

Review Article

Theories of International Politics after the Incident of 9/11: The Richness and Weakness of Realist Tradition in the Twentieth-First Century

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ABSTRACT

The events of 9/11 led to the first two wars of the twentieth-first century: the War in Afghanistan and the Iraq War. Therefore, like many other internationally significant incidents, it revealed something about theories of international politics. This article explores the impact of 9/11 on the theories of the field, and it finds that realism is the only theoretical approach that remains generally applicable. Furthermore, the article identifies the shortcomings of realism—namely, its premise of secularization, insufficient examination of non-state actors, and insufficient attention to non-military and economic powers.

Keywords: 9/11, theories of international politics, realism, secularization

บทคัดย่อ

เหตุการณ์ในวันที่ 11 กันยายน 2001 นำไปสู่สงครามใหญ่สองครั้งแรกในคริสต์ศตวรรษที่ 21 ได้แก่ สงครามในอัฟกานิสถาน และสงครามอิรัก เหตุการณ์ดังกล่าวได้ส่งผลต่อทฤษฎีการเมืองระหว่างประเทศ บทความนี้ได้สำรวจผลของเหตุการณ์ดังกล่าวต่อทฤษฎีและได้สรุปว่าแนวคิดสังคมนิยมโดยภาพรวมยังเหมาะสมที่จะนำไปใช้ทำความเข้าใจการเมืองระหว่างประเทศ อย่างไรก็ตาม บทความก็ได้ชี้ให้เห็นถึงจุดอ่อนของแนวคิดสังคมนิยม ได้แก่ ฐานคิดว่าด้วยการแยกศาสนาจากการเมืองของระบบระหว่างประเทศ การละเลยตัวแสดงที่ไม่ใช่รัฐและการให้ความสำคัญแก่เฉพาะอำนาจทางทหารและเศรษฐกิจ

คำสำคัญ: 9/11 ทฤษฎีการเมืองระหว่างประเทศ สังคมนิยม การแยกศาสนาจากการเมือง

INTRODUCTION

Every great event brings about substantial lessons regarding the theories of international

politics. The Second World War, for example, led political realists to critique the idea and praxis of idealism. The concept of Long Peace, introduced by Gaddis (1992), as well as the neo-realism developed by Waltz (1979), derives from circumstances of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent end of the Cold War led scholars to pronounce realist tradition from political realism through neo-realism obsolete and a return to the idealist tradition. Tradition, in this context, refers to '[capabilities] of spinning off numerous currents of thought and specific theories; hence, when seen as a whole the traditions constitute the main and most dynamic centre for theoretical creativity,' (Jørgensen, 2010, p. 12). The significant difference between both traditions, I argue, is the assumption on war. While the former presupposed that war is a prerequisite of change in international politics, the latter denied that assumption. The events of 9/11 do not differ from previous incidents in that they have induced debate surrounding the validity of theories of international politics. Thus, they definitively inform our conceptualization of international politics. Nevertheless, when any debate emerges within a discipline after major incidents, prudence is essential since 'theory is always for someone and some purpose' (Cox, 1981, p. 128) and comes from somewhere. Space and time necessarily become conditions of arguments pertaining to international politics. Nonetheless, the neglect of history always devalues theories. Therefore, this article not only revises theories of international politics affected by the events of 9/11, but also traces these theories back to their original historical contexts, considering geographical contexts as well. It argues that the events of 9/11 showed academia in the International Relations (IR) field that realism remains generally applicable, whereas the idealist tradition is inadequately applicable because of its utopian nature. However, despite realism's validity, it is not solely adequate as a means of understanding the present age. Its inadequacies, such as the false premise of secularization of international politics, will be also examined. Finally, this paper will

conclude by presenting revised constructions of theories of international politics in order to make them more suitable in the age of the War on Terror.

In the 1990s, IR academia were drawn in by the myth of the great triumph of the US and its allies over the communist camp. Realist traditions thus appeared to be out-dated as theories and practices of international politics. For instance, since the Warsaw Pact no longer existed, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) faced debates over its continuing relevance due to the absence of its opponents. This led to questions regarding the applicability of the time-honored theory of alliance in the arena of theoretical debate in which idealism once again established dominance over realism. The English School of theories also became more influential. The effect of the theory of humanitarian intervention, introduced by Wheeler (2000), can be seen on approaches to humanitarian missions throughout the late twentieth century. Ultimately, the alluring myth of US triumph concealed the realities of international politics, including the functions of the international system and signs of international terrorism.

