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.

To What Extent is the Realist School of IR Theory Useful for Policymakers?

https://www.e-ir.info/2019/09/07/to-what-extent-is-the-realist-school-of-ir-theory-useful-for-policymakers/

VAISHNAVI MANGALVEDHEKAR, SEP 7 2019

World politics has been studied and commented upon extensively through the last couple of centuries, with International Relations (IR) theory evolving into a distinct field in the 20th century (Haas, 2016). As Haas explores, IR theories flourished in late 20th and early 21st century, becoming increasingly holistic and nuanced in their understanding of world politics. However, advancement in academic rigor of a discipline does not automatically translate into their inclusion in practice. The utility of IR theories for practitioners in policy making decisions has been a contentious issue (Nitze, 1993).

International Relations theory is only modestly useful for policymakers and practitioners of world politics. I will discuss the main theoretical frameworks and briefly outline the realist school of thought as it relates to the discussion of IR theory and its utility in world politics, paying special attention to neorealism. The contribution of IR theory in the policymaking field will be explored further, particularly about providing a language and framework to understand the events unfolding, and by providing tools to predict and evaluate actions, behaviours and consequences. Although the contribution of theory to practice is undeniable, it is limited by their inherently different and conflicting natures. The distinct and often contradictory objectives of IR theory and policy building are discussed in reference to neorealist theories. Because of the contrasting aims of theory and practice, the processes associated with them drastically differ as well. These processes further increase the gap between theory and decision making and limits the extent to which theory can be applied to practicing world politics.

Realism in International Relations Theory

International Relations has witnessed a rapid theoretical growth in the last couple of decades, resulting in what is termed 'theoretical pluralism' (Schieder & Spindler, 2014). Realist and Liberal schools of thought (often referred to as rationalist theories) shared similar ontologies and core units of study – the state – and gained eminence in the field of IR. Neorealism, or structural realism, developed through the Cold War and has stood as one of the main paradigms when discussing world politics and has prompted a great deal of subsequent research. *Theory of International Politics* outlines the basic tenets of neorealism (Waltz, 1979). Characterising the international system as anarchic, Kenneth Waltz proposes that states engage in self-help in order to ensure their survival. This is achieved by increasing their internal power and fostering alliances to strengthen their position. Unlike liberalism, neorealism believes that states chase relative gains and not absolute gains. While embracing the basic tenants of Waltz's defensive realism, thinkers like John Mearsheimer advanced what is now known as offensive realism (Mearsheimer, 2001). He believes a rational state is a power maximiser and will seek hegemony to ensure its survival.

Rationalist theories like realism and liberalism – and neorealism and neoliberalism – have remained dominant in IR despite being challenged in numerous debates (Wæver, 1996). Realists like Hans Morgenthau had tremendous influence over both IR theory and, to an extent, American policy (Gellman, 1988; Morgenthau, 1960). President Trump's public policy was shaped on the basis of realism, according to the national security advisor H.R. McMaster (McIntyre & Tritten, 2018). Regardless of whether policymakers were aware that they prescribed to realist beliefs, their conceptualisation of the world itself can be traced back directly to realism. Keeping this in mind, this essay will primarily focus on realism in discussing the usefulness of IR theory for policymakers.

Contribution of Theory to World Politics

Language and Framework

Although Morgenthau's contribution to foreign policy was direct and visible, much of theory's application in practice is inconspicuous at first thought. Most importantly, academic study provides the language and framework through which policymakers view and understand the otherwise complex events in world politics (Walt, 2005). Theoretical underpinnings influence what problem and information is paid attention and the prioritisation of policy decisions to make. Through a realist lens, threats to survival of the state and national interest will take priority over other concerns in a foreign policy discussion (Krasner, 1978).

