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Neo-realism and the Balance of Power in Southeast Asia

Review paper

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This paper reviews neo-realism, an influential paradigm in the study of international relations. This paper will first describe the key elements of this school of thought, then point out its overlap with other paradigms, as well as its advantages and disadvantages. Then, more specifically, the author will examine its appliance in the balance of power in the Southeast Asia area with a focus on the relationships among the United States, China, and Vietnam.

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews neo-realism, an influential paradigm in the study of international relations. This paper will first describe the key elements of this school of thought, then point out its overlap with other paradigms, as well as its advantages and disadvantages. Then, more specifically, the author will examine its appliance in the balance of power in the Southeast Asia area with a focus on the relationships among the United States, China, and Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION OF NEO-REALISM AND ITS KEY ELEMENTS

According to Powell (1994), neo-realism, together with neo-liberalism, is one of the most influential contemporary approaches to international relations. The two perspectives have dominated international relations theory for the last decade. Neo-realism, as also known as structural realism, was first introduced by Kenneth Waltz in his 1979 book titled “Theory of International Politics.” This paradigm helps to reformulate the classical realist tradition proposed by famous realists such as Hans Morgenthau, Edward H. Carr, and Thucydides.

To start with, according to neo-realism, states are great powers and the main actors in international politics. These states also strive for power. However, a difference from classical realism view lies in the reason why they pursue power. Unlike in the theory of realists like Han Morgenthau (1947), human nature does not play a crucial role in gaining power among states, but the context and structure or architecture of the international system does. Clearly, there is not a centralized authority above states, which means there is no guarantee that one state will

not be attacked or invaded by another. This encourages states to gain power to become more powerful and feel secure. It is the states' desire to protect themselves by power-seeking actions that result in anarchy.

The second assumption is that states possess military capability and can harm other states. Mearsheimer (2001) believes each state can create some harm to its neighboring countries. To broaden Mearsheimer's idea, Russett (2012) claims "great powers typically have strong military forces able to exercise force at a distance and wide-ranging-even global-interests to fight for" (p.101). However, this military capability differs among states and changes accordingly when time goes by.

Uncertainty is one of the leading reasons for states to compete, according to the structural realism point of view. States can never be sure of other states' intentions. It is difficult for states to tell whether a certain state is satisfied with the current system or wants more power to make the system imbalanced. Whether or not other states will utilize their military forces to urge a change is another big question to state leaders and decision-makers.

As Mearsheimer (2001) claimed "power is a means to an end and the ultimate end is survival" (p.78), every player in the game, as every actor in the system, both regional and international, has to attempt to survive. They are forced to make alliances and seek power to protect themselves. Other goals in domestic politics can never be achieved if states cannot maintain their autonomy and territory. Therefore, the rising power of one certain state in the world political system is considered a threat to others. Waltz (1979) assumes "states seek to

ensure their survival” (p. 91), which contributes to the “self-help” principle behind anarchy. Since survival is a prerequisite to any other of the varied ends of state, this is a fair assumption in a world where the security of states is not assured. Waltz (1979) also states that world structures are formed by the action of their units. Whether those units live, prosper, or die depends on their own efforts. Both systems are formed and maintained on a principle of self-help that applies to the units.

Furthermore, there is one important assumption about neo-realism in which all states are unitary and rational actors in a complex world. They have rights to cooperate for mutual benefits as they make economic, diplomatic, and military moves in the game. Sometimes, they may miscalculate and make some severe errors, but they possess military capability and can make a decision to stay still, attack other states, or negotiate and cooperate.

STRUCTURAL REALISM AND ITS VARIANTS

In the structural realism point of view, there is a division in state behaviors: defensive realists and offensive realists. The difference lies in their discussion about the question: how much power is enough? While Waltz (1979) implies how a state, as an offensive actor, will be eventually punished if it keeps seeking power at the expenses of others, Mearsheimer (2001) favors the opposite view which indicates that states have to fight for entire survival apart from protecting themselves. The reason states have to move and act like offensive actors, even though they do not want to pursue hegemony, is because they are unsure of other states’ intentions. They are afraid of other states, as they operate in a self-help system, and there is no

better way to keep them safe than competing to become more powerful. It is easily seen that even if no state makes a move, others may assume that this state has its own plots for changing the world system.

