

# **The Realist and Liberal Positions on the Role of International Organizations in Maintaining World Order**

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## **Abstract**

In the international relations (IR)' theoretical and empirical studies, international regime studies emerged as a reaction to inadequacies of the concepts of authority, international order and organization. Over more than half a century, realism has been skeptical of international law. In both classical and neorealist approaches, states are depicted as seeking to maximize power and producing a balance of power. This study examines two paradigms, realism and liberalism, in an attempt to take a closer look at what each of these schools has to offer to the international relations. To be able to carry out such an evaluation each of these paradigms will be analyzed with respect to their positions on the following principles: unit of analysis, key concepts, behavioral dynamics, interstate system, peace and war, and last but not least explanatory power. Discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each of these paradigms will help in determining which of these approaches is the most persuasive.

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**Keywords:** Realism, neo-realism, liberalism, international regimes, international organizations, global governance

## **Introduction**

In International Relations (IR)' theoretical and empirical studies, international regime studies emerged as a reaction to inadequacies of the concepts of authority, international order and organization. Over more than half a century, the dominant IR paradigm, between 1950-1975 classical realism and now neo-realism, has been realism (Kuhn, 1970), Both realist approaches have been skeptical of international law. According to Morgenthau (1948-1993), international law is a primitive type of law in which there is a lack of precision inherent in the decentralized nature of

international law. In both classical and neorealist approaches, states are depicted as seeking to maximize power, relative to each other, and producing a balance of power or seeking to produce balance of power (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979).

But what does anarchy mean? Institutionalism approach defines it as the lack of authority that can enforce agreements among states or, more generally, among the actors in the system (Axelrod and Keohane, 1993: 226-27). According to structural realism (neo-realism), anarchy is the lack of a central authority in a strategic setting in which the threat of force is omnipresent (Waltz, 1979). Waltz describes many realms as anarchic in which the actors, while posing a threat to each other, are not threatening to use force. Whatever definition we accept as our starting point, one thing is clear; anarchy emerges in particular environments where the lack of norms and rules creates a chaotic situation in which actors' relationships with each other are disorganized and possibly deteriorating.

Both the dominant approaches in IR theory and the US's unilateral decision to close the gold window and later to float the dollar in 1971 (Ruggie, 1972) gave rise to study of international regimes. Regime analysts started to fill this vacuum in the literature. They assumed that patterns of state actions are influenced by norms, yet that norm-governed behavior is wholly consistent with the pursuit of national interest. Hence, Haggard (1987) claims that the regime literature can be viewed as an experiment in reconciling the idealist and realist traditions. In sum, as Keohane (1982) puts it, we study regimes because we want to understand the world order.

This study will examine two paradigms, realism and liberalism, in an attempt to take a closer look at what each of these schools has to offer to international relations. To be able to carry out such an evaluation each of these paradigms will be analyzed with respect to their positions on the following principles: unit of analysis, key concepts, behavioral dynamics, interstate system, peace and war, and last but not least explanatory power. Discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each of these paradigms with respect to the above mentioned criteria will help us in determining which of these approaches is the most persuasive. Strange (1983) claims that regime analysis is doomed to failure because of the "imprecision" and "woolliness" of the concept (p. 1983). So, let us look at whether we can come up with a clear definition of governance, International Organizations (IO), and regimes.

## **Definitions**

### **Definition of Governance**

Rosenau (1992) states that governance is a more broader and surrounding term than government or non-governmental actors. It is a

"system of rule" without, necessarily, authoritative institutions that functions because of its acceptance "by the majority (or, at least, by the most powerful of those it affects)." (p. 4). Furthermore, Rosenau (1995:16) remarks that governance consists of "systems of rule at all levels of human activity -- from the family to the international organization -- in which the pursuit of goals through the exercise of control has trans-national repercussions." Finkelstein (1995) describes it as "governing, without sovereign authority, relationships that transcend national frontiers. Global governance is doing internationally what governments do at home."