Prominent theories often provide the language and lens through with policymakers view the world. Neorealism, for instance, popularised terms like anarchy and national interest. Framing issues based on realist understanding of the world limits and guides policy decisions made. Bureaucrats and leaders may not explicitly refer to the theories behind their decisions, or even be aware of their influence themselves. However, major events in history – like the Cuban missile crisis – and their analysis suggest strong neorealist influence over key decisions made by multiple practitioners over the globe (Smith, Hadfield & Dunne 2012).

Neoliberal critics claim institutions counter states' pursuit for power and hegemony, instead encouraging them to cooperate for mutual benefit under certain conditions (Keohane, 1984). On the other hand, constructivists emphasise the role of immaterial factors – like norms, ideas and identity – on world politics (Wendt, 1999). Nevertheless, recent developments in politics indicate that idealist and normative policies like the responsibility to protect (R2P) are implemented to suit state interests (Doyle, 2011). Just as the realist school of thought remains fundamental in IR theory, its main tenets continue to influence world politics well into the 21st century.

Predicting and Evaluating Policy

By providing the framework for understanding issues in world politics, IR theory sets the parameters for policymakers to predict the actions and behaviour of other actors, along with the likely outcome(s) of their own policies. This is especially true for positivist theories like neorealism that rely on observable behaviour to make predictions. Defensive realism argues that rational states will act in ways to ensure their survival and maintain the balance of power and status quo, while offensive realism predicts that states will pursue hegemony. Unlike the peaceful predictions of neoliberals, neorealists have been successful in predicting the turmoil characterising world politics (Kaplan, 1994). Stephen Walt, a prominent neorealist, makes a strong case to explain why a realist perspective is crucial to understand some of the most challenging and complex scenarios and states (Walt, 2018). While conceding that other theories might be more inclusive of variables, neorealism's sharp distinctions helps simplify overwhelming matters to help policymakers make sense of the world. This clarity, in turn, is useful to analyze and evaluate foreign policy.

This is not to claim that neorealism or any other theory in IR helps mirror every detail and nuance of world politics. The framework and language provided by neorealism remains limited in its scope and objects of analysis, because the theory sets ontological boundaries on itself. For example, neorealism largely ignores the domestic politics and the changes that accompany a new administration in a democratic country. It also assumes all states are rational actors – but we know that a considerable number of states are autocracies, ruled by leaders who are perhaps more concerned with their personal wealth and lineage than national interest. This is a valid criticism and must be acknowledged when analyzing the use of theory in unravelling politics.

However, the utility of realist theories (like any other IR theory) for policymakers is limited because of the inherent differences between theory and policy practice. Because of these differences, theories often don't lend themselves to be useful in policymaking. While there are larger, structural reasons that widen the gap between academia and practitioners, this essay will focus on the innate distinctions between the objective and processes of theory and practice of international relations.

Objective of Theory and Practice

The divide between IR theory and practice has always existed, but seems to have become more pronounced in the recent years (Nye, 2008). Joseph Nye points out differences in the nature and culture of theory and policy making that curb interaction between the two. Although academics participated in policy practice in the 20th century, modern trends separate the academics from practice. One reason for the growing gap and the restricted use of IR theory in policy making decisions is the difference in objectives of theory and practice.

Defining the term 'theory' in international relations has been another debate entirely. In *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz differentiates between laws and theories – namely that theories are not merely sets of laws but that theories seek to explain the laws that are derived from observation (Waltz, 1979). The effectiveness of theories in IR, therefore, is not measured by how accurately they represent the reality or their contribution to policy. Theories are meant to be 'a picture, mentally formed, of a bounded realm or domain of activity.' (Waltz, 1979, p.9).

Neorealism is conscious of its exclusion of certain factors and its simplification of international politics – in fact, that is the very objective. Theories also devise and define certain terms in International Relations. Neorealism clearly defines what it means by power, anarchy, self-help, hegemony and other widely used terms. By setting boundaries on otherwise vague terms, theories further aid to precisely demarcate and account for the events in politics. It must be noted, however, that the tendency to break down the international system in a precise manner and use structural analysis to explain it is not a universal trend. Academics in the realist school of thought have introduced unit analysis and domestic factors (Snyder, 1991; Zakaria, 1992).

