



What Are the Respective Roles of a Nation-State's Power, Interests, Institutions in World Politics?

Kevin Renheng Xu^(✉)

Dalian American International School, Dalian, China
kevinxu8856@outlook.com

Abstract. In the past two hundred years, the world has experienced an era of fierce competition. During this period, the realism theory was praised as the interpretation of international relations. As a result of globalization, international institutions have been established to promote cooperation and settle disputes. This paper will examine the respective roles of power, interests and institutions from the perspective of realism and liberalism, and use empirical evidence to demonstrate that power ultimately plays a leading role in promoting international politics. Through the investigation of historical evidence, it can be clearly seen that among the three contributing factors of world politics: power, interest and system. Cooperation and interdependence seem to be common in the 21st century, and countries resolve conflicts through the environment created by the system. Countries should always be prepared to prevent other countries from pursuing power in conflicts.

Keywords: Nation-state · Power · World Politics

1 Introduction

1.1 Define the Key Terms

Power here refers to two types of power, a nation's military competence, and its science-technology-based global trading and economic importance, with its wealth, development level, and size of the population [1].

Interest could be simply explained as the economic gains from a nation's access to global resources, products and capital. Indeed, in the liberal view, "the national interest is the perceived needs and desires of one sovereign state in relation to other sovereign states comprising the external environment" [2].

The institution could be divided into international organizations and international laws. The former is a structure that states cooperate under, or in other words international institutions are broadly defined as "recognized patterns of practice around which expectations converge" [3]. Therefore, there must be rules that states must follow, or otherwise would be no cooperation. These rules are called international laws.

1.2 The Argument

The world endured an era of intense competition over the last two hundred years. It was a period where the realist theory was promoted as more favorable as an explanation of international relations. However, since the end of the Cold War, the world outlook has appeared peaceful, with the U.S. as the hegemony, which brought a fervor of liberalism. During the same course of time, globalization led to tighter trade bonds between nations and more interaction between states. Also, as a result of globalization, international institutions were established to facilitate cooperation and settle disputes. However, despite all these developments, regional warfare reoccurs from time to time; and with the rise of China, the Sino-US relations have become more competitive than ever in all aspects. It then draws a question close to our attention: what are the respective roles of power, interests, and institutions in world politics?

In other words, which factor holds the most impact in influencing international affairs? This article will then examine the respective roles of power, interests, and institutions through the lens of realist and liberal theories and argue with empirical evidence that power ultimately plays the leading role in driving international politics.

2 Survey of Prevalent Views upon These 3 Factors

2.1 Realist Theories: Power is Important

Realistic international relations theory emphasizes the influence of power relations on state behavior, and pays attention to the power balance between nations and the pursuit of national interests. In short, the core of realistic international relations theory is “power” or “strength”. This theory claims that the consideration of power and interests of the state in decision-making is higher than ideal or morality. The opposite is “idealism”. According to the level of independent variables, realism international relations theory can be divided into structural realism (independent variables are system level), classical realism (individual level and national level), and neo-classical realism (both system level and national level are considered).

The realist explanation for world politics always traces the root of arguments to a nation’s power. Typically, John Mearsheime and Robert Jervis with Charles Glaser represent two kinds of realists, the offensive and defensive ones.

Realistic international relations theory originated from political realism in the history of European thought. Its pioneers were Nicola Machiavelli, a politician and diplomat in Florence, Italy, from the second half of the 15th century to the early 16th century, and Thomas Hobbes, a British philosopher in the 17th century. Their pessimistic view of human nature and their analytical theory of the “natural state” have become the logical starting point of realistic international relations theory. Realistic international relations theory came into being in the 1920s and 1940s. It is based on the reflection and criticism of idealistic international relations theory and the discussion of the causes of the Second World War. Before the Second World War, *the 20 Year Crisis (1919–1939)* by Edward Carr, a British historian and diplomat, was considered to be the symbol of the formation

of realistic international relations theory as well as that of the whole western international relations theory [4].