Another distinction between offensive and defensive realists is their answer to the question of how much power is enough for each state. According to offensive realists, states' main and ultimate goals should be hegemony, since this is the best way to guarantee their survival. States, as a result, always look for and seize any favorable opportunities to maximize their power. Defensive realists agree with Waltz's idea that it would be foolish to achieve hegemony by overexpansion. Instead, states can strive for an "appropriate amount of power" (Waltz 1979, p. 40). Mearsheimer (2001) believes that if any state becomes too powerful, balancing will occur. He illustrates by giving examples of the failures of Napoleonic France (1792-1815), Imperial Germany (1900-18), and Nazi Germany (1933-45) when they attempted to become European hegemonies. Nonetheless, offensive realists have their counter-arguments. They claim that balancing is normally ineffective, and sometimes, threatened states make a choice of buck-passing instead of engaging in a balancing coalition. However, both offensive and defensive realists share the same perspective that wars are quite unlikely if both states are capable of nuclear power. In Mearsheimer's words (2001), nuclear weapons have "little utility for offensive purposes" (p.82).

Kenneth Waltz's "Theory of International Politics" (1979) and John Mearsheimer's "The Tragedy of Great Power" (2001) are two core theoretical works for the neo-realism

paradigm. They are also two representatives for defensive realism and offensive realism subdivisions of structural realism. In his book, Waltz elaborates a set of core principles of neorealist international relations theory, which distinguishes him from previous classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau and Edward H. Carr. This book starts a movement named “Neoclassical realist” and publicizes the term “bandwagoning”. Another well-known book of Waltz is “Man, the State, and War” (1959). Another work in this school of thought is the New York Times Best Seller “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy” that Mearsheimer co-authored with Stephen Walt in 2007.

Although these authors published their works in different points of time, they share the same elements of this paradigm. They all agree that states possess different power and operate in the self-help system. The structure of the world system is anarchy.

The famous concept of “security dilemma” was first introduced by John H. Herz in his book “Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma” (1950). Herz (1950) states that most steps or moves a great power takes to enhance its own security decrease the security of other states.

OVERLAPPING BETWEEN NEO-REALISM WITH REALISM AND NEO-LIBERALISM

In general, both classical and structural realists believe that power is the most important factor in international relations. Neo-realism "is progressive scientific redemption of classical

realist scholarship” (Ashley, 1984, p. 260). As states operate in an anarchy system, power will help to define their positions and influence. They also compete among themselves to make sure they gain more power or at the least survive. While classical realists argue that human nature is the main driving force which leads people to seek power, neo-realists examine the context of the entire system of world politics. Moreover, the level of analysis from both the classical and structural realists view is states. Every explanation is state-centric. Moreover, these two paradigms share mutual norms including security, sovereignty, autonomy, and national interests, despite their distinctions of process. Classical realism’s process is to seek power, whereas the structural realism process is power security quest.

Furthermore, neo-liberalists also regard states as unitary rational actors, especially as economic actors that will affect the world political system with their activities. Both neo-realists and neo-liberalists share the state-centric perspective which believes states dominate global affairs. Sterling-Folker (2012) proclaims both paradigms treat states “as unified entities with particular, specifiable goals, rather than composites of many different domestic actors and competing interests” (p. 115). Besides, these two schools of thought are heavily based on rationality as states are supposed to make decisions according to “a set of self-interested priorities” and “a strategic cost-to-benefit analysis of possible choices, reactions, and outcomes” (Sterling-Folker, 2012, p. 115).

STRUCTURAL REALISM AND ITS ADVANTAGES

Structural realism leads people to ask three main questions: Why do states want power? How much power do they want? What causes war?. Structural realists attempt to describe, explain, and analyze world events from their own perspectives. The two first questions are clearly answered in different ways by offensive and defensive realists (see Structural Realism and Its Variants part).

Neo-realists hold the idea that anarchy is the nature of the international structure. The distribution of capabilities also defines the nature of an international system measured by the number of great powers. The anarchic ordering principle is decentralized, and there is no authority over the main actors of this system, states. Each state seeks its own interests in the self-help system, and these interests will never be subordinated to the interests of other states.

To each state, survival is the ultimate goal. Consequently, states always look for feasible chances to maximize their power. This is the driving force to determine their behavior in the international arena. Moreover, each state can never be sure of other states' future intentions. In other words, there is a lack of trust among states. There is a high possibility that states have common interests, but the uncertainty makes it hard for them to cooperate. They are fearful of relative gains made by other states, as well as the possibility of dependence on other states.

