of power, which results in the debate about the worthy existence of the realism as a theory. While some evoke the death of realism (Kapstein 1995, 149), I would suggest that realism is experiencing a midlife crisis. This view is related to realism's incomplete achievement and the decreasing importance of military power.

The contemporary literature exposes that realists tend to overemphasise the importance of military force for states' survival in the anarchic international system to the extent that military might – also referred as 'hard power' – is taken as the superior means in states' struggle of power.[3] To realists, a country can best defend itself and assure its national security by equipping itself with a large arsenal of weapons, nuclear missiles, a large army, naval and air forces, etc. Some branches of realism value military force as the only means in a country's offensive policies.

However, this over-emphasis of hard power prompts realism to march into theoretic and empirical dead ends – for three reasons. First, realism fails to see the difference between potential power and actual power. That is, having important military assets does not guarantee their transformation into real power. The most obvious example is the nuclear weapons which owner countries are potentially unable to use in conflict due to their disastrous consequences. Second, a large variation of wars (e.g. conventional, biological, civil, asymmetric, cyber, etc.) renders tangible military resources to be ineffective from one case to another. In a cyber-war, the enemy might paralyze the whole infrastructure of a country simply by hacking into the government's central information system. Likewise, militarily poor-equipped terrorist groups can use civil aviation, vehicle, or human bombs as weapons to strike a super-power in an asymmetric war. Third, possessing hard power is perhaps crucial in warfare, but winning a war does not ensure success if one takes the issue of costs and benefits into account (Knorr 1966). For instance, even though the Bush administration overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the triumph was eclipsed by the US's colossal spending of money and materials as well as its failure to restore peace in the region in the aftermath of the war (Stiglitz and Bilmes, 2008).

Today's states do not abandon hard power, but they no longer prioritise it as they did before. Since the end of Cold War, major powers in the West have tended to limit their military expenditure to less than 3% of their GDP.[4] There is a prevailing belief that building mutual trust is more effective to retain peace than engaging in armament competition that leads to security dilemma. Moreover, imposing economic sanctions—and not resorting to military forces—stands as a frequent measure for major powers to deal with international conflicts. Such a tendency can be observed in the international community's reaction regarding North Korea's continuous development of its nuclear arsenal in 2013 and 2016, or to Russia's invasion of Ukraine/Crimea in 2014.

The shrinking importance of hard power is not only caused by its incompatibility with a peaceful world, but also because it is being overshadowed by the growing popularity of soft power. Soft power gains its analytical purchase at the expense of the losing utility of hard power (Schmidt 2007, 62). Today, major powers, rising powers, or regional powers are more concerned about how to cultivate their general capacities and expand influences worldwide without conveying an offensive image in the world; this is where soft power can better justify its existence and legitimacy than hard power. Soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye, is a concept inspired by Bachrach and Baratz's (1962; 1963) 'second face of power.' Nye (1990, 31) sees soft power as 'an indirect way to exercise power other than resting on inducements (carrots) or threats (sticks).' He defines soft power to be 'getting others to want what you want' and explains that 'co-optive [soft] power can rest on the attraction of one's ideas or on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences that others express.' For the difference between soft power and hard power, Nye argues that

The distinction is one of degree, both in the nature of the behavior and in the tangibility of the resources. Both types are aspects of the ability to achieve one's purposes by controlling the behavior of others. Command power [hard power]—the ability to change what others do—can rest on coercion or inducement. Co-optive power [soft power]—the ability to shape what others want—can rest on the attractiveness of one's culture and ideology or the

ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices in a manner that makes actors fail to express some preferences because they seem to be too unrealistic (Nye 1990, 267).

Governments now are more willing to develop their soft power by designing relevant policy tools such as establishing overseas cultural institutes, propagating ideology through global broadcasting services, exporting higher education, promoting tourism, etc. Soft power has also become one of the major indexes when analysts attempt to measure a state's general capacity (Treverton and Seth 2005). In a sense, the struggle for power today has a new meaning: to use soft power to attract more allies is a better approach to secure a state's survival than to use hard power to annihilate enemies.