Offensive Realism. The theory of offensive realism was systematically illustrated by John Mearsheimer in his book “The Tragedy of Great Power Politics” in 2001. In this work, Mearsheimer asserts that the anarchic nature of the international system forced states to pursue security by maximizing their relative power, which leads to intense competition [4]. To build the systematic structure of this argument, Mearsheimer first proposed a list of “bedrock assumptions”: (1) the international system is under anarchy, (2) great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability, (3) states can never anticipate another’s intention, (4) Survival as number one priority, (5) and states are rational actors [5]. Based on the combination of these assumptions, Mearsheimer argues that states will inherently feel fear and suspicion against each other, view other great powers as potential aggressors, and themselves as a lonely and vulnerable target. In Mearsheimer’s world, in order to alleviate this kind of fear, states are forced to seek self-help by maximizing their relative power to achieve regional hegemony [5]. The lack of trust between states creates some kind of security dilemma in which states are disposed to think offensively toward other states, even though their ultimate motive is simply to survive [5]. Thus, the final outcome deduced from the security dilemma is that there will be intense competition between states in which sometimes leads to war.

Defensive Realism. Defensive realism developed from the original Waltz’ neorealism, is another significant branch of the realist theoretical studies. Unlike offensive realism in which the anarchic system forces states to pursue maximum power, defensive realism argues that states do not maximize their power since they can be secure within the anarchic system. Defensive realists acknowledge the existence of the security dilemma, but they believe there are means to alleviate the distrust and reduce the competition between states [6]. The offense-defense theory, for example, offers a solution to reduce the security concerns between states. In the debate of offense-defense theory, though, defensive realists assert that cooperation is achievable and security dilemmas can be minimized if defense properties dominate the world rather than offensive properties. This argument usually relies on 2 particular variables: the offense-defense differentiation, and the offense-defense balance.

2.2 The Liberal View: Interest and Institution Are as Important as Power

The theory of liberalism was first put forward by John Milton, a British thinker and political commentator, in the debate on freedom of thought in the 17th century. Later, it was introduced into newspaper activities to form the theory of liberal newspapers and magazines, which played a leading role in journalism during the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the early stage of capitalist society. This theory advocates natural rights, believes that reason is the standard for judging right and wrong, emphasizes the superiority of personal freedom and personal judgment principle, puts forward the concepts of a “free market of ideas” and “self-correction process”, believes that newspaper activities should not be controlled by the government, and advocates that anyone can spread news and express opinions without restrictions, and finally make correct opinions recognized

through competition; As a product of reason, newspapers and periodicals have the right to supervise the government, and can become the fourth power on the basis of equality with legislation, justice and administration. This theory reflects the economic interests and political needs of the bourgeoisie in the period of free competition. It originated in the 17th century, formed in the 18th century and prevailed in the 19th century. In the 20th century, with the intensification of capitalist economic and political monopoly, this theory was gradually replaced by the theory of social responsibility.

The Liberal Concerns for Interest. As generally described in the critique “The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory” by Sebastian Rosato, the “democratic peace theory” claims there is a more peaceful state among democracies because of two sets of causal logic: normative logic and institutional logic [7]. The institutional logic demonstrates the effect of people’s interest—be it peaceful or economical—upon states’ behaviour. This logic explains in the way that war is unlikely among democracies because democratic leaders are accountable to their people who are opposed to war by their interests. Because democracies reflect the interest of their people who have an interest in peace, democracies also tend to have an interest in peace.

The Liberal Concerns for Institution. International institutions have a significant role to play in international politics as well, according to various liberal theories [8]. Bearce has argued that commercial institutions promote peace between the member states through high organs (organs to allow personal contact between state leaders) in-bedded in such institutions. Bearce argues that this trust yields larger likelihood of cooperation between nations due to the positive expectations of other states’ future behavior [9]. Another argument on the role of institutions in international relations is proposed by Axelrod and Keohane with game theoretical analysis.

The structural features of the international system affecting the likelihood of cooperation is analyzed in three “situational dimensions” (mutuality of interest, the shadow of the future, and the number of actors) in terms of payoff structure in both political-economic and military sense. The result is that perceptions of states matter to a large extent on the payoff structures. Institutions can alter perceptions, thus payoff structures, positively favoring cooperation by ensuring a more sustainable shadow of the future, providing information, and reducing transaction costs. Additionally, three “situations” of states interaction contexts (issue-linkage, domestic-international connections, and incompatibilities between games) are also analyzed and it concluded that “a strategy based on reciprocity can yield relatively high payoff against a variety of other strategies,” but states face limitations for such strategies to yield cooperations [10].

