

The Anarchy Problematique and Sovereignty: Neo-Realism and State Power

'Any military commander, who is honest with himself, or with those he speaks to, will admit that he has made mistakes in the application of military power. He has killed people, unnecessarily, his own troops or other troops, through mistakes, through errors of judgement, a 100, or 1000, or tens of 1000, may be even 100000, but he has not destroyed nations' (Robert S. McNamara in The Fog of War).

This lecture deals with one of the dominant approaches in International Relations theory: (neo-) realism. The lecture is divided into three parts. Part I will focus on the historical emergence and key concepts of (neo-) realism. Part II will look at the empirical application of neo-realism by John Mearsheimer to European security after the Cold War, before Part III presents a range of theoretical criticisms of (neo-) realism. Most importantly, the latter will make the point that neo-realism is unable to explain structural change in world order.

1. (Neo-) Realism:

Historically, realism emerged in response to liberal approaches. When the latter's hope for a peaceful international order based on co-operation between democratic states organized through the League of Nations fell apart as a result of the rise of aggressive fascism in the 1920s and 1930s, the international situation characterized by war and the

struggle for survival was ripe for a new theoretical approach. The two key interventions were *The Twenty Years' Crisis* by E.H. Carr in 1939 and *Politics among Nations* by Hans Morgenthau in 1948.

Realism, also referred to as classical realism (see Jacobs 2014, Lebow 2013) emphasizes the 'reality of power'. Conflicts between states are considered to be inevitable in an anarchic international system due to scarcity of economic resources (Carr) or as a result of 'evil' human nature (Morgenthau). The liberal idea that every international conflict is unnecessary or immoral is regarded by realists as an attempt to enshrine an existing economic and political order, which is favourable to currently dominant states. Kenneth Waltz further developed realism in his book *Theory of International Politics* (1979), setting out a neo-realist or structural realism (see Mearsheimer 2013, Schörnig 2014). In the following, key assumptions of realist approaches in general will be outlined, before looking at the differences between realism and neo-realism.

Three core (neo-) realist assumptions can be identified. **First**, states are considered to be the main actors, operating in a rational, utility-maximising way. Neo-realists acknowledge that there are other actors such as international organizations or transnational corporations. Nevertheless, these other types of actors would have no impact on actual developments in the international system and can, therefore, be disregarded. **Second**, the international system is characterized by anarchy, i.e. the absence of an over-arching, ordering power. As a result, the national interest is the maximization of power in order to ensure the state's survival. For neo-realists the particular domestic set-up of states is, thereby, unimportant. Whether states are

democracies or authoritarian regimes, for example, has no impact on their behaviour at the international level. Because of anarchy characterizing the international system, states are functionally similar and are all seeking to ensure their security through a maximization of power. **Third**, the distribution of economic and military capabilities, understood as a systemic factor, is the most important explanatory variable. Hence, when analysing international relations, one has to look at the distribution of capabilities in order to explain new developments. For example, if state A re-arms itself with a new type of weapon and, thus, increases its capabilities, state B can be expected either to re-arm itself too, or to forge a military alliance with another state to balance state A.

The core neo-realist assumptions are:

- (1) states are unitary, functionally similar actors. They are the only important actors in international politics;
- (2) the international system is characterised by anarchy;
- (3) the distribution of power capabilities is the main, system-level variable to explain state behaviour.

Hence international relations for neo-realists is the analysis of inter-state rivalry over economic and military resources.

Moreover, there are three further, secondary assumptions, which can be derived from the three core assumptions. **First**, neo-realists argue that war is the normal state of international affairs. A peaceful order can only be accomplished temporarily through a balance of power, be it bipolar as during the Cold War, be it multipolar as after the Congress of Vienna in 1815 in Europe. **Second**, international regimes are simply a reflection of the underlying power structure and, consequently, have no independent

impact on developments. If there is a change in the underlying power structure, regimes will cease to function. **Finally**, international co-operation is regarded as impossible within the anarchic system except for the exceptional situation of hegemonic stability within a unipolar structure, when one state regulates the international system through its predominance in economic and military capabilities.

Although realism and neo-realism share many key assumptions, there are also four significant differences to be noted (Waltz 1995). These include a different understanding of anarchy. While realists regard anarchy as a general condition within which states operate, neo-realists give priority to the international structure, characterized by anarchy as the ordering principle and the distribution of economic and military capabilities. Moreover, and related to this, there is a different level of analysis. Realists concentrate in their explanation on the interacting units of analysis. Neo-realists, by contrast, explain instances of international politics with reference to the international system and the distribution of capabilities. Unsurprisingly, third, whereas neo-realists do not give any importance to domestic politics, as all states are assumed to behave in a functionally similar way in the international system, realists argue that differently constituted states behave differently and, hence, it does matter in international relations whether a state is democratic or not. Finally, there is a difference in the definition of the national interest. Realists perceive power as an end of state action, but neo-realists regard it as a means to the real goal of state concern, i.e. security and state survival.