From the neo-realism viewpoint, there are essentially three possible systems according to changes in the distribution of capabilities and defined by the number of great powers within the international system. A unipolar system contains only one great power, whereas a bipolar system contains two great powers. The last system is a multipolar system which contains more than two

great powers. Neo-realists conclude that a bipolar system is more stable because it is less prone to great power war and systemic change. In contrast, a multipolar system is less stable because balancing can only occur through internal balancing as there are no extra great powers with which to form alliances (Waltz 1979, 132-133). Since there is only internal balancing in a multipolar system, rather than external balancing, there is less opportunity for miscalculations and therefore less chance of great powers war (Waltz 1979, 133). That is a simplification and a theoretical ideal (Humphreys 2012, 391).

From my point of view, neo-realism unquestionably explains why states want power, analyzes how much power states should attempt to control, and provides reasons which lead states to war. It is predictable that wars are likely if a certain state aims to maximize its power at the expenses of other states or tries to change the polarity of the current world political system. The imbalance of power and unfair distribution of world assets easily cause conflicts and disputes among states.

Recently, China has been the fastest growing economy and is well known as the second largest world economy. This state is also the single foreign holder of U.S. debt, and its military spending is third in the world after the United States and Russia (Jentleson 2014, 426). It is suspected that China will take advantage of its rapid rise, as well as its increasing military strength to threaten its neighboring countries. This can be seen through an examination of China's relationship with Vietnam. Will the threat China has created lately change the balance of power in the current world system? Nobody can be certain of this nation's steps. As a rational,

unitary main actor in the world, or as President George Bush called a “responsible stakeholder”, China plays a crucial role in the possible change of the international system.

STRUCTURAL REALISM AND ITS CRITICS

Although structural realists believe that states are the main actors and major players in the international relations game, they still ignore some very important elements. First and foremost, it is worth acknowledging the increasingly crucial role that non-state actors have recently played in the world system. Lipschutz (1992, 389) and Matthews (1997, 50) argue that state autonomy is in decline, and globalization empowers a web of non-state actors, including multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and transnational activist networks. Similarly, Drenzer (2007, 4) proclaims that the weakening ability of states lies in their failure to fulfill traditional functions, such as national security and economic stability and prosperity. To stress the rising influence of non-state actors, Fidler (2008, 259) develops a new “theory of an open-source anarchy” since he believes “the nature of anarchy has shifted from a condition monopolized by States to one in which anarchy has become ‘open source’ and accessible to non-state actors in unprecedented ways.” There is no doubt that the appearance of non-state actors significantly change the entire world political system. There has emerged a significant number of multinational corporations (MNCs), intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), as well as global markets. These establishments in the international arena have had a considerable impact on world politics. That is the reason states cannot function well if they take no notice of non-state actors and their effects.

In other words, the lack of international regimes is one of the disadvantages of this paradigm. According to Krasner (1983, 2), international regimes consist of “sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations.” States have created and operated some formal international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) or the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other informal international institutional arrangements. There is no denying international organizations and institutions play a vital role in regulating the activities and resolving conflicts among states. Without the international regime, the world system easily turns into a phrase of disorder. It is necessary to have an authority which observes all states and leads their behaviors or at least takes part in negotiation and building trust among them. This is a vital part of the neoliberal school of thought, which emphasizes a certain agreed upon set of rules and norms as being of great importance in enhancing cooperation and minimizing conflicts. Besides, international regimes will connect actors who possess some common expectations and values. Their convergence will aid in world peace. In short, the world will keep its anarchy and never reach the potential peaceful system unless states engage in global institutions and regimes.

Furthermore, neo-realism is criticized by democratic peace theorists. From the neo-realism view, since each state is not structurally barred from using force, war may break out any time. Waltz (1979, 102) states, “Among states, the state of nature is a state of war.” Mearsheimer (2012, 79) shares the same viewpoint by describing the world system as “a world of ceaseless

security competition”. They both believe that world peace is hardly won. However, Russett (2012, 101) added the three Kantian influences which indicate that “democracies will refrain from using force against other democracies.” This idea was initiated by French historian and social scientist Alexis de Tocqueville in his book “Democracy in America”. He states “war becomes rarer” if countries, despite their differences in language, values, and norms, all fear war and love peace.

Another drawback is that cultural aspects are taken for granted by structural realists. Ross (2009, 134) emphasizes the great importance of culture, claiming that it “provides a framework for organizing people’s daily works, locating the self and others in them, making sense of actions and interpreting the motives of others.” Besides, according to Ross (2009), culture is a ground on which one analyzes interests, links identities to political actions, and helps to explain them.

