Realism and Neorealism: An Investigative Overview

Behravesh, Maysam

2010

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
An Investigative Overview

Realism and Neorealism: An Investigative Overview
By Maysam Behravesh on December 19, 2010

The roots of the modern debate on international politics and power relations between states can be traced back to decades earlier between the First and Second world wars when many political analysts and scholars still were contemplating the causes of the Great War and politicians were endeavouring to set up such institutions as the League of Nations to prevent a reiteration of international aggression by institutionalizing a collective as well as normative order-preserving and security-providing structure. The dramatic failure of the League – that represented the liberal ideals of democratic peace and emphasized the possibility of building a modus vivendi beyond national boundaries – in stopping the outbreak of another calamitous international war gave rise to serious doubts about its effectiveness and the assumptions upon which it had been founded. One of the most prominent among critics at the time was Edward Hallett Carr, a British historian and former diplomat who in broad terms attributed the failure of the League to contain aggression and, by extension, the Second World War, to its failure to take into account the conflicting interests of states and prevailing socio-political realities on the ground.[1] Carr’s The Twenty Years’ Crisis[2] is by and large regarded as a classic text of what is now known as ‘classical realism’ in the study of international relations.

In the book he launches a sustained critique of idealism – what he dubs ‘utopianism’ as opposed to realism – due, inter alia, to its overemphasis on free will, neglect of the exigent and grim realities in the external environment that impose severe constraints upon human action, and its false optimism for the feasibility of moral universalism. Prominent among these idealists were Woodrow Wilson, the 28th US president, Alfred Zimmern, a British scholar of international relations, and Philip Noel-Baker, a British politician and Nobel Prize winner, whose beliefs have been summarized by Hedley Bull in a passage well worth quoting,

“The distinctive characteristic of these writers was their belief in progress: the belief, in particular, that the system of international relations that had given rise to the First World War was capable of being transformed into a fundamentally more peaceful and just world order; that under the impact of the awakening of democracy, the growth of the ‘international mind’, the development of the League of Nations, the good works of the men of peace or the enlightenment spread by their own teachings, it was in fact being transformed; and that their responsibility as students of international relations was to assist this march of progress to overcome the ignorance, the prejudices, the ill-will, and the sinister interests that stood in its way.”[3]

The utopian optimism, rooted in the nineteenth-century moral philosophy, ‘was based on the triple conviction’, in the words of Carr, ‘that the pursuit of the good was a matter of right reasoning, that the spread of knowledge would soon make it possible for everyone to reason rightly on this important subject, and that anyone who reasoned rightly on it would necessarily act rightly. [4] Applied o the dynamics of international politics, the argument leads to the conclusion that if the delicate task of foreign policy-making is assigned to educated intellectuals who follow democratic norms under a republican constitution, instead of monarchs and aristocrats, ‘whose sectional interests dispose[s] them towards warfare’, then war will cease to be a possibility.[5]

A more systematic study of the power relations between states, however, was offered by Hans J. Morgenthau, the German-born American political scientist, in his book Politics Among Nations (1948) that is also seen as representing a classical realist approach to international politics. Central to Morgenthau’s theory are the concepts of national-state ‘interest’ and its definition in terms of ‘power’ whose maximization is seen from the conventional realist perspective as the principal objective of all states in the international sphere. Within a realist framework, the statesman is believed to ‘think in terms of the national interest, conceived as power among other powers. [6]

Political realism is a theoretical approach to the study of international relations which has been traced back to the writings of Thucydides, the Greek historian of Peloponnesian wars between Athens and Sparta, and the philosophical thoughts of (amongst others) Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes.[7] Apart from Carr and Morgenthau, other leading realists who have developed the theory and explored its different facets and focus points include George Kennan, Reinhold Niebuhr, Raymond Aaron, Robert Gilpin, John Herz, Henry Kissinger, Stephen Krasner, Susan Strange and Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer. With regard to the development of realism as a mode of political thought, Bell notes that realist arguments are a combination of ‘two discrete, though often intersecting, literatures’, with the first emerging from the discipline of International
A succinct explanation of Hobson’s ‘six principles’ about classical realism and neorealism will shed enormous light on the chief tenets of these theories and their nuanced distinctions. Here the underlying assumption, as indicated, is that neorealism views the state as a ‘passive/adaptive’ actor in the international system, whereas for realism it operates as an autonomous agent. According to these principles (1) while classical realism argues for the ‘historical variability’ of the state and its ontological superiority over the international system as a whole, neorealism adheres to the ‘continuity’ assumption whereby the anarchical states system is an ‘autonomous and self-constituting realm’ ontologically superior to the units comprising it; (2) in contrast to the classical realist argument for the potential ‘absolute cooperative gains’ or a win-win state of affairs states may achieve in the future through higher forms of political cooperation, the neorealist invariably prioritizes short-term ‘relative gains’ over long-term absolute ones due to the security uncertainties caused by the anarchical nature of the international system.
by anarchy and power struggle; (3) for classical realism ‘socialized national’ sovereignty of the state is subject to change over time as a consequence of the change in the status of citizenship rights, but for neorealism sovereign states will continue to exist as pivotal actors in international politics despite the growing momentum of economic interdependence and globalization; (4) whereas realism maintains that the state is not a unitary entity and its rationality is subject to change, neorealism stresses the monolithic nature of the state, which acts on the basis of its unchanging rationality to pursue its national interests; (5) for classical realists, domestic agential power of the state varies through time, and so does its international agential power, but neorealists generally endorse the ‘billiard-ball model’ whereby states are likened to ‘billiard balls’ whose internal or domestic properties have very little, if any, to do with their behaviour in the international system; and (6) As mentioned above, classical realism grants a considerable degree of international agential power to the state, while neorealism insists that states lack any external agency and cannot resist the international systemic logic of anarchy which requires them to overlook norms of morality and seek the necessary means for survival.[21]

In conclusion, it might be appropriate to understand realism as ‘a “big tent”, with room for a number of different theories that make quite different predictions’. [22] There is a good deal of consensus, however, on the ‘negative and cautionary’ character of realism as a way of thinking and looking at things which admonishes against ‘moralism’ and emphasizes the ‘unlikely or difficult’ in world politics,[23] what Carr describes as ‘the necessary corrective to the exuberance of utopianism’. [24] In more explanatory terms, realism ‘depicts international affairs as a struggle for power among self-interested states and is generally pessimistic about the prospects for eliminating conflict and war’, [25] a ‘disposition’, according to Reinhold Niebuhr, ‘to take all factors in a social and political situation, which offer resistance to established norms, into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power’. [26] Finally, Donnelly argues for understanding realism as ‘a philosophical orientation or research program’ that requires us to abandon ‘the gladiatorial vision’ of international relations theory and embrace a pluralistic vision of the discipline instead. What matters, after all, is not the ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of theoretical perspectives but when and where they can help us appreciate and explore phenomena ‘that interest us’. [27] The embrace of such a theoretical pluralism might prompt the observer to transcend the ‘wrong/right’ binary opposition and look for a better understanding of and insight into those dark sides of things even in the most apparently weak and unpopular of ideas, either they be realist, liberalist or constructivist.

Maysam Behravesh is a final-year MA student of British Studies in the Faculty of World Studies (FWS), University of Tehran. He can be contacted via email at maysam.behravesh@gmail.com.

Notes


[5]. Ibid.


