

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Realism Today

<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/01/realism-today/>

EMANUELA VOINEA, MAR 1 2013

Realism Today: Can the Pessimistic Perspective Account for Current Events in International Relations?

This essay will argue that Realist theory continues to be one of the most accurate tools for understanding the events in the sphere of international relations. Realism takes an explanatory rather than a normative approach to its study of International Relations, and through its analytical character provides a pragmatic framework for the examination of current issues in the international arena. The fundamental principles of this doctrine and their efficacy will be assessed in application to Russia's behaviour regarding some of the main contemporary problems in world politics. This piece will examine Russia's attitude towards the Syrian civil war, contrasting it with the position of the same state on the conflict in Libya. The nuclear program of Iran will be brought into discussion in order to complete the demonstration of Realism's applicability to 21st century events.

To begin with, several aspects related to the ongoing conflict in Syria can be explained through looking at Realist theory. The centrepiece of this perspective is the concept of 'statism', which means that "the state is the pre-eminent actor and all other actors in world politics are of lesser significance" (Dunne & Schmidt, 2008: 103). Realists consider that states have the highest authority in the international system, given the condition of anarchy (Steans & Pettiford, 2005: 49). States form the bodies of other actors, such as International Organizations, thus they have influence on the actions of the latter. For instance, Russia, along with China, as permanent members of the Security Council, vetoed three UN resolutions that aimed to sanction the Syrian regime and cease violence. Accordingly, these states had the influence to block United Nations support of foreign military intervention in Syria. The Russian political class places great importance on sovereignty and it illustrates this view by supporting Damascus. Through its decisions, "the Kremlin is telling the world that neither the UN, nor any other body or group of countries has the right to decide who should or should not govern a sovereign state" (BBC News, 2012).

The realist assertion that states are self-interested can assist a deeper analysis of the reasons behind the above mentioned decisions. In 2011, United Nations Security Council resolution 1973 on Libya, in favour of a no-fly zone and protection of civilians, was passed (The Guardian, 2011). In contrast to its vote on the resolutions concerning intervention in Syria, in the case above Russia abstained. Its neutral status in this conflict can be explained by its lack of interests in the Northern African country. Regarding Syria, the Eastern European state has several major interests; one of them is to maintain a high level of munitions exports to the Syrian army, which would be weakened if the conflict is brought to a halt (Rosenberg, 2012). Hence, its own welfare is above the moral duty of humanitarian intervention, and ethics are being "interpreted in terms of politics" (Carr, 2001: 19). According to the Machiavellian maxims of Realist statesmanship, political responsibility implies the pursuit of self-interest and cannot always be "in accordance with the principles of Christian ethics" (Jackson & Sørensen, 1999: 73).

Besides economic grounds, Russia's position can be explained using Morgenthau's realist concept of 'animus dominandi' (Jackson and Sørensen, 1999: 76), which refers to human, and implicitly states', drive for power. This can be illustrated by quoting directly from Ruslan Pukhov, defence analyst:

Syria is the only country in the Middle East which follows our advice, this is the country where we can exercise certain tangible influence [...] It has some symbolic value for the Russian authorities and the foreign policy establishment as a sign of Russia as a great power. (Rosenberg, 2012)

Realism Today

Written by Emanuela Voinea

Consequently, it can be asserted that the behaviour of states “can be interpreted in terms of the pursuit of power” (Wight, 1995: 17), as Realists believe.

Nonetheless, explanations for the actions of Russia cannot be limited to its drive for power and greatness. It also has a geostrategic interest due to Syria's geographical position in the Middle East, close to Iran. The relations between Moscow and Tehran are complex on account of their economic cooperation, their mutual animosity towards America, and their “common fear of radical Sunni Islamist movements such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban” (Katz, 2012). If the current Syrian regime comes to an end, the United States is likely to contribute to the establishment of a democratic system and gain influence in the area, isolating Iran. Therefore, Russia's main concern is that the overthrow of President Assad could undermine its influence in the entire Middle East in favour of the Western World, particularly the United States.

Regarding the United States – Russia relationship, even though the latter implemented a democratic and capitalist regime after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rancour that started in the Cold War era can still be noticed. Between 1947 and 1991, the international system was characterized by bipolarity; Russia and the United States of America had the status of superpowers and, as Mearsheimer (1990: 36) suggests, due to the balance of power determined by the bipolar system, “the post-war era, the period of the Cold War, [has] been so much more peaceful”. The past decade and the present have revealed a multipolar global reality agitated by several violent conflicts, which confirm to some extent Mearsheimer's theses about the efficiency of bipolarity in maintaining discipline. Although the current international system does not involve the concept of ‘superpower’, Russia seems to continue its opposition of the USA in potential pursuit of this title. The nature of this competition for power “is viewed in zero-sum terms; in other words, more for an actor means less for another” (Dunne & Schmidt, 2008: 100). As presented previously, Russia takes measures in order to preserve its influence over areas such as Syria and Iran, which risk undergoing changes that favour the United States.