STRUCTURAL REALISM AND A CURRENT ISSUE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

On July 15, 2014, China announced that Hai Yang Shi You (HYSY) 981, one of China’s mega oil drilling platforms, would be operated in disputed waters lying within Vietnam’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (Hayton 2014). Even though China insisted the operation of HYSY 981 was for commercial exploration and would be towed back to Hainan Island when it finished its duty, Vietnam and other neighboring countries believed HYSY 981 and its operations broke the compromise China had agreed upon with them. Consequently, there was a physical confrontation at sea between Chinese and Vietnamese ships. Seeing it as a chance to

have a real impact in the area, the United States of America eased the ban on lethal weapons to its past enemy, Vietnam. The U.S. State Department announced that the U.S was partially lifting the bans on arm sales to Vietnam to help its maritime security on Thursday, October 2nd, 2014, when Secretary of State John Kerry and Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister Pham Binh Minh met in Washington D.C.

Undoubtedly, China has attacked its weaker neighbor country, Vietnam, and threatened other island claimants in Southeast Asia. The desire for territory leads China to create disputes with Vietnam. From the American perspective, the way China has been maximizing its power and influence in the area results in the imbalance of shared power in the current political system. It is certain that as China attempts to upgrade its position in the global system, it does so at the expense of other neighboring countries, including Vietnam. This is considered the application case of security dilemma. To react in this case, balancing is utilized to confront China's aggression, a significant security threat. There are two ways in which Vietnam balances its power: internal balancing and external balancing.

Internal balancing occurs when Vietnam sees how dependent its economy is on the Chinese economy and makes an attempt to get out of this bullied linkage. In this way, Vietnam grows its own capabilities by increasing economic growth. Vietnam also increases its military spending. Vietnam also needs to strengthen its force and especially boost its maritime security in case the same incidents unexpectedly occur in the future. External balancing occurred as Vietnam entered the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement. The participation of Vietnam

as a party in the TPP Agreement is another linkage between the two countries. Both the US and Vietnam have an interest in maintaining freedom of navigation and trade in the South China Sea. This is how Vietnam joins alliances to check the power of more powerful states or alliances. In the diplomatic field, Vietnam has been calling for help and justice from the international community to ensure its survival. In the military field, the partial lifting of arms sales embargo from the U.S. to Vietnam is a vivid example of external balancing.

The presence of American weaponry in the disputed sea will put a pressure on China's expansion dream and stop it in the short term. Other announcements and diplomatic support from the States for Vietnam are highly welcomed by other pacifists as it is a positive move in gaining regional stability and maintaining the current political system. Had America reduced arm sales or had the States not partially lifted the ban, Vietnam would have been very vulnerable and easily attacked by the People's Republic of China.

Furthermore, a bigger question is how China reacts in this case. It is easily predicted that China easily holds different perceptions about this diplomatic step. China is expanding its borders and has not settled the disputes with other claimants in Paracel Islands and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea (Kapila 2014). The presence of U.S. lethal weapons causes several difficulties to China while it tries to increasingly influence other countries in the area to gain more benefits in roundtable negotiations.

Moreover, if the American government decides to allow its weapon companies to sell lethal arms to Vietnam more freely, China will assume that the U.S. will help other allies in the

area to boost their defensive ability, too. The stronger other claimants become, the more worried China will get. The misperceptions between America and China will possibly lead to conflicts and negatively affect mutual flourishing trade, as well as breaking other linkages between two of the greatest powers in the world system. If China-US relations worsen, the US has no benefits. These are the reasons the American government should consider carefully before making a final decision about whether or not the arm sales embargo it has imposed on Vietnam since 1984 should be completely removed.

It is clearly seen that the U.S. and China are not sure of each other's future intentions, and that is how the current political system operates with its main actors as states. In this case, wars are feasible as the U.S. and China are both great powers. However, wars can be avoided if each great power considers their steps considerably. China should consider whether or not it should be an offensive actor anymore, since the world is now globalized and the activities of international institutions appear to regulate it.

In this case, neo-realism and its balance of power theory helps to explain diplomatic and military moves of China, Vietnam, and the United States. Nevertheless, what neo-realists possibly fail to see is the domestic politics of each country. The domestic politics and internal forces of each state have a real effect on how it acts in global affairs.

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