

Empirical Illustration of Major Theories of Realism and Liberalism in International Relations

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Abstract

This study discusses crucial issues in international relations by recalling the relevant theories of Realism and Liberalism. It further outlines several factors or forces that influence the relations among nations. In the study, we have utilized as urgent illustrations several selected empirical cases in the realm of international relations. As a narrative research, the study has revealed that Liberalism theory gained popularity after the Second World War, indeed between 1939 and 1945. At the time, problems with gigantic dimensions had been created by the war, hence some nations came together to create an international entity, known as the United Nations Organization (UNO), to help build either a peaceful or harmonious world. While our study found that Liberalism theory recognises that the world is a dangerous place, we have concluded that the consequences of using military power (i.e. to foment wars) can endanger the world the more. Therefore, our contention in the study is that economic power (of course, not the imperial way) can be used to compel other nations to do what is expected of them without the destruction of properties as well as the maiming and killing of others. Conversely, the study found that Realism theory is built on the belief that military power is the primary basis of international relations. An example is that during the time of the Cold War, the prevailing notion was for much stronger or more powerful nations to have dominion over other weaker nations. This situation prompted several weaker countries to seek protection by aligning themselves with stronger countries of either the East or the West, thus perverting their non-aligned status. It is always part of our thesis that, in the same Cold War period, some stronger countries also used threats of their military power either to bully or to “colonize” (or “neo-colonialize”) several weaker nations. Therefore, what emerged at the time were countries that constituted themselves into such military power blocs or axis, including the West’s North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance and the former Soviet bloc’s erstwhile Warsaw Pact alliance. It is part of the conclusions of our study that, under the prevailing circumstances, the stronger countries used their military might to serve their respective interests, especially in their relations with the weaker nations of the world. In the final analysis, it was generally felt that the weaker countries of the developing world – sometimes referred to negatively as Third World nations -- were compelled to do what they (as weaker nations) would otherwise not have ordinarily done.

Keywords: Colonialism, Neo-Colonialism, Nations, Realism, Liberalism, Theories, and Relations.

1.0 Introduction

For a meaningful and successful discussion of the concepts of Realism and Liberalism, it is very crucial for the researchers to enlighten their readers about the definition of the two theories: Realism and Liberalism as well as to provide examples of some selected theories of Realism and Liberalism as a way of explaining the main factors (or forces) that combine to influence the relations among nations. The latter will, as well, discuss some specific examples, which either directly or indirectly tackle issues of international relations.

According to Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008), a theory is a set of inter-related concepts as well as definitions and propositions that go a long way to explain and predict events by specifying relations among some variables. Additionally, theories vary in the extent to which they have been conceptually developed and empirically tested (Frankfort-Nachmias, and Nachmias, 2008). Also, Putnam (1975) defines Realism as either the attitude or practice of accepting a situation as it is and, then, being prepared to deal with it accordingly.

Specifically, Liberalism is defined as a political and moral philosophy based on liberty and equality (Dunn, 1993; Gaus, 1983; Gaus, and Kukathas, 2004). It is, of course, very important to point out that Realism and Liberalism are among the dominant theories of international relations (Walt, 1998). It has clearly been demonstrated further that other theories also emanated from these two stated theories. Yet, Realism was the dominant theoretical tradition throughout the era of the Cold War, which was the ideological warfare between the Communistic East and the Capitalist West in the 1960s (Walt, 1998).

2.0 Realism Theory and Its Relative Purpose/Rationale

According to experts of international relations, Realism theory is built on the belief that military power is the primary basis of international relations. During the time of the Cold War, for example, the prevailing notion was for much stronger or more powerful nations to have dominion over other weaker nations. This situation prompted several weaker countries to seek protection by aligning themselves with stronger countries of either the East or the West.