The US-led wars and the failure of idealist/liberalist tradition

The attack on US soil on 11 September 2001 led the Bush administration to proclaim the War on Terror, and subsequently launch war in Afghanistan in October 2001. The invasion of Afghanistan was supported by the international community since the United Nation Security Council (UNSC) had legally endorsed the mission (Dobson & Marsh, 2006, pp. 177–178). In contrast, the Iraq war was not legal according to international law, since the US entered it alone on the basis of the doctrine of pre-emption and with the goal of regime change. What have the two wars in the Middle East told us? It is not an exaggeration to argue that the trail of US foreign policy following the events of 9/11 disproves idealist scholars' supposition that realism is obsolete (Baylis & Rengger, 1992). Despite the legality of the Afghanistan War, the subsequent Iraq war shows that

international law and international institutions can be disregarded if they become obstacles to the national interests of major powers. Thus, concepts like neo-liberal institutionalism and theories of the English School have been confronted with the crucial question: whose international law and international institutions matter most? This has led to critiques of the essence of neo-liberal institutionalism and the English School. These critiques will be considered at greater length in the following discussion.

The liberal myth of international regimes

Although it could be claimed that the US tried to follow the rules of the United Nations (UN) and engage with NATO, as the efforts the country made before 2003 suggest, this article argues that such a claim derives from false, idealistic assumptions regarding the nature of international regimes. The classic definition of international regimes, provided by Krasner (1983), is as a 'set of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations' (p. 2). Idealists in general or institutionalists in particular tend to see regimes as interest based. Despite conceding that anarchy is a realist axiom, institutionalists jump to the conclusion that 'cooperation . . . and prevailing expectations . . . are strongly influenced by the presence and content of international institutions' (Hasenclever, Mayer, & Rittberger, 2002, p. 26). In this regard, international institutions become significant actors that play important roles in international politics (Hasenclever et al., 2002, p. 28). Idealists assume that the nature of regimes is a positive-sum game and that states have common interests in many issue areas, including security, and, as a result, regimes can facilitate a level of international cooperation which is difficult to achieve (Hasenclever et al., 2002, pp. 30–33). The theory's weakness comes from its assumption that common interests are a specific prerequisite for cooperation. But what common interests led to the cooperation surrounding the Afghanistan war? This is difficult to

answer since the common interests are seemingly nonexistent. Rather, the collective action, brought about as a result of the regimes' initiative, derived from the power-based nature of international regimes.

While the theory of international regimes is predominately categorized as an idealist or institutionalist approach, the theory of hegemonic stability is widely utilized by realists (Viotti & Kauppi, 1993, pp. 57–58). Adopting the conception of the role of dominant powers from hegemonic stability theory makes it possible to apply the conception to issue areas beyond economic ones. By applying the coercive leadership model introduced by Duncan Snidal to security issues areas, this article argues that, as with economic regimes, 'the hegemon can and does use its superior *power* to force others to contribute as well, *de facto* "taxing" them for the collective good provided under his leadership . . . [and] coercive hegemons are capable of "taxing" the beneficiaries of their actions' (Hasenclever et al., 2002, pp. 90–94). The relative power capabilities of states are, therefore, crucial features of regimes. In this regard, the dominant power demands a tax from other states in the form of votes on specific issues. The demands the US forced upon other states is evidenced by the declarations of President Bush, who said 'every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists. . . .' (Crockatt, 2003, p. 146) Nevertheless, dominant powers can be challenged by other great powers, as is shown by the roles world powers played in the UN's official disapproval of military intervention in Iraq. This evidences the nature of regimes as power based and suggests that the balance of power can be seen especially well in security organizations like the UNSC. In addition, certain international regimes can be decisively ignored if a dominant power has enough will and capability to take unilateral action.

From *Just Peace* to *Just War*

From this perspective, the aftermath of 9/11 has proven that international law does not matter if

states, especially dominant or great powers, decide to declare war unilaterally. The key features of the English School, namely, its rules and norms, have thus been destabilized by US unilateralism. A norm-governed relationship or, in other words, the tradition of international law, is the essence of international society (Brown & Ainley, 2009, p. 51), and, according to Hedley Bull, 'the expositions of international law contend that states are bound to refrain from forcible or dictatorial intervention in one another's internal affairs' (Bull, 2002, p. 138). Thus, the US-led invasion of Iraq broke with norms regarding non-intervention and the sovereignty of states, which are at the core of the pluralist strand of international society (Jørgensen, 2010, pp. 108–110). The solidarism of international society cannot invalidate the fact that there is no state standing on the Iraq side, as states have the responsibility and obligation to 'offer diplomatic or military support to any state whose international rights have been violated' (Jørgensen, 2010, p. 111). It should be noted that the action of the US is not the only example of such violation; the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 is another. Consequently, the stance of the English School has been unconvincing in the aftermath of 9/11.

