

Royal College of Defence Studies

Seaford House

London

1<sup>st</sup> MA Essay

12.12.2007

## Does Realism continue to have relevance as a theoretical tool for understanding international relations?

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2500 words

Presenting *The culture of national security*, an edited set of constructivist and neo-institutionalist studies of world politics, Peter J. Katzenstein, notes ‘the inability of all theories of international relations, both mainstream and critical, to help us explain fully’ the end of the Cold War. He calls therefore for other theoretical models.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, William C. Wohlforth, asserts that ‘realist theories are not invalidated by the post-1989 transformation of world politics. Indeed, they explain much of the story’.<sup>2</sup> In the light of those opposite answers to the question of the validity of realism as a theory, one can wonder whether this very theory, whose systematic development began during the cold war,<sup>3</sup> a period of systemic, bipolar stability, still holds in today’s complex and changing environment.

This essay will study the importance of the realism as a world politics<sup>4</sup> framework, following here the distinction drawn by Elinor Ostrom between *frameworks* (relationship between variables), *theories* (defining more consistence and determination between those variables), and *models* (more focussed, precise and explicit).<sup>5</sup> Three applications for frameworks have been offered by Wayne Parsons in his reference book on political science:<sup>6</sup>

1. Rationalization, seeking to ‘show how something happens’, either ‘heuristic’ – allowing a simpler view of a complex reality (explanation) to be provided - or ‘causal’ – allowing a forecast based on logical deductions (prediction).
2. Definition of ideal types, ‘a common mental construct in the social sciences derived from observable reality although not conforming to it in detail because of deliberate simplification

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<sup>1</sup> Peter J. Katzenstein, 'Introduction: alternative perspectives on national security', *The culture of national security: norms and identity in world politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2. He then calls for the further study of the influence of ‘the cultural-institutional context of policy’ as well as ‘the constructed identity of states, governments, and other political actors’ Katzenstein, 'Introduction', 4, but to further those aspects goes out of our scope.

<sup>2</sup> William C. Wohlforth, 'Realism and the End of the Cold War', *International Security* (Winter, 1994-1995), 92.

<sup>3</sup> The basic analysis of classical realism is Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics among Nations - The struggle for Power and Peace Brief edition*, (Boston et al loc: MacGraw-Hill, 1993) that was originally written in 1948. Its structural reinterpretation – the so-called neorealist approach – was devised thirty years later by Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> We understand *world politics* as relationships between numerous classes of actors involving various concerns on the international scene, where *international relations* is the a field of study limited to a ‘state-centric’ view around the ‘interstate system’ Graham Evans and Jeffrey Newnham, *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations* (London: Penguin Books, 1998) 578.

<sup>5</sup> See Elinor Ostrom, 'Institutional Rational Choice : An Assessment of the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework', *Theories of the Policy Process*, ed. Paul Sabatier (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 39-41.

<sup>6</sup> Wayne Parsons, *Public Policy : Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Policy Analysis*, Paperback edition 2001 ed., (Cheltenham: Elgar, 1995) 57-58.

and exaggeration. [...It is] a constructed ideal used to approximate reality by selecting and accentuating certain elements'.<sup>7</sup>

3. 'Normative frameworks (...) concerned with what ought to be, rather than what is'.<sup>8</sup>

This essay wants to assess whether realism can cope with any of the previous points. It will concentrate on the contemporary period beginning after the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001. This limitation intends to single out any discontinuities ('accelerations of history') such as the fall of the Berlin Wall or the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

In the next chapters, we will first describe realism. Second, we will compare the tenets of realism with the key attribute of the international environment and assess the results. In the conclusion, we will draw on those elements and show that, even if realism is not able to describe contemporary world politics, it is still a useful benchmark to compare other approaches with.