During the same Cold War period, stronger countries also used threats of their military power either to bully or to colonize outright some weaker nations. At the time, the countries that were known to be strong also constituted themselves into transparently strong military power blocs (or axis), including the West's North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance and the former Soviet bloc's erstwhile Warsaw Pact alliance. Under these circumstances, the stronger countries used their military might against the weaker nations of the world. It was also a fact that the weaker countries – which included the so-called Third World nations of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Middle East -- were compelled to do what they (as weaker nations) would otherwise not have done.

Most certainly, the foregoing is only a gist of what was the existing much tensed relationship between nations then, and that was the language of coercion about which the Realism theorist speaks. Today, some nations still go by the Realism theory in their relationship with other countries. It is also a fact that the Realist nations do not accept change very quickly. Therefore, in this modern world, they still hold on to some assumptions, including the contention that every nation is either sovereign or independent, and that if that is the case, then such nations should not put their trust in international organisations like the United Nations and others in order to get needed protection.

It is also a fact that countries do not any more believe in moral values, thus holding the belief that because of God, as their protector, no other nation will ever attack them. As a result, each country must always be ready for war, just as it was in the time of the Cold War. Therefore, such countries keep on building deadly and destructive weapons – including even nuclear weapons -- to protect their interests. The manufacture of the weapons by the various countries could also deter any other nation that will like to wage war on others, and this situation also can lead to a theory known as deterrence, which seeks to deter or warn aggressive nations to refrain from their aggression.

3.0 Liberalism Theory and Its Relative Purpose/Rationale

It is a fact that the Liberalism theory gained popularity after the Second World War between 1939 and 1945. At the time, a lot of messy problems had been created by the war, hence some nations came together to create an international organisation, known as the United Nations, to help build either a peaceful or harmonious world. Therefore, based on such a theory, it has been expected that the relationship among nations will always be a peaceful one (Doyle, 1986).

Liberalism theory recognises that the world is a dangerous place, but the consequences of using military power (i.e. creating war) would endanger the world the more; rather, other power, like economic power (not the imperial way) can be used to compel other nations to do what is expected of them without the destruction of properties as well as the maiming and killing of others (Doyle, 1986; Dunn, 1993; Gaus, 1983; Gaus, and Kukathas, 2004).

Meanwhile, any nation with Liberal views embraces a change that comes along with positive improvement in human rights and, in the process, to foster a harmonious living in every society. The countries that believe in a Liberal theory, therefore, have respect for negotiations among nations as well as moral values, rules and regulations among nations (Dunn, 1993; Gaus, 1983; Gaus, and Kukathas, 2004). They are also of the view that war is not the way to solve issues or how nations should relate with one another (Doyle, 1986). In the end, the Liberalism theory pictures the world to be a very nice place, and that everything will be perfect, but of which it is not easy to overcome; this situation leads to what is known as the Idealism theory (Doyle, 1986).

4.0 Examples or Classification of Countries, International Bodies under Realism, and Liberalism Theories based on their respective Assumptions:

It is also a fact that no nation or country is an island unto itself, especially since countries are interdependent on one another (or each other) for the sake of survival. Therefore, in all international relations, it is not a bad idea, on its own, as the theories involved are also good in their special way. However, how a nation relates to other countries or other international bodies can be classified either under the Realism theory or Liberalism theory, based on their respective assumptions.

For example, the Cotonou Agreement (CA) between African, Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP) nations and the European Union (EU) was signed by 78 ACP countries and the fifteen- member nations of the European Union (EU) on 23rd June of 2000 in Cotonou, the Republic of Benin's largest city. The objective of the agreement was for the reduction and eventual eradication of poverty, while also contributing to sustainable development and to the gradual integration of ACP countries into the world economy. This Agreement comes with a lot of benefits for the ACP countries from the EU countries, which have European Development Fund to which the fifteen European member nations, in every five years, make contributions to finance a wide range of such long-term development operations as education, health, debt relief and many more. From this view point, the fifteen EU member nations are exhibiting the ideas of Liberalism theory. One of the assumptions of such a theory is that the world should be peaceful, and that each nation will help the other to ensure harmonious living.

