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The Limitations of Classical Realism, If There Be Any, and The Extent to Which Neo-Realism Has Overcome Them or Not

To what extent has neo-realism addressed the limitations of classical realism, if there be any, and overcome them or not? The following analytical essay shall engage this question by exploring each theory's core assumptions and then review the effect of these assumptions on key areas of understanding international relations to include philosophical perspective, definitions of power and security, the role of anarchy and rationality, the distribution of capabilities and balance of power, and a definition of the international system. The essay will conclude by bringing both theories' assumptions to bear upon the current crisis between the United States and Iran. Given the assumptions, I will draw conclusions as to which theory most accurately ascertains the situation and which is more likely to predict the outcome.

Introduction – How Realism and Neo-Realism View Theory

Throughout this essay I will draw upon the views of arguably each camp's most prominent theorists, Hans Morgenthau for realism and Kenneth Waltz for neo-realism. Morgenthau refers to theory in *Six Principles of Political Realism* as an "outline" capable of "ascertaining facts and giving them meaning through reason" (147). Waltz describes theory in *Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power* as explaining events within a "bounded realm" (329) that has observable "law-like regularities" (330) and "predicts a strong tendency towards balance" (338). By delimiting the interpretative boundaries within the bounded realm of the system,

Waltz's neo-realism aspires to be more accurate than a rational outline at predicting outcomes; but by focusing so much on systemic factors, neo-realism gives up the greater accuracy that realism's emphasis on unit level factors provide. We'll see this theme again.

Key Theoretical Assumptions

Philosophical Perspective. The classical realists led by Morgenthau and preceded in history by Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes, were empiricists and humanists who grounded their view of international politics in the universal and philosophical idea that human nature is the main cause of evil and discord in the world (Dunne and Schmidt 95-98). Morgenthau quotes Thucydides as saying, "and of men we believe, that it is a necessary law of their nature that they rule wherever they can ("Political Power" 68). Thus, man is simply acting on inescapable instinct in a sense. He is predisposed to pursue power over others in order to attain for himself "gain, safety and reputation" (Hobbes 144).

From a philosophical perspective, the neorealists make a slight departure from this pessimistic view of human nature. While accepting the *universal* aspect of the laws of human nature, Waltz ascribes to it a predilection towards security rather than violence. Jack Donnelly quotes Waltz as declaring that states "at a minimum seek their own preservation, and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination" ("Realism" 44). This small but important distinction resolves the classical limitation that war is inevitable by implying that the system is influenced more by a state-centric proclivity for security rather than power.

Power and Security. In his second of Six Principles, Morgenthau states that the "main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power" (148), and then goes on to define power as "man's control over the minds and actions of other men" ("Political Power" 62).

Here the insatiable thirst for acquiring more power is seen through the lens of human nature as a means to an end. This is confirmed with Morgenthau's preeminent emphasis upon military preparedness over other factors such as natural resources, industrial capacity, population and geography ("Elements" 207-236).

With an emphasis on security and survival, Waltz's view of power in *Political Structures* is framed more in context to the arrangement of units within the system. He asserts that position and the constraints imposed by that position strongly influence the choices states have available (293-297). The states are "functionally undifferentiated" within that system and "power ranked" according to their distribution of capabilities to include some national factors mentioned by Morgenthau (295-300). Within this structure, Waltz adds that "some states may persistently seek goals that they value more highly than survival (294).

The neorealist perspective thus goes beyond the classical limitation that states make decisions strictly based upon behavioral precepts by expressing the real possibility that states have other interests and priorities besides power accumulation. Secondly, Waltz alludes to the limitation the system itself places upon states' pursuit of interests when he indicates that the structure may "determine the kind of player who is likely to prosper" ("Political Structures" 294). Thus, bellicose interests themselves may be constrained and some international cooperation reinforced to preserve the balance of power. The systemic propensity for balance in turn reinforces and preserves security and peace. Thirdly, we may conclude that variation in the structure may play a larger role in outcomes than human nature.

Similarities of Anarchy, Rationality and Self-Help. Dunne and Schmidt confirm that both realists and neo-realists assume an anarchic condition upon the international system with no central governmental authority (93), that sovereign states are the principal actors within that

system (100), and that states resort to self-help to resolve their “security dilemma,” acknowledging that other states cannot be trusted or counted on to come to their aid (102).

In his *Six Principles* essay, Morgenthau elaborated on the realist view of rationality by pointing out that states make reasoned, rational decisions that “require a sharp distinction between the desirable and the possible” (149), and must consider the “political consequences of seemingly moral actions” (154) in a prudent and deliberate fashion. Thus, realism points to a separation between political morals and universal morals in making decisions.

Waltz embraces rationality as well, but ascribes a structural bent to it, saying that “units differently juxtaposed and combined behave differently and in interacting produce different results (“Political Structures” 292). Therefore, juxtaposition has as much to do with the choices available and corresponding outcomes as does a rational, moral or political decision-making process. In this respect neo-realism supplements realist rational decision-making by providing a “grid” that points out what is most *likely* given the structural constraints and positional conditions. One could say that a U.S. invasion of Venezuela might be both desirable and feasible, but structural considerations would rule it out as unlikely, being that desire to preserve systemic status quo dramatically reduces the available options.

Distribution of Capabilities and the Balance of Power. Morgenthau’s concept of the balance of power was one in which national interests play out within predictable patterns of conflict, competition and alliances, and war often surfaces to restore equilibrium and resolve relational uncertainties (“Balance of Power” 237-257). There are dominant and dependent systems within this framework, but equilibrium is driven by the reality that “all nations live in constant fear lest their rivals deprive them ... of their power position” (256). Morgenthau

recognized that “the balancing process has frequently led to the substitution of one predominant power, disturbing the balance, for another one” (256). Hence, we have the limitation in realism of being able to *explain* the cycle of war, but neither *prevents* it nor offer a realistic scenario where the necessity of the “safety valve” of war is thoroughly reduced.