Additionally, neorealism relies on explaining generalised regularities in the international system and not specific events/ outliers (Waltz, 1990). By relying on assumptions and using a reductionist approach, a theory aims to be merely a tool to perceive the external world. It does not claim to be particularly useful for policy making. While academics like Morgenthau applied realist convictions to practice, he did not solely rely on the principles of theory to assess American foreign policy. He was a strong critic of the Vietnam war, and while he used realist arguments in part of his commentary, the main convictions remained grounded in the morality and ethics of the policy (Morgenthau, 1968). Despite being a prominent classical realist, Morgethau understood the limits of theory in world politics, making a strong case against applying academic understanding in practical pursuits. Following the same logic, neorealism is restricted in determining policies pertaining events and actors outside its scope of analysis. Non-state actors, climate change, civil unrest, refugee crisis and other forces in world politics are given limited attention in the realist school of thought (if that).

Going beyond the realist school of thought, it is evident that different paradigms subscribe to different types of theories. Robert Cox, for example, explores two different types of theories – namely 'problem solving theories' and 'critical theories' (Cox, 1981). While problem-solving theories might lend some use to practitioners, critical theories do not. Instead, they question the very assumptions and boundaries that the former rely on. While critical theories may have a broader scope and mechanisms to evaluate factors in world politics, its objective of problematising the world severely limits its contribution to policy making.

A bureaucrat or practitioner in world politics is required to deliver in a time-constrained environment (Nye, 2008). This is especially true in the modern world, with the pace of information sharing and communication increasing exponentially. Academics and scholars devote months or even years to research, develop and polish their theories and perspectives on international relations. However, policymakers primarily rely on historical narratives, cognitive biases and common practices to make decisions (Nau, 2008). Apart from theoretical understanding of the international system, bureaucrats are required to be invested in the cost-benefit analysis of context specific policy decisions (George, 1993). As Alexander George points out, theoretical approaches in international relations are inadequate to provide policy makers vital input. Prominent neorealists are not only aware of incompatibility between theory and practice, they respect the differences and encourage their separation (Waltz, 1996).

Processes in Theory and Practice

Because the objectives of academia and policymakers in international relations are drastically different, the processes they use to achieve these goals also vary. Theory in International Relations is not developed to be

predictive, but as a reaction to events that have already unfolded in world politics. Liberal institutionalism took centre stage in IR theory when Woodrow Wilson advocated the establishment of the League of Nations post World War I (Van De Haar, 2009). After the collapse of the League of Nations and World War II, the United Nations took into account the power dynamics of the world. The Security Council explicitly gives the Permanent 5 – USA, Russia, United Kingdom, France and China – the power to veto resolutions, thereby maintaining the balance of power between strong and weak states (United Nations, 1945). Soon after, classical realism gained prominence over liberalism (Carr & Cox 2016).

Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* introduced structural realism or neorealism to the world during the Cold War, when the effects of an anarchic international system were most obvious (Waltz, 1979). Another process by which theories develop is by interacting with each other in attempts to understand the events that unfold. While Waltz introduced neorealism to the world, Robert Keohane responded with neoliberalism by employing the same rationalist terms, assumptions and methodology (Keohane, 1984). Theories continue to grow and evolve through this criticism and discussion within academia – scholars (ideally) either explain or modify their theories (Waltz, 1986). Even constructivists who vehemently opposed rationalist theories interacted with neorealism in their language. The titles of Alexander Wendt's works are telling. 'Social theory of international politics' and 'Anarchy is what states make of it' are two examples where theories develop by interacting with each other and sharing similar language and examples (Wendt, 1992, 1999).