### **Definition of International Organizations**

Cox and Jacobson (1972) argue that international organizations are "*a system of interaction including all of those who directly participate in decisions taken within the framework of the organization, and in addition all officials and individuals who in various ways actively determine the positions of the direct participants.*" (p. 16). Rochester (1986) notes that that "international organization can be viewed as the set of instruments for making and implementing 'transnational policy' or 'international public policy' rather than merely as a patterned set of international interactions" (p. 812). Also, he states that the application "*asks only for a more focused examination of the structures and processes associated with these institutions -- warts and all*" (p.812)

### **Definition and the Scope of the Regime**

Let us ask the same question Haggard (1987) asks at the outset. "*How do we know a regime when we see one?*" (p. 493). Krasner (1983) rightly argues that "regime" is sometimes used in a purely descriptive way to define a group of a range of state behavior in a particular issue-area. Yet, in this case the potential for tautology is very high. According to the second definition, principles and norms are at the core of the international regimes. Rules and decision making in this process provide more specific injunctions for appropriate behavior. But this second definition also appears to be imprecise, because actor's expectation from norms, rules, decision making procedures might be quite different, and, in fact, actors' perceptions of these phenomena might dramatically differ. Keohane and Nye (1987:741), and Haggard and Simmons (1987:495) claim that problems exist in operationalizing this definition. They maintain that with this definition, international regime is extended beyond the institutionalized results of formal interstate agreements, and the boundaries between non-regime and regime situations become rather ambiguous.

Young's definition appears to be more restricted, which considers regimes as multilateral agreements among states, aiming to regulate national

action within an issue-area (Young, 1982: p.36). Accordingly, “*international regimes cover a wide spectrum in terms of functional scope, geographical domain, and membership*” (Young, 1989: p.11). International regimes, according to this definition, range from the polar bear agreement to the broader concerns of the arrangements of outer space to global regimes for international air transport.

In light of above explanations it is obvious that for a regime to exist there should be cooperation among the actors. Whatever definition is chosen, it is also clear that regimes facilitate the ‘institutionalization’ of a chaotic- if not anarchic- environment, namely international arena. Accordingly, they are also closely associated with ‘order’ and ‘stability’. But they might cause a chaos as well, as it happened with the collapse of Bretton Woods’s monetary regime in the late 1960.

International regimes have served as a label to identify the patterns of what John Ruggie (1975) called “*institutional collective behavior*” (p.557). Some also extended the regime studies to analyze the international security issues. For instance, Robert Jervis (1978) identified a Concert of Europe Regime (p.167), which based on security of the relevant states. Yet, he could not find a regime in the central strategic relationship between the United States and Soviet Union. Regimes can cover various areas such as trade regimes (GATT etc.), monetary regimes (Bretton Wood etc.), human rights regimes (created by various treaties), the oceans regime, security regimes and so on.

Regimes are mainly seen as responses to the problem of collective action problem in international arena, especially among the advanced capitalist countries. Snidal (1985) stresses that collective action is antithetical to the idea that a hegemon provides the public good. Haggard and Simmons (1987) suggest that when it comes to the regime studies the boundaries separating international and domestic politics blurs. “*Governments*”, they maintain, “*when making choices about regime creation and compliance, try to preserve the benefits of cooperation while minimizing the costs that may fall on politically important groups*” (p.516) They also argue that growing interdependence means that groups at the domestic level have an interest on regime formation and maintenance.

In IR literature, many times, the word organization and the word institution have been used interchangeably. Most scholars, today, believe that international institutions- should be read as organizations- are sets of rules meant to govern international behavior. Ironically, an offensive realist Mearshmier (1994) gives a precise definition of what international institutions mean “*institutions are sets of rules that stipulate the ways in which states should cooperate and compete*” (p.7). Rules and decision-making procedures are simply the rules in this definition. Yet, simplification

in this respect might darken our understanding in terms of actors' perception of the institution- Jervis's (1975) analysis of 'perception and misperception' should be remembered at this point.

### **Realism vs. Liberalism**

While it may be easy to depict these schools as being different, many tend to overlook the fact that within these schools of thoughts there are many disagreements. These two schools of thought within different groups have emphasized one level of analysis over another. Therefore, we tend to see the fundamental realists concentrating on human nature, the constitutional realists emphasizing the domestic society and the structural realists focusing on the interstate system (Doyle, 1997). Each of the liberal theorists, like the realists, makes some assumption about the interstate system, human nature and domestic society. In fact, the liberal institutionalists focus on human nature, while the commercial pacifists emphasize domestic society, and last but not least the liberal internationalists concentrate on the interstate system.