I also feel it is unlikely that classic realist principles which presuppose certain rules such as “suspect everybody” and “always ally with the weaker side,” as well as essential conditions like “multi-polarity,” “roughly equal capabilities,” and “no ideological pressures” (Lecture Week 3) will exist simultaneously in real world scenarios.

In contrast, the neo-realist perspective endorsed by Waltz proposes that balance of power is not driven as much by power-seeking principles and conditions as it is by the structure of the system. The distribution of capabilities across the system results in a structural polarity (bipolar is best) where a preponderance of power resides in a small number of main players (Dunne and Schmidt 98). Alliances are formed within the structure to satisfy the need for security (“Structural Causes” 305), but may also have interest in economic interdependence (Lamy 128). Grieco added that states may seek relative gains through international cooperation to increase their combined capabilities and improve their position within the structure (Lamy 129).

A global hegemony like the United States may also emerge under rare and special conditions to provide order in the system (Lamy 128) through “liberal trading regimes,” “stable international security,” and the “provision of international security” (Gilpin 479). Robert Jervis adds that the presence of the hegemon may also reduce security concerns and establish hierarchy (194). This outcome challenges the assertion of anarchy in both views, but especially that of neo-realism since the structure depends on it so much.

For realists, the “most important manifestation of the balance of power ... is to be found ... in the relations between one nation or alliance of nations and another alliance” (“Balance of Power” 244). For neo-realists, what is most important is the system-wide arrangement of the major actors – polarity – and its influence on outcomes. Waltz trades Morgenthau’s “relational” distribution of capabilities across *multiple* spheres of dominant and dependent systems for a *singular* sphere of system-wide capabilities held by a few players and defined by anarchy, not merely conditioned by it. But if unipolarity does away with anarchy, and I think it does, that lessens the ability of neo-realism to explain both the genesis and future transformation of the international balance of power.

Realism is inductive, explaining system outcomes by analyzing interactions of “internal” unit level relations. Neo-realism is deductive, unconcerned with unit relations since they are all undifferentiated “like units” (“Political Structures” 294), attributing outcomes to the influence of “external” anarchy and position of states within the structure. Thus, as a systems theory neo-realism can explain some of the *how* but little of the *why*.

For example, Waltz says that systems are “transformed if one ordering principle replaces another” (“Political Structures 294”), but that structure only changes when the system changes (299). Viewing the U.S. as a global hegemon and “central authority” who plays influential roles with global institutions and has the other states hierarchically positioned behind it, the anarchy assumption becomes suspect. Though neo-realism can account for hegemonic stability in a structural sense, the structural explanation’s dependence on anarchy fails to explain the act of structural transformation. One must look at the unit “relational” level for that. As such neo-realism sacrifices meaningful and deeper levels of explanation over theoretical simplicity, while realism explains structural changes better.

System Definition. Schweller and Priess note that, “For traditional realists, the international system is composed of units, interactions, and structure” (“Tale” 8). For neo-realists, “a system is composed of a structure and the interacting units” (“Political Structures” 291). Again, in Waltz’s effort to exclude normative components and achieve simplicity, he tosses aside the most important piece, unit level interactions. The cost is too high. For the neo-realists, the end of the Cold War and onset of a new system must be explained as a structural change, yet the structural change itself cannot be explained. The realists can point to power interests in the interactions between the USSR and the U.S., and this is a better explanation.

Does Classical Realism or Neo-Realism Better Explain Iran’s Current Behavior?

In *Tehran’s Take: Understanding Iran’s U.S. Policy*, Mohsen Milani describes Iran’s counter containment strategy as having multiple components (46-62). First, they’ve increased trade with the European Union to sow discord between the U.S. and the E.U. (52). Secondly, they’ve sought to counterbalance the U.S. by signing significant military and economic deals with Russia and China (52). Thirdly, they rewarded Saudi Arabia and other allies with big oil contracts (53). Fourthly, they created “spheres of influence” in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and in Palestinian areas by pouring cash into pro-Iran groups.

Milani added, “Iran’s policies ... suggest that when Iran feels threatened and its legitimate security needs and national interests are ignored or undermined, it acts more mischievously than when it feels secure (59). Which theory explains these actions better?

The realist would interpret the actions of Iran as being consistent with that of a power maximizer looking to expand their interests through every mechanism possible, be it military, economic or alliances. They would see Iran as disrupting the balance of power in the sphere

of the Middle East and be highly suspicious of their plans to obtain nuclear weapons. The recent alliances, trading and oil contracts would be seen as individual components of an overall strategy of aggression that may need to be confronted by power and force.

The neo-realist would interpret Iran's actions in light of the system-wide structure, seeing Iran as a security maximizer. Ignoring Iran's ideology and form of government, they'd point to unipolarity as influencing the military and economic choices consistent with Iran's structural position. The trading, oil contracts, economic choices and alliances would be chalked up as structural balancing and the pursuit of other interests besides power and war.

Conclusion

Neo-realist theory adequately overcomes classical realist limitations on philosophical perspective, power definitions and states' interests while supporting rational decisions. Realism overcomes similar neo-realist limitations on the system definition and explaining the transformation of balances of power. While both theories are helpful, realism explains current events in Iran better due to its assessment of power interests and unit level interactions that allow for systemic transformation beyond status quo and anarchic-dependent causes. Other items besides structure, such as ideology and Russian interactions, must be taken into account to predict future outcomes in Iran. With this in mind, neo-realism may overcome some limitations of realism, but not in the most critical area of predicting international outcomes and structural transformation.

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