## **The framework of realism**

The primordial theory of international politics, realism, or *realpolitik*, can be traced back to the world vision of Thucydides's *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Niccolò Machiavelli's *il Principe* and Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. After the Second World War, critics developed realism in reaction to what was considered the failure of the Wilsonian idealism. Author of *Politics among the Nations*,<sup>9</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau can be described as the father of modern realism, although the contribution of E. H Carr, Georges Kennan and Reinhold Niebuhr shall not be underrated. Kenneth J. Waltz, Morgenthau's student, developed what has been designed as *neorealism*, or *structural realism*, a more rigorous approach that 'emphasises the influence of the world power structure on the behaviour of the state within the global hierarchy, defined primarily by the distribution of military power' and eschews reference to the evil nature of man.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Ideal type* (Encyclopædia Britannica 2006 Ultimate Reference Suite DVD, 2006 [cited 23.02. 2007]).

<sup>8</sup> This public policy analysis can be link with Michael J. Smith assertion that realism 'contains three main aspects (...). First, and most broadly, realism purports to be a general theory explaining the essence of international politics. Second, (... some use it) to advocate, criticize, or justify specific policies for a given state. Finally, the notion of realism is often advanced as a particular solution to the vexed problem of the place of moral considerations in foreign policy'. Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger*, : (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986) 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Morgenthau and Thompson, *Politics among Nations* .

<sup>10</sup> Charles Kegley and Eugene Wittkopf, *World Politics - Trends and Transformation* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 2006) 34 Martin Griffiths and Terry O'Callaghan, *International relations: the key concepts* (London Routledge, 2002) 262-263.

Considered the major paradigm of international relations, realism does not suffer from lack of definitions.<sup>11</sup> The main realist tenets can however be summarized as follow:<sup>12</sup>

1. The major actors in world politics are states. They struggle over interests and seek to maximise their power.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, they act according to the principle of self-help, that is, self-reliance.
2. The state's foreign policies are shaped by rational calculations (cost/benefit calculation).
3. If all states act as realists, searching to expand their power, a situation of stability, the balance of power, will be reached. Yet, stability is not static because alliances shift and coalitions evolve.<sup>14</sup>

The second tenet is a methodological axiom that allows reducing the complexity of the analysis by considering the state as a black box,<sup>15</sup> avoiding the need to deconstruct it using, for instance, the bureaucratic politics framework.<sup>16</sup> We will thus limit the discussion to the other tenets.

This essay will not consider the ability for realism to explain change. But it is worth noting that this is yet another challenge to realism: the theory does not state its time frame of validity; in a Braudelian approach to time,<sup>17</sup> how shall we assess the temporality of realism? Clearly, we shall assume an approach based on long periods of historical time. But shall we use *l'histoire presque immobile* (the relationship between man and his milieu) or rather *l'histoire lentement agitée* (the social history, linked with human groups)?

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<sup>11</sup> Jack Donnelly, 'Realism', *Theories of International Relations*, ed. S. Burchill, et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 30 refers to Thomas R. Cusack and Richard J. Stoll, *Exploring Realpolitik: Probing International Relations Theory With Computer Simulation* (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner, 1990), chapter 2 and Jack Donnelly, *Realism and international relations* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 6-9.

<sup>12</sup> This list is roughly based on Robert O. Keohane, *International institutions and state power: essays in international relations theory* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989) 40.

<sup>13</sup> Power can be defined as 'the factors that enable one actor to manipulate another actor's behaviour against its preferences' Kegley and Wittkopf, *World Politics* 29 For a more detailed discussion on the concept of power, see Evans and Newnham, *Dictionary* 446-448.

<sup>14</sup> On this framework, see for instance Keohane, *International institutions*, Evans and Newnham, *Dictionary* 465-466, Kegley and Wittkopf, *World Politics* 29-31.

<sup>15</sup> See Keohane, *International institutions* 41.

<sup>16</sup> See Graham Allison and Morton H Halperin, "Bureaucratic politics: A Paradigm," *World Politics* supplement, no. 24 Spring 1972., Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision : Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Second Edition ed., (Longman: New York et al loc, 1999), Roger Hilsman, Laura Gaughran, and Patricia A. Weitsman, eds., *The Politics Of Policy Making In Defense and Foreign Affairs: Conceptual Models and Bureaucratic Politics*, 3rd edition ed., (Pearson Education POD, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Contributeurs à Wikipedia, *Fernand Braudel* (Wikipédia, l'encyclopédie libre, 13 mars 2007 [cited 16.3. 2007]); available from <[http://fr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Fernand\\_Braudel&oldid=15038141](http://fr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Fernand_Braudel&oldid=15038141)>.

