Are Security Issues Most Effectively Addressed by a Neo-Realist IR Approach?

Arguably security has always been the raison d'être of the academic study of International Relations; by understanding the factors that lead to security or insecurity, the discipline can do a great deal for the global good (Rudolph, 2003). However many debates rage within IR as to exactly what constitutes a security issue, and how these issues are best addressed. Der Derian (1994, p24) suggested that "no other concept in international relations commands the disciplinary power of security". In fact the very word security is a contested one, and the definitions within the literature are varied.

Neo-realist theory has long been at the centre of the debate about security within the discipline and the discourse is heavily influenced by it. From its origins in Machiavelli and Hobbes, to Morgenthau and classical realism, neo realism continues to be popular within the discipline, with thinkers such as Waltz and Mearsheimer offering seminal texts that discuss security from a neo-realist perspective in some depth (Glaser, 2010). However since the end of the cold war, events within the international system have challenged the dominance of neo-realism within the security discourse, and other theories can be used with great effect to address security concerns within International Relations. This essay, firstly by addressing and critiquing neo-realism and then by using case studies and drawing upon other theoretical perspectives, will argue that neo-realist approaches do not most effectively address security issues in IR.

Kenneth Waltz (1979, p102) stated that "the state amongst states, conducts its affairs in the shadow of violence. Because some states may use force at any time, all must be prepared to do". This single paraphrase sums up neo-realist approaches to security quite well; it mentions the state, as well as declaring the violent and anarchical nature of the international system. Neo realist thinkers believe that the state is the key actor when it comes to security, and that due to the anarchic nature of the international system, states will pursue some sort of offensive military capability in order to defend themselves or expand (Mearsheimer, 2010). The idea that the stronger your military the better your security is a view that a feminist such as Enloe would disagree with strongly, purely on the grounds that powerful militaries often lead to the militarization and abuse of women, who in recent conflicts have suffered disproportionally high casualty figures (Enloe, 2000).

Neo-Realists see power as being crucial to security and argue that this power should come primarily in the form of a strong military, after all who would want to pick a fight with the United States as it has the largest and most well equipped army in the world (Gelb, 2010). Survival, self preservation and therefore security are thus, according to a neo realist, best achieved by having a strong military and preparing for war whether it comes or not (Rudolph 2003, p5). Waltz (1979, p102) goes as far as to apply Hobbes's state of nature (Hobbes 1968) to the realm of international politics, by declaring that "among men, as among states, anarchy, or the absence of government is associated with the occurrence of violence". The Hobbesian attitude that realists take towards security in International Relations was particularly popular in the bi-polar world of the cold war, an era of arms racing and zero sum politics (Rudolph 2003, p5). However even during this time challenges emerged to neo-realist conceptions of security and since the end of the cold war it could be argued that this viewpoint is looking increasingly worn out.

It is relatively easy to critique the neo-realist view of security by looking at their key idea of Hobbesian anarchy for example. In fact it is not even always necessary to delve in the more radical theories of International Relations in

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order to do so. Alexander Wendt for instance, a social constructivist, famously argued that "anarchy is what states make of it", and doing so moved the debate from structure to agency (Wendt 1999, p6). This is an interesting view as it suggests that states will address security issues according to how they view and identify the perceived threats of other states, why does for example the United States see 5 North Korean nuclear weapons as more of a threat than 500 French nuclear weapons? Wendt argues that it is because there is not simply the Hobessian kind of anarchy, where all states are rivals and where military force and power is the best way to guarantee security; but also Lockean and Kantian anarchy (Wendt 1999, p246-268).

Lockean culture is where states view each other as rivals but not as enemies and warfare is accepted but avoided and contained (Aguis, 2010 p60-61). In Lockean anarchy, states are more likely to use soft power, economic sanctions and self restraint in order to improve security (Aguis, 2010 p61). Relations between China and the U.S could perhaps be explained by this type of anarchy, The Economist (2011) for example, describes China as a "rival" to the U.S, as opposed to an enemy, as the United States is worried for its economic security due to China's policy of undervaluing the Yuan. Kantian security on the other hand is characterized by friendship amongst states. Treaties and discussions are valued instead of conflict, with only those states who fail to adhere to the norms and values of the Kantian system being punished (Aguis, 2010, p61). Collective security and faith in international institutions of the variety that Keohane (1984) and other neo-liberals would advocate is essential to Kantian Anarchy. Wendt argues that the 'Western' world moved to a Kantian system at the end of the 20th century, hence the countries of Europe see each others as partners in security issues, rather than rivals or enemies (Wendt, 1999 p314). This shows that states are able to create the conditions for insecurity and therefore security, whereas as neo-realism is self fulfilling and can lead to a security dilemma in which states increase the insecurity of each other (Glaser 2010 p18).