Power, Realism and the Rise of China

Realism's power concept becomes problematic when applied to the case of China. If classical realism's balance of power found its empirical ground in Europe, notably in early 19th century, this is not the case in the East. Imperial China had been the region's only superpower over centuries and its neighbour states rarely contested such hegemony. This long-lasting unipolar system also contradicts the argument of structural realism of which a bipolar system is the key to stability in an anarchic international system. From 3 BC to 19th century, the Chinese dynasty was able to maintain its central position in the tributary system, surrounded by 'uncivilised' neighbours such as Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, Korea, Annam (present-day Vietnam), Siam (Thailand), Burma (Myanmar), and Nepal (Cohen 2000; Wills 2010).

The Chinese perception of war is irrelevant to realism as military force is not considered *ultimate ratio*. From the prevalence of 'The Art of War,' authored by the renowned strategist Sun Tzu, imperial China put greater importance on a well-considered logistics system and strategic visions to prevent a war rather than on strengthening military forces to strike a war. China's use of force was commonly not exercised for the purpose of self-defence, as realism stipulates. More frequently, it has moral underpinnings. For example, the breakout of the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894 was derived from the attempt of the Chinese Qing dynasty to protect Korea against Japan's invasion. What contradicts realism is that, despite its military inferiority vis-à-vis the empire of Japan – after its successful Meiji Restoration – the Qing dynasty still decided to go to war against Japan (Shih 1993, 134-6).

Even today, China continues to go astray from the power trajectory posited by realism. Looking back at its historical account of wars, the People's Republic of China (PRC) can hardly be qualified as a 'rational actor' in the way realism understands the term. The Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979 well illustrates China's uncommon behaviours in world politics. The war, also surnamed as 'The Punishing War,' was driven by China's intention to punish Vietnam for attacking its protégé, the communist Cambodia of Pol Pot, and for siding with the Soviet Union. In the war, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) dominated the Viet Cong army and seized several important sites in both North and South Vietnam within a month. Once it had declared victory, however, China surprisingly withdrew itself from the occupied regions. Similar patterns can be discerned in the Sino-Indian War in 1962 and China's quasi-war over Zhenbao Island against the Soviet Union in 1969 (Shih 1993).

China's authoritarian regime and growing overall capabilities prompt many realist scholars to believe that a war is inevitable between China and the current superpower or even regional powers (e.g. Japan, India). According to this logic, China's fast rising in the world should jeopardise American hegemony. China is often perceived to be a bigger threat than the US by the international community. To the supporters of democracy, a superpower led by a communist regime is simply unimaginable. A violent debate over the 'China threat' was ignited in 1995 when Charles Krauthammer, an American journalist, published an essay, depicting China as a 'bully (…) as it tries relentlessly to expand its reach,' and exhorted that the US should contain China (Roy 1996, 759). The offensive realist John Mearsheimer (2001) even went far to suggest that China's emerging power and influence must be contained by any means.

Nevertheless, China's conduct in world politics so far does not allow realists to qualify it as a 'revisionist state'[5] who, following their logic, should always have been seeking to overturn the American hegemony; nor does the rising of China result in instability in East Asia or beyond. Overall, the rising of China does not affect the stability of the current

unipolar international system. The 'China threat' evaluated by much of the realist analyses is mainly grounded on China's building-up of hard power. However, in recent years, China's enthusiasm for developing soft power programs implies that hard power is no longer the sole priority in Chinese foreign policy.

Since 2003, China has been undertaking even more efforts on developing its soft power in order to shape an image of peaceful rising. In 2014, the annual report made public by the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) explained that the PRC's military expenditure only occupied 1.4% of the country's GNP (gross national product).[6] Meanwhile, China has been developing tools to increase its soft power in the world. These efforts include support for infrastructure-related projects in Africa and Latin America, the creation of the Confucius Institutes for promoting the Chinese language and culture worldwide, media such as the CCTV and China Radio International to broadcast about the 'good' China, and the hosting of important international events such as Olympic Games or World Exhibitions to increase international exposure. Comparing to the past, contemporary China is also more inclined to conform to international norms on issue areas like free trade, nuclear non-proliferation and environmental protection.