The interactions between theories and processes is often narrated by dividing the interactions into The Great Debates (Lake, 2013). While the first great debate between realism and liberalism focused on two statist theories, the second debate between traditionalists (advocating for interpretive techniques) and behaviourists (preferring objective methods of hard sciences) was concerned with the methodology of theories in IR. The third great debate was epistemological in nature, questions the foundations of knowledge that shape theories in the first place (Houghton, 2008). The development of IR suggests that the discipline has grown by responding to events and competing theories, and has largely ignored the predictive strength of different theories. The nature of academic work actively discourages theorists from being preoccupied with policy-relevance, and instead demands that scholars strive for peer-acceptance within their 'ivory towers' (Walt, 2005, p. 40).

On the other hand, practitioners of policymaking work under certain administrations and governments and are concerned with meeting demands of multiple stakeholders. However, unlike academia, the scope for debate and interaction is limited due to centralised decision making and cognitive rigidity and bias of employees and institutions themselves (Renshon & Renshon, 2008). Scholars are able to engage and interact for years to achieve the theoretical excellence and recognition. Practitioners, however, are expected to make trade-offs between a multitude of factors like time, cost and benefits, norms, objectives of the government or regime in power (Renshon, 2008, p. 516). As IR theory contributes to become more abstract and prosper in its own bubble, think tanks are better able to provide the expert advice and consultation for policy makers (Nye, 2008).

Theories of IR are not designed to allow for context-specific variables to be factored into consideration. Neorealism, for example, may at best provide a framework to understand politics in a generalised manner, but its use of structural analysis will be of little help in the policy process and its many requirements and restrictions. Decisions in politics are made by analysing and anticipating the future and consequences involved for the state. However, neorealism (and other a number of other theories in IR) is more retrospective and not predictive in nature. They tend to respond to events than guide them.

In conclusion, international theory has become a rigorous academic discipline in the social and political sciences. Despite the evolution in IR theory, its use in practice remains modest at best. In this essay, I focused on the realist school of thought – and particularly neorealism – for its relevance and prominence in both scholarly and political world. Neorealism did provide the language and framework for policymakers to conceive the world in. Without the boundaries, definitions and simplification that theory provides, events in politics are likely to seem overwhelming and chaotic. In other words, neorealism provides heuristics for practitioners to analyse the behaviour of actors and evaluate their own actions. While multiple theories might claim credit for influencing different policies and behaviours, the impact of neorealism has been consistent and visible over the decades.

However, the impact of theory on policy making remains limited not only because of structural factors but inherent differences between the two. As both Nye and Walt emphasise, theories have different objectives than practitioners of world politics. Theories like neorealism are aimed towards simplifying and drawing precise lines and explain generalised and observable regularities. Prominent theorists like Waltz and Morgenthau understood the limitations of theories they developed, and were skeptical about using them in policy making. Other academics have proposed different types of theories, like problem solving and critical theories. Because of their nature, objectives of each paradigm remain different. The process involved in developing theories is another inherent factor that limits its contribution to policy making. IR theory has developed by reacting to the events in world politics, and interacting with each other – often sharing terms and languages. Scholars are encouraged to polish their theories over years and gain prominence within the abstract world of academia over focusing on policy.

Policy makers, however, have drastically different objectives. They are required to take into consideration all factors and the context and actor specific aspects of politics. Therefore, they are likely to use cognitive bias, cost benefit analysis and have trade-offs between multiple factors. Making policy decisions requires bureaucrats to predict future events and the possible consequences. Theories like neorealism, therefore, are therefore of limited use for policy makers. Although theories in International Relations are only moderately useful in policy scenarios, their worth is not exclusively linked to their practical utility. Theoretical concepts remain valuable for their insights and critique of world politics, regardless of the gap between academia and practice of world politics.

References

Carr, E. H. and Cox, M. (2016). *The twenty years' crisis, 1919-1939: Reissued with a new preface from michael cox*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Cox, R. (1981). Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory. *Millennium, 10*(2), 126-155.