So while constructivism offers an interesting critique of the neo-realist attitude towards security issues, it does not stray too far from the state centric security model of neo-realism and the idea military power being the only really actor in security (Waltz, 1979, p79-103). The state centric nature of a neo-realist approach is perhaps best captured by Walt (1991 p212) when he defines security as being "the study of the threat use and control of military force", and of course the state is the only legitimate user of military force. While some neo-realists such as Waltz agree that economic security is also somewhat important, they only see it as important so that money is available in order to build more powerful militaries (Glaser, 2010, p21). Many others however would disagree with these views, and say that there are many different kinds of security the state needs to achieve before it can even consider bolstering or improving its military.

Energy security and climate change are for example becoming increasingly important, without energy a state's economy would grind to a halt and it certainly could not even think about running a military. Green Theorists would criticise the state-centric neo realism as being unable to deal with these security concerns (Barnett, 2010). As energy demands continue to increase, states can now use energy as a method of hard diplomacy and to gain power (Energy Bulletin, 2008). This 'Pipeline Diplomacy' has been best employed by Russia, aiming to increase its own security by bring European countries onside with supplies of natural gas, or by making other states insecure, by turning off the gas supplies when the fall out of line (Baev, 2007). Economic security as mentioned before is heavily intertwined with both energy security and military security, prosperity can strengthen society whereas depression can lead to societal unrest and lack of government resources to deal with the unrest. In developing states, large amounts of migration due to economic hardship can lead to political and social destabilization, both for the country of origin and arrival (Rudolph 2003, p16).The financial crisis of 2008-2009 for example has severely weakened the capability of the state. The Economist (2011, p104) predicts that since the crisis, only out of 163 states, only 34 are rated as being highly capable and effective in terms of delivering economic security to their citizens.

Cultural Security is also not tackled by neo realism and is becoming an increasingly important aspect of security, with recent conflicts in the Balkans, Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa all having culture and identity at the core (Rudolph 2003, p19). Arguably other states, such as Venezuela and Iran, feel insecurity a U.S cultural hegemony and so adjust their foreign and domestic policy accordingly. As Wendt (1979) points out, the rationalism of neo-realism has no effective way with dealing with identities.

So it is clear then that neo-realism fails to effectively deal with many security issues in International Relations,

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however the state-centric nature of the theory is perhaps its greatest weakness of all and the certainly the one that allows many of the critical theories of IR to criticise it (Detraz 2009, p353). It is easy to see, even from just looking at mainstream news, that the dynamic of security and conflict is moving away from the traditional inter-state model. For example in Sub Saharhan Africa of 26 conflicts in the region between 1963 and 1998, 19 were internal civil wars; as a result of ethnicity, power-sharing and factional rivalries (Luiz 2006, p633). Countries such as the DR Congo have been made insecure by internal factors such as infectious diseases, economic misconduct and a volatile political situation (Marriage, 2010, p353) Recent swathes of protest in the Middle East show how instability and insecurity can come from within the state and from non state actors and this has made neo-realists seem out of touch (Economist, Feb26th, 2011). Wendt would no doubt argue that the rejection of autocracy in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain were due to the spread of norms and values.

Critical theories look to assess human security as opposed to state security as it is the individual who suffers from things such as political violence within a state, food insecurity, disease and underdevelopment (Kerr, 2010 p123). Those who subscribe to human security believe that a greater emphasis should be put on civilian security as civilians more often than not pay the heaviest price in times of conflict and crisis (MacLean et al, 2006, p15). It can be argued that decreased human security at the most basic level, for example a lack of food or a lack of safety from political violence can de-stabilise a region on a larger scale. For example research conducted by the Asia Foundation (2010) showed that the biggest worry for the people of Afghanistan was for the safety for themselves and their family. A response to this can perhaps been seen in ISAF's policy of putting out patrols to reassure local populations.

Feminists, who have a gendered take on human security, would point to the use of rape as a weapon of war, which is especially prevalent during ethnic conflicts such as the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, and the Rwandan genocide (Enloe, 2000, p109). Feminists would also critique the complete marginalisation of women in the neo realist discourse on security, all of the prominent neo realist thinkers have been men.

To conclude then, neo-realism, while offering perhaps a logical insight in to the reasons why states pursue military power, is the not the most effective theory when it comes to addressing security issues in International Relations. It has a narrow and one dimensional view of anarchy (Hobbesian) and does not explain the different positions states adopt towards each other with regards to security. Neo-Realism is a largely military focused approach, and fails to acknowledge security issues that are environmental, social or economic. Its focus on military power can often lead to a security dilemma and even arms racing. State centrism, a central facet of neo-realism, means that it fails to effectively deal with security issues below the state (such food insecurity and disease) and issues above the state (such as climate change and energy security). It fails to recognize the wants and needs of humans and how that can affect security on a multi level basis. The neo-realist approach to security is just simply too narrow to be highly effective at dealing with security issues in our ever changing world.

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Date written: March 2011