## Realism and the contemporary international environment

The complex nature of the contemporary international environment can be best captured by scrutinizing the substantial number of different description of the contemporary international environment.<sup>18</sup> In order to simplify it, we will crudely define and describe three attributes that characterize present world politics - and challenge realism - to assess how it can cope with them: the growing power of non-state actors (1), the demise of the monopoly on strategic violence (2) and the unipolarity of world politics (3). This chapter will describe and compare them with the realist tenets. One could define many other attributes to describe the current world. However, the real test is to consider how realism copes with challenging arguments, in a popperian approach, using *modus tollens* to try to falsify the realist assumptions.

### The growing power of non-state actors

Realism asserts, as previously explained, that the state is the only relevant actor on the world stage. However, in the contemporary international environment, the power of non-state actors is increasing.

Accordingly, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as for instance, Greenpeace or Human Rights Watch, may exercise strong influence on governments.<sup>19</sup> The important role of international organisation (IO), as Kenneth W. Abbott and Duncan Snidal put it with humour, has been much more acknowledged by states than by academics.<sup>20</sup> The influence of multinational corporations (MNC) has been the subject of multiple academic or normative books and articles.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, *pêle-mêle*, a short subset of such documents, such as *Contributeurs Europa, La politique étrangère et de sécurité commune : introduction* ("EUROPA" le site portail de l'Union européenne, 13.7.2006 2006 [cited 19.7 2006]), Colin S Gray, 'How War has Changed since the End of the Cold War', *Parameters* 2005, Kegley and Wittkopf, *World Politics* .

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Joseph Nye, *Soft Power - The Means to Success in World Politics*. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004) 90-97. See also Robert Cooper, *The Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), who explains that states use NGO to do pressure on other states.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Abbott and Duncan Snidal, "Why States Act Through Formal International Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 1 1998: 28.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance Joseph Nye, "Multinational Corporations in World Politics," *Foreign Affairs - an American Quarterly Review*, 53, no. 1 1974. or Richard Barnet and Ronald Müller, *Global Reach: the Power of the Multinational Corporations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974 ).

Realism does not cope with this influence, because of its basic assertion that only states matter. As a result, it is challenged by the fact that non-state actors, using the equivalent of soft-power,<sup>22</sup> can have a major influence on world politics.

### The demise of the monopoly on strategic violence

According to realism thought, 'hard power' - the military and economic dimensions of influence - is the currency of power, and violence its main instrument. Since the signature of the treaties of Westphalia, force has clearly been a state's preserve.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, with the development of, and the leverage given by, technology, terrorist groups can create substantial pressure on states. Clearly, the influence of terrorism on world politics is not a new topic. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914 indirectly led to the death of more than eight million combatants during World War 1. Still, using weapons of mass destruction (WMD) such as stolen nuclear weapons, biological toxins or chemical agents, terrorists could nowadays directly create effects of a magnitude that was previously only achievable by middle powers.<sup>24</sup> The impact of airplanes used as guided missile on 9/11 demonstrates that terrorists can challenge the most powerful state.

In consequence, whereas the state is still a powerful actor, new players can nowadays get hold of strategic power, allowing them to influence, even to contest, states. Obviously, the realist tenet is seriously challenged.

### The unipolar nature of the world

The last tenet makes clear that if the states act as realists, a situation of stability, the balance of power, will be reached. However, today's international environment is characterized by a unipolar power distribution: since the end of the Cold War, the United States is the single dominant power

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<sup>22</sup> Soft power is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" Nye, *Soft Power* 10.

