



Realism and the Logic of Statism, Survival, and Self-Help in International Relations

Peter Sunday Equere, PhD¹; Captain Iniobong Edward Ekong (Rtd.)² & Aniebiet Iniobong Antia³

^{1&3}Department of History and International Studies, Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria.

²Department of History and International Studies, University of Uyo, Nigeria.
peterequere@aksu.edu.ng

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Abstract

Realism is a broad and influential theoretical framework in the study of international relations that emerged following the decline of the discredited idealist approach. Given that realism provides a practical guide for maximizing state interests in a hostile international environment, it helps explain why it continues to remain a dominant tradition in the study of international politics. This classical realism became dominant after the Second World War and identified the state as the major actor in the international system whose main goal is to pursue power as the logic of existence. For realists of all persuasions, the survival of the state can never be guaranteed because the use of force, which sometimes culminates in war, is a legitimate instrument of statecraft. The assumption that the state is the principal actor, backed up by the reality that the international environment that the state inhabits is a perilous arena, helps to define the core principles of realism, which are statism, which defines the idea of the state as the legitimate representative of the collective will of the people and self-help, which is seen as the principle of action in an anarchical international system where there is no world government. For the realists, each state actor is



responsible for ensuring their own welfare and survival. These three Ss: statism, survival, and self-help are concepts that all realists, regardless of their persuasions, consider the basic and inescapable logic of international relations. This paper is a discourse of these principles. Adopting an analytical approach and relying primarily on secondary sources, the paper argues that the state itself constitutes a moral force, as its existence makes possible the emergence of an ethical political community within the domestic sphere. The findings further suggest that the twenty-first century, and indeed the centuries to come, are likely to remain the realist's centuries, given the realist conviction that words can function as instruments of power and that internationalist ideas represent a continuation of statism by other means.

Keywords: Realism, Statism, Self-Help, State Survival, International Relations.

Introduction

Realism is the dominant school of international relations. This is so because it offers the most powerful, convincing, and persuasive theory for the state of war, which is the recurring decimal in the international system, a bold claim of realism in defense of its intellectual tradition. Within the realist paradigm, the essence of statecraft is national survival in a hostile environment. To this end, no means are more important than the acquisition of power, and no principle is more important than self-help. In this conception, state sovereignty gives the political elites the prerogatives and obligations to do anything necessary to advance the state's interests and survival (Kegley, 2006). To the hardline realists, recourse to moral principles is a wasteful and precarious interference in the pursuit of self-advantage of the state. To these exponents of power politics, a state's philosophical preferences are neither good nor bad; what matters is whether they serve its self-interests. In this wise, the game of international politics revolves around the pursuit of power, acquiring, increasing, projecting, and using it to bend others to one's whims and caprices. This is so because the possibility of eradicating the instinct for power is a hopeless utopian aspiration, underscoring the logic that of all people's ways, none are more prevalent, unchangeable, and dangerous than their instinctive lust for power and their inordinate desire to dominate others. For

realists like Thomas Hobbes, international politics is a struggle for power, “a war of all against all” (Genest, 2004).

Conscious of the fact that the primary obligation of every state, a goal to which all other national objectives should be subjected, is to promote national interest and to acquire power for this purpose, because the anarchical nature and dynamics of the international system dictate that states acquire adequate military capabilities to deter attack and exercise influence over others, states should acquire arms and get ready for war to keep peace and not be hesitant to use arms since might makes right. The realists also sound a note of warning that states should never entrust the job of self-protection to international or multilateral security organizations or international law and should resist any effort to regulate international behavior through global governance, hence the prevalence and relevance of statism, survival, and self-help in international relations (Kegley, 2006).

This paper focuses on these three principles of essential realism to interrogate its relevance in the extant global system. To this end, the paper is structured in four parts. Part one examines the principle of statism, which defines the state as the major actor in the international system. The second part considers the concept of survival, which asserts that in international politics, the preeminent goal is survival, while the third part focuses on the third principle of self-help, which stipulates that in an anarchical setting, self-help is necessarily the main principle of action. Part four is the concluding remarks.

Statism

For realists, the state is the most important actor, and sovereignty is its distinguishing or unique trait in the international system. The meaning of a sovereign state is bound up with the use of force. Within the municipal context, Max Weber defines the state as the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. In this territorial space, sovereignty means that the state has the supreme authority to make and enforce law, which is the basis of the unwritten contract between the individual and the state. For Hobbes, individuals trade their liberty in return for a guarantee of security. Once security has been established, civil society can thrive, but in the absence of adequate security, there can be no art, culture, or society (Bull, 1977).