2.3 Our Critique

The examination of the theories from liberalism to realism demonstrates that realism endorses the role of power as the dominant and essential drive for state behavior, largely as consequences of the two World Wars in the last century, whereas liberalism believes interest and institution could play a more dominant role, largely based open the relatively safer period during the cold war and the situations in the 1990s. However, by reviewing the empirical evidence, the role of power prevails and explains states’ behavior throughout even during the 1990s [11–13].

Institutionalist theories also appear weak under empirical evidence. Axelrod and Keohane have differentiated the cooperation-promoting effect of institutions being stronger in political-economic interactions but weaker in military interactions. However, the military aspect of international relations is vitally important as it determines peace or war.

3 Conclusion

Through inspection of historical evidence, it is evident that out of the three major contributing factors in world politics: power, interest, and institutions; power plays the most impactful role in influencing international affairs. We arrive at this conclusion as comparisons of the realist and liberalist theories, and historical evidence for or against either, presents the world as more often driven by power. Realism's claim of nations is driven by power due to insecurity which leads to inevitable conflict, is more likely than the liberalist's reliance on cooperation to avoid conflict reflects the world more accurately. It is shown as recently as the World Wars, which occurred less than a century ago, and as the world, again, regresses back into a state of bipolarity, where both powers will seek more power to secure its own safety, even if at the expense of interests. Whilst interests and institutions, hoping for the diminishing of the likelihood of conflict have failed repeatedly. Germany in the World Wars, which held economic ties with its European neighbors, disregarded the tie in interest and waged war. Institutions, which are hoped to bond states together in order to maintain peace, are not very impactful either, the League of Nations and United Nations hold very little leverage of actions of countries. Nevertheless, major powers such as the United States.

This analysis implicates state that while cooperation and interdependence seem prevalent in the 21st century, and state resolve conflicts through the environment created by institutions, the country should always be prepared against other countries' pursuit of power in conflicts. Cooperation and peace are maintained in the current state is only because they do not yet conflict with states' pursuit of power. As evaluated by the article, states are unwilling to concede power to economic interest or to the rules of institutions in a such an anarchic world. Every state should be aware of and prepared for the situation in which the state will choose to pursue power when such pursuit is conflicted by interest or institution.

References

1. Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. WW Norton & Company. p. 55.
2. Nuechterlein, Donald E. "National Interests and Foreign Policy: A Conceptual Framework for Analysis and Decision-Making." *British Journal of International Studies* 2, no. 3 (1976): 246–266. Accessed August 6, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20096778>.
3. Douglass C. North and Robert P. Thomas, "An Economic Theory of the Growth of the Western World," *The Economic History Review*, 2nd series, Vol. 23, No. 1 (April 1970), p. 5.
4. Snyder, G. H. (2002). Mearsheimer's world—offensive realism and the struggle for security: a review essay. *International Security*, 27(1), 149–173.

5. Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). The tragedy of great power politics. WW Norton & Company. p. 30–34.
6. Lobell, S. E. (2010). Structural realism/offensive and defensive realism. In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies.
7. Rosato, Sebastian. “The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory.” *The American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (2003): 585–602. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3593025>.
8. Weir, L. A. (2017). AN ENDURING LIBERAL INSTITUTION: HOW NEOLIBERAL VICTIM-CENTRIC REFORMS STRENGTHEN THE LIBERAL CONCEPTION OF THE LEGITIMACY OF THE CRIMINAL TRIAL.
9. Bearce, David H., and Sawa Omori. “How Do Commercial Institutions Promote Peace?” *Journal of Peace Research* 42, no. 6 (2005): 659–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343305057886>.
10. Axelrod, Robert. *The Evolution of Cooperation*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1984.
11. Nuruzzaman, M. (2006). Beyond the realist theories: “neo-conservative realism” and the American invasion of Iraq. Blackwell Publishing Inc. (3).
12. Hwang, H. (2017). Thinking beyond Modernism: Peripheral Realism and the Ethics of Truth-Telling. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota.).
13. Zhao, & Michael. (2010). Anti-Realism and the Limits of Meta-Ethics.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