Doyle, M. (2011). International Ethics and the Responsibility to Protect. *International Studies Review, 13*(1), 72–84.

Gellman, P. (1988). Hans J. Morgenthau and the Legacy of Political Realism. *Review of International Studies, 14*(4), 247-266.

George, A. L. (1993). *Bridging the gap : theory and practice in foreign policy* . Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace Press.

Haas, M. (2016). *International relations theory : competing empirical paradigms*. In (pp. 307).

Houghton, D. P. (2008). Positivism 'vs' Postmodernism: Does Epistemology Make a Difference? *International Politics, 45*(2), 115-128. doi:DOI:10.1057/palgrave.ip.8800222

Kaplan, R. (1994). The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War. *New York Times*.

Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After hegemony : cooperation and discord in the world political economy* . Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Krasner, S. D. (1978). *Defending the national interest: raw materials investments and U.S. foreign policy* . Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Lake, D. A. (2013). Theory is dead, long live theory: The end of the Great Debates and the rise of eclecticism in International Relations . *European Journal of International Relations, 19*(3), 567 – 587.

McIntyre, J. and Tritten, T. J. (2018). H.R. McMaster: Trump national security strategy to be based on 'principled realism'. *Washington Examiner*.

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*: WW Norton & Company.

Morgenthau, H. J. (1960). *Politics among nations; the struggle for power and peace* (3d ed.). New York,: Knopf.

Morgenthau, H. J. (1968). U.S. Misadventure in Vietnam. *Current History (Pre-1986), 54*(000317), 29-34.

Nau, H. R. (2008). Scholarship and Policy-Making: Who Speaks Truth to Whom? In C. S. Reus-Smit, Duncan (Ed.), The Oxford Handbook of International Relations: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199219322.003.0036

Nitze, P. H. (1993). *Tension between opposites: reflections on the practice and theory of politics* (illustrated ed.): Scribner.

Nye, J. (2008). International Relations: The Relevance of Theory to Practice. In The Oxford Handbook of International Relations: Oxford University Press.

Renshon, J. and Renshon, S. (2008). The Theory and Practice of Foreign Policy Decision Making. *Political Psychology, 29*(4), 509-536.

Schieder, S., & Spindler, M. (2014). *Theories of international relations*. In (pp. 357). Retrieved from http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=1694670

Smith, S., Hadfield, A. and Dunne, T. (2012). *Foreign policy: theories, actors, cases* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Snyder, J. (1991). *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (revised ed.): Cornell University Press.

United Nations. (1945). *United Nations Charter* San Francisco United Nations.

Van De Haar, E. (2009). Classical liberalism and international relations. *Policy: A Journal of Public Policy and Ideas, 25*(1), 35-38.

Wæver, O. (1996). The rise and fall of the inter-paradigm debate. In K. Booth, M. Zalewski, & S. Smith (Eds.), *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (pp. 149-185). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Walt, S. M. (2005). The Relatiionship Between Theory and Policy in International Relations. *Annual Review of Political Science, 8*(1), 23-48.

Walt, S. M. (2018). The World Wants You to Think Like a Realist. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/30/the-world-wants-you-to-think-like-a-realist/

Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.

Waltz, K. N. (1986). Reflections on Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics. In R. O. Keohane (Ed.), Neorealism and its critics: Columbia University Press.

Waltz, K. N. (1990). Realist thought and neorealist theory *Journal of International Affairs, 44*(1), 21–37.

Waltz, K. N. (1996). International politics is not foreign policy. *Security Studies, 6*(1), 54-57. doi:10.1080/09636419608429298

Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics. *International*

organization, 46(2), 391-425.

Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zakaria, F. (1992). Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay. *International Security, 17*(1), 177-198.

Written by: Vaishnavi Mangalvedhekar
Written at: University of Sydney
Written for: Dr. Ken Fraser
Date written: October 2018