In light of these dynamics, the realists argue that the first and most important thing to do is to organize or wield power within the municipal jurisdiction of the state, meaning that every state is imbued with power, and it is only once power is organized

that the community can begin. At the international level, the realists go with the assumption that domestically, the issue of power is settled since the presence of a sovereign guarantees security for individuals through a corpus of legal rules, law enforcement agencies, and other coercive mechanisms. This allows members of the community to pursue a good life. Outside the state, the relations between states, insecurities, dangers, and threats to the existence of the state loom large. Realists argue that on the basis of the absence of the conditions for order and security, it is missing from the international realms. Realists also claim that in anarchy, states compete with other states for security, markets, influence, and other things, and this competition is viewed in zero-sum terms; in other words, more for one actor means less for another. This competitive logic for power politics makes agreement on universal principles difficult, apart from the principle of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other independent states. These international aspects of sovereignty are the red lines on the borders against states designed to engender coexistence. However, this principle is sometimes suspended by major powers in the international system (Smith, 2001).

Granted that the first task of the state is to organize power municipally and the next task is accumulation of power internationally, it is apt at this point to consider what is the meaning of fusion of politics with power. Realists like Hans Morgenthau define power as man's control over the minds and actions of other men. Based on this conception, the realists make two vital points on the concept of power. First, they argue that power is a relational concept that cannot be exercised in a vacuum but in relation to another being. Second, power is a relative concept that must be calculated based on one's capabilities and the capabilities of others, though the process of assessment can be very complex and may amount to taking inventory of the troops, aircraft, and naval ships a state has. However, neo-realists like Kenneth Waltz tried to deal with these complexities by offering conceptual clarity by shifting the focus from power to capabilities. He opined that geographical size, population, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political competence, and stability are some of the indices or elements of a state's capability (Waltz, 1979).

Other realists offered more explanations on the understanding of the power calculus of states in the global system. This argument hinges on the ability of the state to control its environment, especially in peacetime. However, one reservation about the realist's conception of power politics is that they exclusively focus upon state power, bearing in mind that states are the main actors that matter. For them,



transnational corporations, international organizations, and even religious denominations may come and go, but states remain one permanent actor in the political landscape of international politics. In addition, these non-state actors are not completely detached from the influence of state power, such as the papacy in Italy or Microsoft in the United States. This is so considering the fact that these non-state actors bear the imprint of a statist identity. This position is underscored by the fact that these actors must navigate the international political landscape, whose rules of engagement are made by states. The case of the American hegemonic power behind the Bretton Woods trading system, which determined the *modus operandi* for international economic relations since 1945, is a good case in point (Keohane, 1986).

The American position was shaped not by altruism but by rational calculation: the United States stood to gain more influence and prestige from managing the international economic system than it would lose by refusing to exercise the necessary leadership. The realists stridently argue that the existence and efficacy of an open, free market system such as the Bretton Woods system depend on the presence of a hegemon that is willing and able to shoulder the financial stress of managing the system. This argument, which is rooted in the logic of the hegemonic stability theory, maintains that a stable international economic order depends more on the existence of a dominant state that can offer the leadership to maintain the status quo (Baldwin, 1993).

Survival

The second principle, widely endorsed by realists of different persuasions, asserts that the most vital interest of the state in international politics is survival. It is generally accepted that the state's ultimate concern is security, since it serves as a prerequisite for the attainment of other goals and objectives. This reinforces Waltz's argument that "beyond the survival motive, the aims of the state may be endlessly varied" (Waltz, 1979).

However, this assertion threw up a controversy among the realists about whether states are mainly security or power maximizers, an issue that made some realists be identified as either defensive or offensive realists. For the defensive realists, states have security as their principal objectives and therefore seek the needed power to ensure their survival. According to this school of thought, states are defensive actors and are not interested in accumulating more power that may jeopardize their existence and security.

On the other hand, the offensive realists argue that the ultimate goal of all states is to attain a hegemonic position in the global system. They opined that states seek more power and are ready, given the slightest opportunity, to change the status quo or alter the existing distribution of power systems, even if such an action may not augur well in terms of security or stability or not be in their best interests. In terms of survival, the defensive realists are of the view that the existence of status power lessens the competition for power, while the offensive realists maintain that the competition for power is always keen because states that are aspiring hegemons are risk takers with the aim of improving their position in the global system (Wendt, 1994).

