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Realism and Balance of Power: Analysis in the Contemporary World

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ABSTRACT

Humans by nature are greedy and always in fight or flight mode. Wherever there are interests, rights and duties, conflicts are bound to happen. The theory of realism states that every nation state wants to serve its own interests and welfare. In situations like this, balance of powers is vital. This ensures that no one nation has supremacy over others. This balance of power is based not only on the military powers of a state but also on the soft and economic powers of the state. Today with major developments in technology, the balance of powers seems to be taking a shift. In a situation like this, it is pertinent to understand these theories in today's context.

Through this article, we shall understand the theories as propounded and their significance in today's world. We shall also with the help of an article review critically analyse these theories in the sphere of global politics as we understand it today.

Keywords: *Realism, Balance of power, Soft power, today's global politics.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The philosophies of realism and the balance of power are enduring pillars of international politics that have impacted the functioning of nations and their cooperation on the international stage. Realistic thinking holds that states put their own security and well-being above everything else, and is based on a realistic understanding of human nature and the pursuit of self-interest. A complicated web of alliances, conflicts, and strategic considerations that are all geared on gaining power and influence result from this point of view. The idea of the balance of power, that holds that states try to achieve equilibrium among themselves in order avert the hegemony of any single actor, complements this idea.

According to the balance of power theory, which is strongly related to realism, states want to avoid any particular state or a collection of states from gaining an excessive amount of dominance. It encourages the division of power in a manner that precludes one organization from dominating the global order, which fosters stability. This may result in the creation of cooperation, redistributing actions, and diplomatic tactics intended to keep the balance between

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powers.

International politics have historically been shaped by realism and the balance of power doctrine. Different realisms, including classical realism and structural realism, have been developed by realist philosophers like Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz to further investigate how states interact and struggle for dominance.

Overall, according to these thinkers even as the world landscape changes and new elements come into play, these theories stay relevant and provide useful perspectives into understanding the intentions and actions of nations in the international sphere.

II. REALISM

Realistic approach, in its most basic form, refers to a theory or method that aims to explain how the world operates. The idea that things are how they are today because they have always been that way is at the heart of realism. People may like to think that human nature can be changed, that governments won't start wars, or that the international system will somehow stop being chaotic, but these are only figments of their imagination.

Realists regard nations as the main participants in the international arena because they worry about their own security, operate in order to protect their own national interests, and vie for power. The downside of realists' concentration on self-interest and authority is their skepticism about the significance of moral standards to interstate relations. They sometimes assert that national politics is the area of authority and law, but international politics is a sector devoid of justice, defined by ongoing or probable disputes among states. However, not all realists deny the existence of morality in international affairs.²

Human nature, according to Hans Morgenthau, is unchangeable and defective. The desire to fight for power is ingrained in people and is greater than any instinct to behave in the interests of everyone. Conflict is frequently the result of this drive for power, therefore we must be ready for it.

John Mearsheimer believes that the foundation of realism's presumptions is international anarchy rather than human nature. Anarchy refers to a state-based international order in which there is no superior authority to arbitrate conflicts. States have the power to harm and even destroy other states in this lawless international order. Making problems worse, it is impossible to determine other states' intentions.³

² POLITICAL REALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-intl-relations/#ConcCautChanCharReal> (last visited Aug 16, 2023).

³ WHAT IS REALISM? FROM OBAMA:: THE RELUCTANT REALIST ON JSTOR,

III. BALANCE OF POWERS

Hans J. Morganthau developed the term "balance of power" to refer to the current condition of affairs in which power is roughly apportioned among the several states. The power is not always allocated equally, according to Claude, who contends that the balance of power is a system of alliances between governments to coordinate action against other alliances. According to Gilpin, the main method of control in an international system is the distribution or balance of power among states. According to Claude, the international system was described by the balance of power theory from around 1815 to 1918. According to Gilpin, changes in the economy, politics, and technology lead to changes in the global system and the balance of power.⁴

(A) Article review

Layne, C. (2006). *The Myth of the Balance of Power: From Great Power Rivalry to Global Energy Competition*. *International Security*, 30(2), 80-113.

The classic idea of the balance of power theory is contested in this article by Christopher Layne, who focuses primarily on the area of international energy competition. Layne contends that in a world where the projection of power is no longer purely dependent on military force, the classic balance of power theory, which highlights the efforts of nations to prevent the increase of other states' power, has lost its significance.

According to Layne, the interconnectedness of nations in the global economy, technical improvements, and economic variables all play a larger role in shaping power in the modern period. He asserts that the idea of "soft balancing"—in which states use economic and diplomatic channels rather than traditional military ones to restrain the power of others—has gained significance.

Yang, Shih-yueh. "Power Transition, Balance of Power, and the Rise of China: A Theoretical Reflection about Rising Great Powers." *China Review* 13, no. 2 (2013): 35–66.⁵

The author in this article argues that the balance of power paradigm cannot account for the current situation. According to the idea, a balance of power should periodically develop, thus it is puzzling that following the fall of the Soviet Union, the subsequent rise of the USA was not

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep04748.5> (last visited Aug 16, 2023).

⁴ THE CONCEPT OF POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS - JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41371577> (last visited Aug 16, 2023).

⁵ POWER TRANSITION, BALANCE OF POWER, AND THE RISE OF CHINA: A ... - JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23611064> (last visited Aug 16, 2023).

restrained by way of this procedure. In order to counterbalance the Soviet Union, the weaker side, in the Cold War, Western Europe allied with the USA, which was the stronger side.

The author argues that even a nuclear race cannot ensure supremacy of any one nation over the others. In the world today, most developed and developing nations are in possession of nuclear weapons. Therefore, any nuclear attack would only attract a second attack in response.

Moreover, the rise of China in global politics has been possible owing to their developments in technology and influence in the global economic chain.

IV. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

In the cold war period, the theory of balance of power fits perfectly. Both the nation states had equal resources and destruction caused by an active war would have been two-fold. However, after the fall of the soviet union, the hegemony of the USA was well established. As per the theory of balance of powers, new nations had to gain power in order to balance the excessive power in the hands of the USA. The USA held this position owing to not only their military but soft powers as well.

The world today is witnessing the rise of various nations including the developing ones. The workings of the world's balance of powers is further complicated by the changing dynamics of power in the current international framework. Small nations and even non-state organizations are now able to gain substantial power due to innovation like the rise of globalization, internet connectivity, and nuclear warheads.

While the world is now recognising the importance of soft power as an important means in the global war for power. The importance of military power cannot be ignored. Military and defence of any nation has and will always be of utmost importance.

Diplomatic relationships also play a critical role in global politics as well. In situations like that of the cold war, nations ally with their allies and those who promise something in return. Therefore, the balance of powers cannot always be maintained. Unlike what is propounded by the theory of realism, nations today also empathize with other nations who are treated poorly and are willing to help them. This was seen during COVID, when different nations supplied vaccinations to one and other. Moreover, the various treaties and agreements in place make sure that certain limitations are set and no one nation can act arbitrarily.

However, much like humans, any nation will always put its own interest first and anarchy is likely to exist. Total balance of powers is not possible and there will always be certain nations that dominate world politics.