



Introduction *to* **International Relations**

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Chapter Three

Approaches to the Study of International Relations

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Introduction

Systematic study of international relations is a fairly recent development. It actually began in the inter-war years (after World War I) when some writers attempted to explore the nature of behaviour of states as it concerns war and peace. Hitherto, the field of international relations was studied as diplomatic history (Frankel, 1969, Adeniran, 1983). As a distinct field of intellectual inquiry, however, it required some theoretical and analytical tools and approaches that could be used to provide understanding to international phenomena and indeed, to the behaviour of states so that the infantile discipline could move beyond mere description of events. In this chapter, an attempt is made to examine two of the dominant approaches to the study of international relations: Idealism and Realism.

Idealist Approach

Idealist thoughts on international relations are anchored on the Platonic, Kantian and Hegelian traditions that particular forms of experience could be deciphered and inference made about them in relation to something beyond themselves. Moral experience, for instance, in relation to the ideal of 'good' and religious experience in relation to the ideal of God. Idealism is based on the assumption that human nature is 'good' having been created by God. It is believed that since human

nature is 'good', human beings will naturally abhor violence, conflicts, and wars. Like humans, nations will also naturally eschew violence save for the 'unjust' international system, which precipitates conflicts. To the idealists,

bad human behaviour is a product not of evil people, but of evil constitutions and structural arrangements that motivate people to act selfishly and to harm others—including making war (Kegley and Wittkopf, 1989).

In the inter-war years (1920s and 1930s), idealist thoughts gained currency among scholars and practitioners of international relations. To many, war was undesirable and preventable provided that there were institutional and legal frameworks to which members of the international system subscribe. They, therefore, recommended the formation of international organizations and promulgation of international laws and treaties that would regulate state behaviour and provide basis for mutual restraint and respect. This, by extension, could also lay the foundation for cooperation and peaceful conduct of interstate affairs. These, as argued by advocates of idealism, would ultimately engender international peace and security.

In the period between World War I (1914–1918) and World War II (1939–1945), world leaders found idealism appealing. Among such leaders were President Woodrow Wilson of the USA, Prime Ministers Lloyd George and Neville Chamberlain of Great Britain. In the First World War, these leaders established the League of Nations to prevent future wars. Beside the formation of the international organisation, there were several international legal instruments designed to prevent war. Instances of such attempts to ensure "peace through law" were evident in the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 which outlawed war as an instrument of state policy.

Woodrow Wilson was particularly influential among idealists and was more popular with his famous 14-points for post-war peace. This reflected the dominant thinking of the liberals which formed the bulk of a secret policy group put together by Wilson under the leadership of Walter Lippman (*Chronicle of the 20th century*: 1988). Ideas contained

in the 14-point agenda include; open covenants of peace, the spread of democracy, disarmaments, etc.

Although there were marked dissimilarities in the views of advocates of Idealism, they were strikingly similar by their relatively common suggestions on how to ensure international peace and prevent wars. These include:

- (a) The spread of democracy across the world which was informed by the assumption that dictatorships and undemocratic regimes are war-like;
- (b) States should observe and keep to the rules of international law;
- (c) That power possessed by state (e.g. technology, economic resources, diplomacy, etc.) should be used for peaceful purposes;
- (d) The establishment of international organisations (regional and global); and
- (e) Disarmament.

Ironically, President Woodrow Wilson, who was instrumental to the formation of the League of Nations failed to secure congressional approval for U.S. membership of the organisation. The debate on whether if the U.S had been a member of the League, the Organization might have lasted for much longer than it did persists till today. In any case, the outbreak of World War II in 1939 not only marked the end of the League, it also threw idealism as an approach into a whirl-pool of criticisms as to whether it offered a sufficient tool for explaining human nature and behaviour of states. Despite its moralistic-cum-legalistic prescriptions, idealism could not anticipate, much less prevent the outbreak of the World War II. Notwithstanding the series of appeasements as shown in the infamous 'Czechoslovakia Deal' in Munich, the Nazis and their authoritarian collaborators in Italy, Spain and Japan precipitated another major global war through ceaseless spaces of aggression across the universe-Japan in Manchukuo (Manchuria), Italy in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Germany in Poland, Austria, Hungary, etc. This subjected the idealist approach to scathing criticisms by the realists for under-estimating power politics in international relations.

Realist Approach

As an aftermath of the World War II, there was paradigmatic shift from Idealism to Realism in explaining international politics. Adherents of Realism (otherwise called 'power politics approach') rejected the utopian and moralistic doctrines as espoused by idealist thinkers. Classical Realism could be seen as the intellectual offshoot of early writers like Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau. However, it gained tremendous popularity after World War II, replacing the extant Idealist postulations.