Niccolo Machiavelli, a prominent realist of international repute, reflected further on the principle or art of survival. His treatise, 'The Prince,' was written with the main intention of codifying a set of maxims or rules of engagement for political leaders who want to hold on to power. He came by this maxim courtesy of his experience as a diplomat and his reading in ancient history. Machiavelli extolled the Roman Empire for annexing all its potential opponents through conquest and imperial domination. He instructed political leaders or sovereigns that they must be prepared to break their promises if it is in their interests and to conquer the immediate neighboring state (Skinner, 1998). However, there are ethical issues concerning the Machiavellian principles as they relate to contemporary international society and politics.

Regardless of these issues, there are two vital Machiavellian themes that transcend the writings of neo-realists, both of which derive from the idea that the realm of international politics requires more moral and political rules than those applicable in domestic politics. The task of understanding the nature and dynamics of international relations and the need to protect the state at all costs places a heavy burden on the shoulders of political leaders. Henry Kissinger, erstwhile American Secretary of State, argues that state survival is its first and ultimate responsibility that cannot be compromised nor put at risk (Smith, 1968).

Their guide must be an ethic of responsibility, the weighing of consequences, and the realization that the individual act of an immoral kind might have to be taken for the greater good. For example, the ways in which governments suspend the legal and political rights of suspected terrorists in view of the threat they pose to national security. The realists would argue that letting a suspected terrorist out of prison because of insufficient evidence for prosecution would be an irresponsible act that might be detrimental to the lives of innocent citizens. An ethic of responsibility is usually used

as the basis for breaking the laws of war. For instance, the principle was invoked by the United States' decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. However, there are issues with the realist tradition on the ethics of responsibility. Whereas the realists instruct the political elites to consider the consequences of their actions, they have not provided a template or guide to how state leaders should weigh the consequences (Smith, 1986). Theoretically, realism frowns at bringing ethics into the realms of international politics. Starting from the assumption that each state has its own values, norms, the realists believe that the state is the supreme good, and there can be no community beyond borders. In the absence of a common culture, values, and belief system, the idea of advocating for moral rules is utopian. Edward Carr, a renowned realist, pushed the argument further with the assertion that advocating for universal principles such as self-determination, the principle of free trade, and the protection of human rights, among others, is nothing other than a reflection of national policy or the interests of great powers (Carr, 1946).

However, this moral relativism has generated a series of criticisms, especially from the liberal scholars. The Liberals argue that if all values or norms are relative, what then is the basis for judging the action or inaction of political elites of states? They also question if there are no policies that are wrong regardless of who makes such policies, such as torture and denial of basic human rights, among others. All things considered, while the intuitive response to these issues may lean toward the affirmative, the argument extends beyond that, particularly when considering states that adhere to non-Western values and norms. For instance, political elites in developing states, particularly in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, argue that the westernized civil rights undermine social cohesion by granting privileges to individuals' rights over the collective benefit of the state. Therefore, the realist, for instance, sees the pursuit of human rights in the foreign policy of states as an imposition of one's moral values on another (Morgenthau, 1978).

Self-Help

The third concept, self-help, has facilitated a more profound understanding of the dynamics of the international system within the realist tradition. Kenneth Waltz, in his popular work on the theory of international politics, argues that there is nothing unique in international politics in terms of the regular occurrence of war and other conflicts since these are also recurring decimals in national politics. For Waltz, the seemingly different between national and international order is the structure. Within the state,

citizens do not have to resort to self-defense or protection since there are laws and enforcement agencies of the state, but on the international plane, there is no higher authority or government to prevent or counter the undue use of force. In this wise, security can only be possible or realized through self-help. Waltz further argues that in an anarchic setting, self-help is necessarily the principle of action (Waltz, 1979).

Practically, this principle is fraught with problematic issues. When a state relies on self-help, it unintentionally causes insecurity in other states. This spiral of insecurity gives rise to a security dilemma in the international system. Scholars like Wheeler and Booth have argued that a security dilemma exists when the military preparation of one state creates an uncertainty in the minds of other states as to whether such preparation is for defensive purposes to enhance its security in an uncertain world or whether it is for offensive purposes to change or alter the international status quo to its advantage or interest. This situation suggests that one's state desire or quest for security is mostly another state's insecurity. This is so because of the high sense of distrust among states, who often see the intention and action of others negatively. Thus, the military action of one state is very likely to be matched by others. Ironically, at the end of the day, states feel more insecure than before they undertook measures to enhance their security (Wheeler & Booth, 1992).

In response to the security dilemma, the structural realists argue that the security dilemma is inherently one of the dynamics or conditions in international relations, while the historical realists believe that in the self-help system, the effects of the security dilemma can be mitigated through the operation of the principle of balance of power. They argued that maintaining a balance of power is a vital objective of the foreign policies of major world powers. Furthermore, in a self-help system, the structural realists believe that the balance of power will emerge even in the absence of a deliberate policy to maintain the balance, which they term as 'prudent statecraft' (Baldwin, 1992).