### **Unit of Analysis**

At the most basic premises of these schools of thoughts we have differing opinions over the unit of analysis. Realists believe that states are the key unit of analysis. The main reason why realists tend to view states as the major actors in world politics is the fact that they are not only unitary but rational as well. Hence, the study of international relations, for them, is the study of relations among these units (Viotti and Kauppi 1993: p. 6). What about non-state actors? Well, for realists non-state actors, such as international organizations, may desire a place in the international system, however, they believe that such actors will not have any significant effect on what goes on in world affairs.

Although liberalists accept that states are important, they believe that there are other important actors such as intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), transnational actors as well as multinational corporations (MNCs). Liberalists believe that such actors, among many, can have substantial influence in areas such as agenda settings. However, we tend to see the neo-liberalists accepting realists' arguments that states are major unitary rational actors in the world politics where anarchy is a major shaping force for state preferences and actions (Grieco 1993). On the other hand, the neo-liberalists also believe that institutions are important for they can help states cooperate by reducing verification costs, creating iterativeness and making it easier to punish cheaters. Hence, it seems that for liberalists states as well as non-state actors are equally important; this makes it somewhat difficult to test their assumptions.

## **Key Concepts**

Each school of thought tends to make different assumptions, therefore, emphasize different concepts in their studies and analyses. The realists, for instance, tend to focus on anarchy, power, self-help, security, and balance of power (Waltz, 1959; Morgenthau, 1977; Grieco, 1993). Liberalists, on the other hand, concentrate on domestic politics, interdependence, decision-making, transnationalism as well as regimes (Strange, 1982; Viotti and Kauppi, 1993).

## **Behavioral Dynamics**

As it was discussed earlier, realists believe that states, which are unitary and rational, are the most important actors in world politics. These states, according to the realists, seek to maximize their own interest or national objectives in their foreign policy (Viotti and Kauppi, 1993: 10). Liberalists, on the other hand, tend to believe that foreign policy making and transnational processes involve vigorous events such as conflict, bargaining, coalition as well as compromise, which in return may result in non-optimal outcomes (Viotti and Kauppi, 1993:10).

## **Interstate System**

While realists acknowledge the importance of the interstate system, it is in fact the neorealists, especially the work of Kenneth Waltz (1979) elevated the role of interstate system in understanding world politics. According to Waltz, if we want to understand the causes of war we should focus not on the individual or national level but on the interstate system, which is made up of a structure and interacting units. Hobbes, who is identified by Doyle as a structuralist realist, also move away from human nature and the domestic system by focusing solely on the international system, especially interstate anarchy which he believes to be the defining cause of the state of war (Doyle, 1997: 123). Hence, structural realists as well as the neorealists believe that the solution is for states to act as “structural units” in the system and balance power against power.

Whereas the realists tend to emphasize the importance of the interstate system, the liberalists pay less attention to the system and more to the numerous units within the system. This, of course, does not mean that none of the liberalists focuses on the interstate system. In fact, Doyle argues that liberal internationalists, such as Kant, concentrate on the interstate system (Doyle, 1997: 211). Yet, Kant himself does not seem to pay more attention to the interstate system than to the domestic arena.

## War and Peace

All these schools of thought deal with international relations and international politics. However, each school tends to focus on a different part of the field, mainly as a result of the different assumptions they hold. The realists, for instance, assume “*in varying degrees that the best description of world politics is a ‘jungle’ characterized by a ‘state of war’, not a single continuous war or constant wars but the constant possibility of war among all states*” (Doyle, 1997: 18). Hence, according to the realists, politics is wrapped up in a constant state of war mainly due to human nature, the character of the states, and/or the structure of the interstate system allowing wars to occur. As a result, realists believe that states end up being preoccupied with anarchy, self-help, maximization of relative power, national security, preparation for war, and calculations of relative balances of power. In fact, Morgenthau maintained that all politics was a struggle for power where nations struggled to protect their national interests and where the power of a nation(s) could be most effectively limited by the power of another nation(s) (Vasquez, 1998: 37). Realists believe that since the Second World War “*all nations, regardless of location, history, size, political orientations, leadership style, government form, and military and economic strength, were motivated by the same goal– maintenance of world order according to the logic of power*” (O’Loughlin, 1989: 292). Therefore, the realists’ assumptions lead them to emphasize conflict in their studies, as well as to believe that a mechanism for avoiding conflict is a balance of power.