When analysing the war on Iraq in 2003, for example, realists may therefore emphasise in their analysis the nature of the Iraqi regime, the personalities of Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush, as well as the way these two states and others interacted in

the run-up to open conflict. Neo-realists, by contrast, would stress the systemic distribution of power resources at the global level and here the importance of securing control over access to oil for the USA in competition with other powers such as China and Russia. Moreover, they might analyse the regional distribution of power and the threat a strong Iraq with access to chemical weapons may pose for neighbouring countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, undermining stability within the regional system.

More recent developments in neo-realist theory include the distinction between offensive and defensive realism. As for offensive realism, John Mearsheimer argues that the international systems is characterised by (1) anarchy; (2) the fact that states have offensive military capabilities; and (3) uncertainty about other states' actions; (4) survival is the primary goal of great powers; (5) great powers are rational actors (Mearsheimer 2001: 30-2). 'When the five assumptions are married together, they create powerful incentives for great powers to think and act offensively with regard to each other' (Mearsheimer 2001: 32). In other words, there is a constant struggle between states over dominance, since maximising power ensures maximum security. If states have the chance, they will attack in order to use their advantage. 'This unrelenting pursuit of power means that great powers are inclined to look for opportunities to alter the distribution of world power in their favor. They will seize these opportunities if they have the necessary capability' (Mearsheimer 2001: 3). Unsurprisingly, offensive realism focuses mainly on great powers in its analyses, as only great powers are in a position to move first in the international power struggle. Applied to the current situation at the international level with China becoming increasingly a global power in its own right,

offensive realism suggests that the US should counteract growing Chinese strength now through a pre-emptory strike, as long as this is still possible.

Defensive realists such as Waltz (1979) also argue that states seek power to maximize their security. Since a balance of power ensures peaceful stability, however, states will focus on maintaining a balance of power. Acquiring ever larger amounts of power is not an objective in itself. Matthew Rendall (2006) examines four European crises between 1814 and 1848. On all four occasions, he concludes, the dominant state chose not to go to war, although hegemony may have been possible as a result. In short, states may pursue opportunistic expansions, but they are unlikely to attempt to achieve hegemony at all costs. In their analysis, defensive realists, in addition to the distribution of power capabilities, also pay attention to the potential importance of shared values by states, supporting a peaceful balance of power, as well as the importance of unit-level factors, i.e. the specific characteristics of individual states. ‘While this does not falsify Mearsheimer’s theory per se, it contradicts one of its underlying assumptions: that states are prepared to take big risks in the pursuit of regional dominance’ (Rendall 2006: 540).

Think points

- Is it correct to exclude actors such as international organisations, transnational corporations or global social movements when analysing international relations?
- Why could it be a problem to neglect the domestic arena when analysing international relations?

2. Neo-realism and security in Europe after the Cold War:

In his seminal contribution 'Back to the Future' in 1990, John Mearsheimer asks which factors ensured the long-lasting peace in Europe after 1945 and outlines a rather gloomy picture in relation to security and peace in Europe after the end of the Cold War. In relation to the long peace in Europe between 1945 and 1989/1990, he **first** refers to the bipolar distribution of military power on the Continent. **Second**, the international structure in which the Soviet Union and its allies balanced the USA and its allies is identified as crucial. In other words, a bipolar balance of power secured peace. **Third**, and equally important, he positively acknowledges the existence of nuclear weapons. While in the absence of these weapons war would have been feasible and, therefore, more likely, the mutual destruction implied in a nuclear holocaust ultimately ensured that both sides in the Cold War accepted that war between the blocs was impossible. And while Mearsheimer identifies hypernationalism as an important cause of war, he concludes in neo-realist terms that 'the keys to war and peace lie more in the structure of the international system than in the nature of the individual states' (Mearsheimer 1990: 12).