Overall, the rise of China does not follow the scenario of realism, for two reasons. First, military forces are not the most important means to exercise power for China. Soft power comes as an important strategy in China's recent foreign policy-making. In addition, China's use of military force can be somehow irrational, as we have observed from its historical track. Second, China does not act like a 'revisionist state.' It does not strive to change the current balance of power; nor is it keen on immediately becoming the next superpower by engaging in war with the US.

After the Midlife Crisis

A review of the literature exposes that realism's major conception of power, which casts a heavy focus on hard power—is problematic. Its theoretic construct seems to be over-simplified and is unable to explain and predict many international outcomes. As is explained in the previous section, neither classical realism, nor its structural and neorealist counterparts have rightly explained or foreseen the past or recent development of China in world politics. For, the realist tends to regard China as the next superpower who will challenge the American hegemony and destabilise the current unipolar system. Nevertheless, the belief of a 'China threat' can be merely an imaginary fear built on the assumption that China's hard power would endanger western civilisation. Until today, there is no (or not yet) clear evidence showing that China manifests revisionist tendencies.

Can realism cope with the struggle of achievement and solve the midlife crisis? Despite significant amendments of several 'neo' schools, realism still suffers from empirical inconsistency. The reason is straightforward – its fundamental principles of power never change: neo-classical realists still favour the concept of the balance of power when explaining international conflicts, structural realists still believe in a bipolar international system headed by the US and China in the future, and offensive realists never give up the superior means of hard power in world politics. Consequently, there is no room for optimism regarding the future of realism. Kapstein (1995) acknowledges that the dissidents of realism point out several fatal flaws of the theory, but he also argues that the theory cannot be overthrown as long as there is no better theory to replace it thoroughly. However, such an argument is irrelevant. For the very existence of a theory depends on its ability to explain and to predict the occurrence of a phenomenon, and not on the existence (or not) of another (dominant) theory. A problematic theory will eventually lose its attraction in front of its public with or without the emergence of a better theory. If realism is unable to readjust its conception of power by theoretically taking into account of the equal importance of other faces of power and by empirically looking at the international outcomes beyond the Western sphere, it will be difficult to expect a rejuvenation after the midlife crisis.

Notes

[1] However, recent interpretations regarding Machiavelli and Hobbes's perspective of power is more nuanced. For example, some authors suggest that Hobbes's notion of international anarchy refers to the anarchy of pre-political societies outside the ordered system of European states, instead of that of interstate relations later posited by realism (Moloney 2011).

[2] The term 'midlife crisis,' first coined by the psychologist Elliot Jaques in 1965, is employed here in a metaphoric fashion to depict the struggling state and the dysfunction of power in realism. After all, midlife crisis 'commonly involves reflection on what the individual has done with his or her life up to that point, often with feelings that not enough has been accomplished (Mendez 2008, 565; see also Edwards and Byrd 2008).'

[3] Some scholars disagree that hard power equates to military force because hard power is mostly a contrary concept of soft power. For the concept of soft power and its comparison to hard power, see Nye (1990; 2004; 2011). They also suggest that military force is only one form of power. However, given the supreme role of military force in realism's conception of power, I use hard power and military force in an interchangeable fashion.

[4] See SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex

[5] Structural realist uses the term 'revisionist state' to portray a state's intention to use forces in order to alter the balance of power. It opposes to a 'status-quo state' who prefers to maintain the current balance.

[6] See http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2014-03/05/c_133161044.htm (accessed 20 June 2016). However, many countries, international organisations, and think tanks contest the transparency of this report and believe that the PRC's military budget already reached 2.3% of its GNP in 2003 and grows at a rate of 7% to 10% annually, although such rate is still far behind that of the United States. See http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/budget.htm (accessed 20 June 2016)

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