Realism was anchored on the assumption that human nature is 'bad', sinful and wicked (Kegley and Wittkopf, 1989), and that, like individuals, states pursue selfish national interest that often times, generate conflicts in the international system. Power, to the realists, is the currency of international politics and the more of it a state has, the more it seeks. Realists assume further that in the anarchic international society, self-help is the best help in order to protect a nation's interest. Realist writers like Carr (1939), Morgenthau (1973) and Herz (1951), questioned the validity of idealists' exceedingly moralistic and utopian prescriptions. To them, since the first law of nature is self-preservation, states are naturally guided by national interest defined in terms of power. According to Taylor (1979:122),

...it is the nature of the state to acquire as much power as it can, because of the dangerous and anarchic world in which it exists.

Political realism in the view of Morgenthau (1973) is based on a pluralistic conception of human nature. In this context, a man is seen as a composite of the "economic man", the "moral man", the "political man", the "religious man", and so on. To him,

A man who was nothing but a political man would be a beast, for he would be completely lacking in moral restraints. A man who was nothing but a moral man would be a fool, for he would be completely lacking in prudence... (Morgenthau, 1973).

In the realm of real politics, statesmen and diplomats are propelled by the survival and security of their respective states. They are neither constrained by ethical standards, nor by any known law of self-deprivation or self-abnegation. Rather, they often maximise gains of their countries by any available methods which do not threaten the existence of other countries (Morgenthau, 1973).

It may be misleading to assume that there is a consensus of opinion among realist writers. As a matter of fact, the intellectual tradition of realism has various paradigms and views subsumed within it. This has led to a delineation of different types of realism (Dunne & Schmidt, 2001) into structural realism, historical and liberal realism.

Some notable advocates of realism include: Reinhold Niebuhr, Nicolas Spykman, K.J. Holsti, Klaus Knorr and George F. Kennan. These writers were called 'modern' realists having written mostly after World War II. Neorealists of contemporary world politics would include Spanier (1988), Kissinger (2001), Brzezinski (1993) and others. These neo-realists subscribe to the basic assumptions of classical or modern realism except that they give contemporary credence to it (Lamy, 2001).

It is worth noting that if Idealism failed to anticipate the outbreak of World War II, Realism also failed to explain the end of Cold War (and the collapse, defeat or retreat of the Soviet Union). Similarly, the Realist approach may also be unable to explain the demise of power-politics in Europe which had been the theatre of virtually all major global conflicts. Beside these inherent deficits, there are several other flaws in the postulations of the realist approach.

A cursory look at Realism would reveal that it seeks to equate power with commodity which can be acquired at will. It ignores the fact that power is transient, relative and circumstantial. The relativity of power is better illustrated with the children's game of paper, scissors and stone – paper can wrap-up (incapacitate or defeat) stone, scissors can cut paper and stone can destroy scissors. In international politics, an actor chooses its own resources without knowing its opponent's choices which sometimes result in unexpected outcomes. Otherwise, how can one explain the defeat of France at Die Bien Phu by Vietnam? Or, how can one justify the humiliation of the United States in South Vietnam by Ho Chi Minh's North Vietnam?

Implicit in Realism again, is the assumption that power is measurable or quantifiable, so that the power of states can be compared and on that basis, more can be acquired by the weaker nation. That the approach failed to offer empirical or scientific tools for such measurement is a major drawback to its utility.

Above all, Realism as an approach to the study of international politics has been criticised for being of little value by social science precepts. According to Vasquez (1998), of the 7,044 realist hypotheses tested in the field in the 1950s and 1960s, only 157 of them were not invalidated. All these in addition to its 'billiard ball' state centricism in a world characterised by networks of interdependence and rising potency of non-state actors, further weakens Realism as a framework for analysing contemporary international politics.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have attempted an exploration of the basic postulations of Idealism and Realism as approaches to the study of international relations. In view of contemporary events in the international system, it is possible to ask: 'Is the debate still relevant?'

Current global events and issues have tended to suggest that neither Idealism nor Power Politics says it all. Elements of Idealism are found in as much proportion as Realism; the increasing profile of international organisations, the rising confidence and belief in international law, the doctrine of universal jurisdiction, the declining defence spending (except perhaps in Asia and Middle East), the importance attached to global disarmament, and so on, are indicative of the relevance of idealist thoughts in today's world.

By the same token, states have held tenaciously to the traditional conception of sovereignty (albeit with greater challenges from the forces of globalisation). Also, states are increasingly pursuing national interests regardless of whose ox is gored. The military intervention of the US in the Persian Gulf without UN's support is indicative of this trend. Therefore, it can be held that elements of Idealism and Realism are evident in contemporary world affairs.

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