Unfortunately, in Mearsheimer's eyes, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union also implied an end to this stable, peaceful bipolar order. He then identifies four alternative future scenarios for Europe. The **first scenario**, Europe without nuclear weapons, is considered to be the most dangerous one, as the deterrence of nuclear weapons is missing and war seems to be feasible. The move away from a bipolar to a multipolar order in Europe is equally considered dangerous, as it is more difficult to balance power between multiple big powers in Mearsheimer's eyes. 'The structure of power in Europe would look much like it did between the world wars, and it could well

produce similar results' (Mearsheimer 1990: 32). Finally, mass armies are considered to be ripe for hyper-nationalism increasing the danger of war. The **second scenario** is a continuation of the existing ownership patterns of nuclear weapons. This too is considered dangerously unstable, first because Germany may try to go nuclear in order to balance other powers such as the UK and France. Moreover, the vast area free of nuclear deterrence would be prone to warfare, potentially fuelled by mass armies gripped with hyper-nationalist sentiments. By contrast, the **third scenario**, a 'well-managed proliferation' could produce an order nearly as stable as the current order (Mearsheimer 1990: 37). Germany could be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons and other states in Europe should be provided with security guarantees by one of the nuclear powers. In other words, a managed multipolar balance of power would be established. Finally, the **fourth scenario**, a non-managed proliferation of nuclear weapons, would again be more dangerous, as nuclear powers may try to prevent others from going nuclear. Moreover, small nuclear powers may be unable to maintain and secure their nuclear arsenal and their political elites may not be able to perceive the futility of nuclear war. A wider spread of nuclear weapons, ultimately, would increase the likelihood of terrorists getting their hands on such weapons.

Nevertheless, while this assessment is clearly logical within the neo-realist theoretical framework, is it really convincing? What may Mearsheimer overlook in his analysis of post-Cold War Europe? We will return to this question when discussing liberal IR theory in the next lecture and its application to the same question.

Think points

- Arguably, Mearsheimer's concerns were not borne out in post-Cold War Europe. Which factors has he overlooked?
- Are you convinced by the idea that nuclear weapons can be a positive force of peace?

Neo-realists have been very influential in influencing especially US foreign policy. Henry Kissinger, who served as National Security Advisor and later concurrently as Secretary of State in the administrations of Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford from 1969 to 1977, and Condoleezza Rice, first President George W. Bush's National Security Advisor between 2001 and 2005 and then his Secretary of State between 2005 and 2009, had both been accomplished neo-realist scholars before entering office. The gripping and yet also disturbing documentary film [*The Fog of War*](#) (Dir. Erol Morris, 107 min., Sony Pictures, 2004) follows the insights of Robert S. McNamara, US Secretary of Defense (1961-68) in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War. It provides numerous excellent examples of applications of neo-realist theory to foreign policy-making.



[The Fog of War - Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara](#)

See also the excellent poem [The Fog of IR Theory: Robert S. McNamara and Rule No.11](#) by Jamie Jordan in relation to this documentary.

3. Theoretical criticisms:

Despite its conceptual simplicity and logical coherence, neo-realism has come under severe criticisms over the years. **First**, in order to carry out their enquiries, neo-realists have an ahistoric assumption of a frozen set of actors, be they states, i.e. functionally similar, utility-maximizing actors trying to ensure security, be they individuals, attempting to maximize power (Ashley 1984). As a result, actors' changing behaviour cannot be analysed. In a way, even the possibility that an actor could change its behavioural rationale in the first place cannot be incorporated into the analysis. **Second**,

the assumption of an international system consisting only of states as relevant actors is equally ahistoric. Consequently, any structural change of the international system itself, any change beyond the interstate system cannot be analysed or comprehended. **Third**, as a result of its focus on states and the distribution of economic and military capabilities, neo-realism is reduced to great power management. If the distribution of capabilities is key to explaining international relations, then our attention is automatically and inevitably drawn to the big powers.

Ultimately, these theoretical shortcomings can be related back to neo-realism's positivist epistemology. If the goal is to identify law-like, causal relationships in international relations, then certain characteristics such as actors' behavioural rationale or the structure of the system have to be held artificially constant. As Waltz argues himself, 'theory becomes possible only if various objects and processes, movements and events, acts and interactions are viewed as forming a domain that can be studied in its own right' (Waltz 1995: 69). This may allow us to study certain regular developments within a narrowly defined, separate space of reality, but it will always prevent us from gaining a wider understanding of structural change and the related underlying dynamics. Moreover, positivist social science claims to be engaged in value-free research. Nevertheless, the focus on big powers by neo-realism inevitably implies that the approach helps to maintain this existing order, which it tries to explain and takes as its starting-point of analysis at the same time. Hence, Robert Cox (1981) describes neo-realism as a 'problem-solving' theory, which focuses on solving problems within existing orders, but does not analyse change of the wider social formations.

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