Kenneth Waltz, one of the outstanding structural realists, asserted that balance of power will emerge regardless of the intentions of the states. He further argued that in an anarchical system inhabited by states who play power politics and seek to perpetuate themselves, alliances are inevitable that will check and balance the power against aggressive states. In this course, a fortuitous balance will be formed through the interaction of states, culminating in the establishment of power equilibrium in the international system. For liberal realists, the emergence and maintenance of a stable

balance of power hinge on the vital roles of state leaders and diplomats. This perspective suggests that the balance of power is neither natural nor accidental; rather, it must be intentionally and consciously constructed (Gilpin, 1993).

Realists of all persuasions have consented to the fact that balance of power is not a very stable condition in the global political system. Whether it is the contrived Concert of Europe of the 19th century or the fortuitous balance of the Cold War era, balance of power is broken either through war or a peaceful change giving way to the emergence of a new one. The lesson of history derived from the collapse of balance of power is that states can mitigate the worst consequences of the security dilemma but are not able to escape it (Viotti & Kauppi, 1993).

To address the problems caused by the self-help system, neorealists argue that creating international legal rules or agreements is an effective solution. They argued that by establishing a pattern of rules, norms, or procedures of engagement such as those of the World Trade Organization, states may have confidence that other states may comply with these rules and that the deviants may be sanctioned. The liberal realists agree with the neorealists that legal regimes can promote cooperation under certain conditions; however, such cooperation often faces challenges in maintenance and remains heavily dependent on the distribution of state power (Baldwin, 1993).

One reason that underscores the above position is that states are more concerned about relative than absolute gains. Thus, the issue is not whether all will be better off through cooperation, but rather who will likely gain more than another will. It is because of this issue of relative gains that informed the realist's position that cooperation is difficult in a self-help system (Gilpin, 1993). One weakness of the realist's assertion on the self-help system is that anarchy does not necessarily call for self-help because, historically, anarchic situations have contained varieties of interstate practices. For instance, in the 18th century, philosophers and legal experts portrayed the European state system as a commonwealth, a family of nations with common laws and customs. In the 20th century, the decentralized international system witnessed a diverse pattern of interaction from a literal state of war to a period of collective security and regional integration (Baylis & Smith, 2001).

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is safe to say that statism is the cornerstone and a central theme of the realist's philosophy. This can be seen in two ways: the state is the preeminent actor and non-state actors are subservient to the state, and that state's



sovereignty signifies the existence of an independent political community, one which has juridical authority over its domain. However, statism as a concept is flawed both on empirical challenges to state power from above and below and normatively as it relates to the state's inability to respond to collective global problems such as famine, human abuses, and poverty, among others.

On the principle of survival, it is axiomatic that the primary objective of all states is survival, a supreme national interest that all political leaders must achieve. All other goals are secondary, considered low politics, and subsumed under this primary objective. In order to promote and maintain the security of states, leaders must adopt an ethical code that judges actions in line with the outcome rather than moral rules. This underscores the principle of the end justifying the means. If there are ethical or moral rules of universal applicability, they can only be consolidated in specific states or communities. However, there are limits to what states can do on grounds of necessity and national interests.

Thirdly, no state can be entrusted with the survival of other states. In international politics, the structure and dynamics of the system do not absolutely permit friendship, trust, and honor, only a perennial condition of uncertainty generated by the absence of a supranational government. Co-existence is achieved through the maintenance of balance of power, and limited cooperation is possible through interaction, especially where the state stands to gain more than others. However, self-help is not an inevitable consequence of the absence of a supranational government. Rather, self-help is the diplomatic game that the state chose to play. Moreover, historical evidence is abundant where states preferred a collective security system and regional integration to the principle of self-help.

All said, there are many variants of realism, such as structural, historical, liberal, neo- and neoclassical realism. Regardless of these distinctions, there is a consensus that the purpose of statecraft is national survival in a hostile international environment and that it is the national interest of states that is the force that drives, shapes, and determines the actions or inaction of states. These principles have been subjected to a barrage of criticism, especially by the liberal scholars. However, despite the weaknesses of realism, almost all states think and play international politics in line with the realist's theory. They think and act in terms of interest and power. Of the three concepts, such as statism, survival, and self-help, it is only the relevance of self-help that has been eroded by the principle of collective security. States continue to be the



major actors, and survival remains an article of faith for all states in the international political landscape.

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