Another current problem that Realism can help understand is Iran's nuclear policy. The nuclear program started in the 1950s and was cancelled after the Islamic revolution of 1979. Nevertheless, it was resumed in the final part of the war against Iraq, as “Tehran wanted to guard against a future surprise analogous to Iraq's repeated use of chemical weapons” (Chubin, 2010: 82). This policy was in conformity with Machiavellian principles, which focus on prudence and forethought, arguing that a state should “ward off any threat posed by his or her neighbours” (Jackson & Sørensen, 1999: 73).

At present, Iran's principal antagonist in the region is Israel, which is widely thought to possess nuclear power, although “its nuclear capability is arguably the most secretive weapons of mass destruction programme in the world” (BBC News, 2003). The former invokes security maximisation and civil purposes as justification for nuclear proliferation, maintaining that “its nuclear programme is purely for peaceful purposes” (Knell, 2012). However, this explanation is highly doubted by the rest of the world, including organizations such as the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency, which continue to apply sanctions against the Middle Eastern state. At the same time, Israel considers the nuclear program of Iran a threat to its existence and does not exclude the use of military force in case international sanctions are not successful in ceasing it (Knell, 2012). The idea that “it is concrete power in the end that settles great international issues” (Wight, 1995: 27) seems to guide the policy of the Israeli government in this problem.

When men dislike Bismarck for his realism, what they really dislike is reality. Take his most famous sentence: ‘The great questions of our time will not be settled by resolutions and majority votes [...] but by blood and iron.’ (A. J. P. Taylor, 1952: 44)

From a different perspective, Iran's aspiration to obtain nuclear weapons can be seen as a desire to impose its authority in the Middle East and gain regional hegemony, rather than the elimination of Israel or liberation of Palestine. Moreover, it aims to be acknowledged as a key international actor (The National, 2009). In this respect, achievement of military nuclear capabilities can serve its intention to guarantee its regional and international status, as well as security and self-reliance. According to Carr (quoted in Wight, 1995: 98), one of the leading Realist scholars of the 20th century, “if your strength is recognized, you can generally achieve your aims without having to

Realism Today

Written by Emanuela Voinea

use it”.

As a conclusion, it can be said that although it is hard to determine which theoretical perspective explains most precisely the events occurring at the international level, realism makes a major contribution to the comprehension of the current situation in international relations. Realism inquires into the intricate reasons behind international actors' actions, thus it assists in understanding the causes of conflict and crucial decisions in world politics. Through the case studies presented, this essay has shown that Realist concepts such as state primacy, self-interest, drive for power, balance of power, and security can be used effectively in the analysis of contemporary events. All in all, recent and ongoing events can be understood clearly if they are studied through the lenses of this explanatory and practical critical approach.

Bibliography

BBC News (2003) “Israel’s nuclear programme”, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3340639.stm, Date Accessed: 07/11/2012;

BBC News (2012) “Why Russia is standing by Syria’s Assad”, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18462813>, Date Accessed: 09/11/2012;

Carr, E. H. (2001) *The Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919-1939: An introduction to the Study of International Relations*, London: Palgrave;

Chubin, S. (2010) ‘The Politics of Iran’s Nuclear Program’ in Wright, R. (ed), *The Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and U.S. Policy*, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press;

Dunne, T. and Schmidt, B. C. (2008) ‘Realism’ in Baylis, J., Smith, S. and Owens, P. (eds), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 4th edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press;

Jackson, R. and Sørensen, G. (1999) *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, Oxford: Oxford University Press;

Katz, M. N. (2012) “Why Russia won’t Play Ball on Iran”, <http://thediplomat.com/2012/06/23/why-russia-wont-play-ball-on-iran/>, Date Accessed: 09/11/2012;

Knell, Y. (2012) “Israeli PM Netanyahu ‘ready’ to order strike on Iran”, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20220566>, Date Accessed: 10/11/2012;

Mearsheimer, J. J. (1990) “Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Volume 266 (2), p. 35-50;

Rosenberg, S. (2012) “Why Russia sells Syria arms”, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18642032>, Date Accessed: 07/11/2012;

Steans, J. and Pettiford, L. (2005) *Introduction to International Relations: Perspectives and Themes*, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited;

Taylor, A. J. P. (1952) *Rumours of War*, London: Hamish Hamilton;

The Guardian (2011) “UN Security Council resolution 1973 (2011) on Libya – full text”, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/17/un-security-council-resolution>, Date Accessed: 08/11/2012;

The National (2009) “Iran aims at Regional Hegemony”, <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/iran-aims-at-regional-hegemony>, Date Accessed: 10/11/2012;

Realism Today

Written by Emanuela Voinea

Wight, M. (1995) *Power Politics*, London: Leicester University Press.

—

Written by: Emanuela Voinea
Written at: University of Birmingham
Written for: Dr. Marco Vieira
Date written: November 2012