<sup>23</sup> According to Max Weber, something is "a 'state' if and insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds a claim on the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order" Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York Free Press, 1964) 154 quoted in Wikipedia contributors, *Monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force* (3.3.2007 2007 [cited 13.3. 2007]); available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Monopoly\\_on\\_the\\_legitimate\\_use\\_of\\_physical\\_force&oldid=112421353](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Monopoly_on_the_legitimate_use_of_physical_force&oldid=112421353).

<sup>24</sup> A frightening account of the possibilities and the opportunities given to terrorist actors by using nuclear weapons is drawn by Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism - The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books/Henry Holt, 2004).

(hegemon) in the international system.<sup>25</sup> This situation is particular in respect of former historical hegemonies - the Roman Empire, the British Empire), because the US has had, and keeps, a leading position over most of, if not all, instruments of power.<sup>26</sup>

Realism assumes that, by developing their power and concluding treaties, states will eventually create a stable, yet not static, situation: the balance of power. Still, the US hegemonic position is such that no other contender is able to challenge directly the US military or economical power. The duration of this supremacy is subject to heavy discussions between academics; some assume that the US will be able to maintain this position for a long time,<sup>27</sup> other foresee a return to bipolarity or multipolarity.<sup>28</sup> In spite of that, it must be noted that a peculiar structural power relationship between the USA and the rest of the states has existed for more than fifteen years. It can not be easily changed.

Nonetheless, the unipolarity of US power contests the validity of the balance of power; it is, once again a challenge to realism.

### Conclusions

Does realism continue to have relevance as a theoretical tool for understanding international relations? This essay has examined two tenets of realism, the state as the major actor and the balance of power and examined them in the light of the growing power of non-state actors, the demise of the monopoly on strategic violence and the unipolar nature of the world. Those arguments unmistakably undermine the realist assumptions.

Coming back to our initial framework, we can now assess which framework features can be fulfilled by realism.

The first use, which provides simple explanations of complex dealings or prediction, appears to be contested by the apparition of influential non-state actors, the loss of the monopoly on violence and

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<sup>25</sup> William C Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1 1999.

<sup>26</sup> The liberal journalist Jim Lobe summarises the current opinions to this theme in an article published by Foreign Policy In Focus Jim Lobe, *Unilateralist Path Scored as Self-Defeating* (Foreign Policy In Focus, July 2, 2002 2002 [cited 13.2. 2007]); available from <http://www.fpif.org/pdf/gac/0207hegemon.pdf>. Joseph Nye lessens this argument: he asserts that world politics plays on a 'three-dimensional' chess board (interstate military issues, interstate economic issues, transnational issues); the US has only a significant lead on the first. Nye, *Soft Power* 4.

<sup>27</sup> Wohlforth, "Stability".

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Choice : Global Domination or Global Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 2004) cited in Kegley and Wittkopf, *World Politics* 525.

the unipolarity of the world. Thus, it seems difficult to explain the world or predict future developments on the realism basis.

Those shortcomings do not, on the other hand, hinder the use of realism as the ideal type. On the contrary, it is simple, rational and allows for comparison studies. To quote Keohane, 'Realism is a necessary component in a coherent analysis of world politics because its focus on power, interests, and rationality is crucial to any understanding of the subject'.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, realism as a normative framework, used to draw policy, can still be used in spite of its drawbacks. The cautious advice given by realism, and its inherent mistrust, ensure safeguards to the guidance of politicians: In essence, realism warns that it is better to be safe than sorry.

Therefore, realism should not be used as a single tool for understanding international relations. However, combined with other theories or empirical results, in order to create a 'methodological triangulation' that allows for multiple sources of evidence,<sup>30</sup> realism offers insights that allow for a better understanding of world politics.

In the end, in Jack Donnelly's words, realism gives valid insights 'a lot less often than most realists claim, but a lot more frequently than most anti-realists would like to allow'.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Keohane, *International institutions* 35.

<sup>30</sup> M. Q. Patton, *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation ?* (Newbury Park CA: Sage, 1987) cited in Robert Yin, *Case Study Research - Design and Methods*, ed. Applied Social Research Methods Series, 3rd ed., vol. 5 (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003) 97-99.

<sup>31</sup> Donnelly, 'Realism', 54.

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