Liberalists, on the other hand, reject “*the view of world politics as a ‘jungle,’ Liberals’ view of world politics is that of a cultivable ‘garden’, which combines a state of war with the possibility of a state of peace*” (Doyle, 1997: 19). Liberalists, indeed, tend to believe that since the state is not a unitary, rational actor in a state of war, a “*state’s interests are [then] determined, not by its place in the international system, but by which of the many interests, ideals, and activities of its members captures (albeit temporarily) governmental authority*” (Doyle, 1997: 19). Liberalists also tend to differentiate between democratic regimes and non-democratic regimes, and therefore, the state of war for many of the liberalists only exists outside the separate peace that exists among democracies. As a result of the liberalists’ assumptions, we find them concentrating more on cooperation, than on conflict. In fact, liberalists take a step further to make the argument that in order to promote cooperation and avoid conflict there needs to be a spread of democracy, higher levels of development, increasing the role of international organizations and last but not least promoting international law.

The importance of the assumptions of these fields, pertaining war and peace, lies in their ability to provide us with testable hypotheses that will enhance our knowledge about the process of war and peace. Since the end

of the Second World War, when power politics (or *realpolitik*) began to re-emerge as an important tool for decision makers, scholars have been inspired to gather data in order to test hypotheses about the world. Furthermore, many of the variables in the COW project, whether we are talking about the CINC score, alliances, or conflict indices (such as the severity or length of a war) are all considered to be derived from power politics. However, realists still have not been able to provide us with a clear definition of balance of power and polarity, for instance, which would help us further to evaluate their assumptions.

The liberalists have of course provided us with different assumptions to test. Liberalism has helped to develop the research of conflict and trade, democratic peace, domestic politics, etc. Nonetheless, just like the realists, the liberalists still have left a lot of areas not ventured. Much of that has to do with the fact that the models put forth by the liberalists are more complex than those of the realists. For instance, liberalists assume that the state is not the only major actor in world affairs, but in fact that there are other important actors such as the intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and transnational actors, and that there are more than one issue that may dominate the political agenda. However, the question that remains is how do these actors interact with each other, and when and which issues dominate the political agenda?

### **Explanatory Power**

To be able to understand and evaluate these schools of thought on the whole, it is important to ascertain how complicated these schools of thoughts are, and how much of international relations they are able to explain.

When looking at these schools of thought one has to admit that realism appears to be the most parsimonious. Realism appears to be particularly attractive since not only are its assumptions much simpler than the other school, but also their models incorporate less variables mainly due to the fact that they believe that power explains most of what goes on in the world. Liberalists, for instance, have complex models for they assume that more than one issue and more than one actor may dominate the political agenda. Socialists also have complex models. It is easier to think of one state more powerful than another than to visualize conflict on a world scale based mainly on capitalist exploitation.

In order to progress in our understanding of international relations, it is very important that these schools of thought are able to resolve puzzles and irregularities that could not be explained before. The realists would tend to argue that their theory explains a lot more of international relations than the liberal school. They claim that since their theory is more parsimonious, they are able to use fewer elements to explain international politics. One must acknowledge that realist concepts such as security, power, anarchy,



alliances, and balance of power have played a much more important role in our empirical studies than the liberalists' concepts of interdependence and decision making. Thucydides' belief that "*the growth of Athenian power, which put fear into the Lacedaemonians and so compelled them into war*" (Woodruff, 1993: 15-16) is one of the most powerful and clear-cut statements of why states go to war. It is very difficult to find such a simple and direct statement in the liberalist school as well as in the socialist school that would shed light on international relations.

### **New phase: Globalization and international relations theory**

Good theory should be falsifiable and have empirical accuracy. An important contribution of liberalism is that it looks at the 'black-box' and uncovers how internal dynamics of institutions bring out different behaviors and external outcomes. Since approximately nineteenth century, it can be said that there are political development or progress. Although apparently there have been continuing conflicts, sometimes conflagrations, under the international stage there are trends of 'dyadic peace' stemming from domestic political development in terms of democracy (Russett and Oneal, 2001; Rousseau, 2005).