All the assistance that the EU is offering to the ACP countries is to foster peace and unity, which are the core motives of Liberalism theory.

Furthermore, European Union (EU) trade, development and cooperation Agreement with South Africa also underscores or portrays Liberalism theory. This agreement was signed on 1st January of 2000 to regulate trade between South Africa and the EU. Since then, South African export volume and value have been growing significantly due to this agreement, which promotes their mutual trade, development and eventual cooperation. Both parties are happy with the agreement because there are some mutual benefits. South Africa, in the process, supplies EU with agricultural produce at an already-agreed upon reasonable price; therefore, if world market price of agricultural produce falls, South Africa will still be better off. EU too is assured of raw materials because they are entitled to South Africa's agricultural produce. In a nutshell, these are forms of negotiations about which the Liberalist preaches. Both parties will never like to wage war against each other because if that happens, both parties will suffer economically, especially since they depend on each other. At the end, this will foster peace, which is one of the assumptions of Liberalism.

Also, as an example, China's relationship with some developing countries shows a feature of realism theory. Specifically, China helped to build an airport for the Republic of Zambia by using a loan for which Zambia, out of poverty, could not service the payment as required. China capitalized on the default of Zambia in respect of the loan and, as a result, the Southeast Asian nation (China) has taken over Zambia's airport operations. Other countries that have suffered similarly from China include Sri Lanka, whereby the Southeast Asian neighbour leased a port to a Chinese company for 99 years after struggling but it was unable to make loan payments due to its Lankan Rupee currency.

The foregoing dominion instances of control on the part of the Chinese demonstrate clearly that the government of China is using economic power in an imperial way to get dominion over the strategic assets of the affected nations, including Zambia and Sri Lanka. This action on the part of the Chinese is in line with the assumption of the Realism that nations are independent entities and, therefore, can pursue their own interests. China's aim of giving assistance to some economically-weak nations is to have eventual dominion over such nations, hence it will give them the needed huge assistance in a form of infrastructure or whatever the Chinese know, for sure, that the needy countries cannot repay on time. Therefore, China plots to take over of their strategic assets like an airport, as it happened in Zambia, and also a sea port, as Sri Lanka suffered at the hands of China.

5.0 Conclusion

Conclusively, the relationship between the United States (U.S.) and Iran — sometimes known as either Persia or the Islamic Republic of Iran — does portray both the Liberalism and Realism theories. As the facts show, Iran is known to have taken the United States of America (or the U.S.) to the International Court of Justice in The Hague because of the U.S. either disowning or leaving the obligations of the signed international treaty between Iran, the U.S. and its allies. Instead, the U.S. has imposed sanctions on Iran for refusing to renegotiate the treaty to which the Obama Administration was a binding signatory. This shows that Iran believes in institutions, rules and regulations, which is one of the attributes of Liberalism. Unlike the Realist, who believes that we live in the world of anarchy, thus a lawless world. The US is, therefore, exhibiting some Realism features in the sense that its leaders, led by Mr. Donald Trump as President, have the assumption that each nation is a rational actor. This, therefore, means that Iran, as a rational nation, will not wage war on US, even though the sanctions US is imposing on that country is greater than what they could bear because the U.S. is militarily either mightier or a lot more capable than Iran.

The foregoing illustration is one the reasons why a nation, with a belief in Realism like the U.S., keeps building and harboring weapons to deter other countries they either believe or suspect that they may like to wage war on them, if they can do so. The excuse for building those weapons sometimes is that they do not know the intentions of other neighbouring nations.

Meanwhile, the argument, for example, of America's National Security Adviser John Bolton is that globalism constrains US' sovereignty, and that also confirms the U.S.' stance on the Realism theory. This is because, from our own understanding, we can clearly see America's National Security Adviser's wish that the world should be in a state of anarchy. Therefore, the stronger he wants his country (the U.S.) to be, the more they can easily exercise their political power to have dominion over other weaker nations, which is a true feature of Realism.

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