Good theory also solves a puzzle hidden in empirical phenomena and falsified discrepancy with the existing theory. For example, one crucial issue in terms of cooperation in the situation of anarchy is the issue of relative or absolute gain. If the game of international relations is only zero-sum-game, cooperation might not be possible. But if there is a room for absolute gain, in other words, if international relations are not necessarily zero-sum-game, cooperation is possible because actors can find or get mutual gains. It is one of the core arguments that Keohane (1986) claims in the case of regime. In this respect, Keohane's one of the important contribution is the fact that he helps to solve a puzzle between the Hobbesian interpretation of the world (no moral or legal restriction among states) and the Kantian explanation of the world ("*international politics...lie not in conflict...but in the trans-national social bonds...the relationship among all men in the community of mankind*") (Bull 2002 [1977]: 24); that is, even under the condition of anarchy in which selfish rational actors (states) pursue their interests, the shadow of future, retaliation, 'TIT-for-TAT' (Axelrod, 1984) make selfish rational actors (states) seek for cooperation and maintain international order.

Promising theory, we think, should be able to uncover a certain consistency throughout dynamic processes of empirical world; for example, progress and spread in terms of democratic institution, and evolution or accumulation of cooperation. Neorealism may expect the end of cold war is abnormal and returns to polarity. For example, Mearsheimer claims that stability after WWII was due to bipolar system in the Cold War. As the Cold

War, for him, the anarchic structure would aggravate political stability and there is possibility of war among major European powers (Mearsheimer, 1990). However, in the short term (for twenty years from 1990 to the present), real world makes progress in the opposite direction; in the long term, it is questionable whether other countries will actively attempt to seek for balancing amongst the western democratic states.

However, while contemporary globalization shows increasing democratization, deepening interdependence, and disaggregated actors, it also includes dark-side in terms of inequality and global terrorism. Especially, when it comes to non-state actors and global network of terrorists such as Al Qaeda, state-centric view cannot address this issue. Only when theory addresses internal system, individual actors, international collaboration and cooperation, can international society cope with it. Two implications regarding this issue can be derived both by neoliberalism and democratic peace. The one is the effect of spread of democracy and economic liberalization in terms of mitigating military conflicts. Spread of democracy would enable a society to encourage freedom and individual liberty that are stipulations of economic prosperity. For example, Bates explains when states transform from coercion and “*a means of predation*”(Bates, 2001:101) into institution of using its power to defend economic activity; that is, pure provider of public good such as security and peace, states would play a positive role for prosperity; if not, it results in violence as African failed states show. It implies how the character and thereby role of states differ and are important (Bates, 2001).

The other is how international society achieves cooperative relations through international institutions. Proper mechanism to maintaining international regime (Keohane, 1984) and the evolution of cooperation (Axelrod, 1984) may encourage continuing economic globalization and thereby contribute to avoiding mistake in 1930s.

## **Conclusion**

Only one theory cannot provide comprehensive explanation on the whole picture of international relations. Realism has contributed to explaining why conflicts among states occur. Liberalism, nevertheless, has explained the aspects of order in world politics. In addition, especially in globalization, international actors become more and more diversified ever before. Accordingly, state-centric views do provide less explanation about international affairs even when types of political system of a unit state put alongside. In the same vein, even in the context of conflicts in contemporary world politics, non-state actor or conflicts from disaggregated units become much more conspicuous than conflicts among states. As explained so far, we think liberalism has more explanatory power over the conflict and world

order; thus, liberalism is more parsimonious and persuasive than the other one.

It seems that ‘perpetual peace’ (Kant, 1957 [1795]) in world politics may be difficult to achieve in the near future. Contemporary new phase of the world that the post-Cold War era provides still faces with new type of conflicts such as global terrorism, although instances of waging war among states decrease. Nevertheless, when it comes to contention of ‘perpetual conflict’ in international politics based on namely ‘law’ throughout human nature and history (Morgenthau and Thompson, 1985 [1948]), it cannot choose but think of changing (progressive) types of international relations including inter-state relationships such as regional integration (EU), ‘security communities’ (Deutsch, 1957) as well as the effect of internal character of states-regime type; spreading democratic states in the world.

Herz (1951) asserts that a thought claiming that a society based wholly on a compassion is both desirable and possible is “political idealism”. Herz offers a new theory of what he calls “Realist Liberalism” as the solution between utopian idealism and cynical realism (p.146). Hence, we need to incorporate some of the liberalist and socialist elements in order to have a more comprehensive theory.

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