The US declaration of war also led theorists of international politics to reconsider the reasons and justifications rather than the root causes of war, hence the 'just war' theory. This reconsideration suggested that war is no longer the last resort under idealist presuppositions; instead, it becomes a tool of foreign policy. The invasion of Iraq represents a prominent example of this shift since the US had other alternatives, such as police action or a call for international sanctions. In fact, it can be assumed that the US had hidden agendas behind its war on terror, and these will be elaborated on later.

US foreign policy and realist theories

The preceding discussion showed both international law and international institutions to be the instruments of dominant and great powers rather

than the agents of global governance. Nevertheless, some scholars, such as Beyer (2010), argue that this is a new form of governance, namely, hegemonic global governance. Similarly, this article proposes that US foreign policy after the incidents of 9/11 has caused scholars to revive realist theories from the spheres of influence through containment strategies. These theories prevailed and were implemented by both theorists and practitioners during the Cold War.

The US-led wars in the Middle East, from Afghanistan to Iraq, did not come as a surprise, since the role of the US in this region has been pronounced throughout the twentieth century. As Mary Ann Heiss has pointed out, the presence of dominant and great powers, primarily the US and Soviet Union, in the Middle East has stemmed from petroleum and security issues (Heiss, 2006, pp. 77–95), and the Gulf War strengthened and solidified the US as 'the primary Western power working for stability in the Persian Gulf and protecting smaller, oil-rich Gulf states like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia from outside attack' (Heiss, 2006, p. 94). From this viewpoint, it can be argued that the current intensified presence of the US in the Gulf represents the return of the US to an earlier sphere of influence.

The realist theories

The realist concept of spheres of influence derives from a phenomenon that preceded the Cold War, but, during the Cold War, the unequal power relationships between the Soviet Union and Eastern European states became the prominent example of the concept in practice. According to Kramer (1996), spheres of influence can be defined as 'a region of the world in which a preponderant external actor (state A) is able to compel the local states to conform with state A's own preferences. Other outside powers may also have some leverage over the countries in state A's sphere of influence, but that leverage is relatively circumscribed and is greatly eclipsed by the power that state A exerts' (p. 99). In addition, in the past, geographical proximity has served as a requirement for spheres of influence, as in the case

of US involvement in Latin America. Edy Kaufman called this the sphere of direct influence (Kaufman, 1976, p. 11). Today, however, geographical proximity is not a requisite condition determining dominant and great powers' choices of spheres of influence; because of the development of new technologies, the US can have a sphere of influence in the Middle East, for instance.

This article's argument that, since the beginning of the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, the Gulf has become a sphere of US influence derives from the broad classifications of relationships between a preponderant state and its subordinates devised by Hedley Bull. Classified as dominant and hegemonic, these relationships dictate spheres of influence (Kramer, 1996, pp. 99–100). A relationship of dominance can be defined as one in which 'the preponderant state exercises tight and pervasive control over the subordinate states, often paying little heed to modern norms of international law' (Kramer, 1996, p. 100); therefore, the US invasion of Iraq and its subsequent presence and policies can be explicitly viewed as the re-emergence of a dominant power's sphere of influence.

The US in the Middle East

The US' need for spheres of influence is unambiguous since the region is rich in interests, from economic- to security-related ones. Importantly, general economic interests, or those particularly related to petroleum, and security interests are two faces of the same coin and cannot be divided. The US has had long-term relations with the moderate Arab states, specifically Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. During the Cold War, the Middle East was another region involved in the war between the US and Soviet Union as a proxy, and the role of both powers could be seen in all Middle Eastern altercations that occurred during that time, including the Six-Day War, in which the US aided Israel while the Soviet Union aided the Arab states (Baxter & Akbarzadeh, 2008, pp. 49–56). Significantly, aside from the communist threat, Islamic extremism has threatened

US interests in the Middle East ever since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The fear that the Islamic revolution would be exported led to the US-supported Iraqi government during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s (Baxter & Akbarzadeh, 2008, pp. 114–123). Nevertheless, the supposed collapse of the communist camp, a liberal myth of the 1990s, the invasion of Afghanistan and, subsequently, Iraq unintentionally turned Tehran into a regional power (Milani, 2005, p. 33). For this reason, US interests have been endangered by the transformation of the international system and US policies themselves. Moreover, the US-allied Arab states of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia require the presence of the US as a guarantor since they perceive Iran, as well as Syria, as threats to the survival of their regimes. Regarding these factors, this article argues that the American sphere of influence in the Middle East aims to contain Iran and Syria in addition to assuring the stability of American interests. Thus, it can be concluded that the events of 9/11 do not actually serve as the reason and justification for the US presence in the region. Rather, the reasons pertain to long-term interests and global geopolitical strategies—specifically, the containing of China—which will be discussed in greater detail subsequently. Finally, the Middle East is not the only US sphere of influence. Southeast Asia is also an important sphere.

The US in Southeast Asia

Before the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969, Southeast Asia was another region on the front lines of the tensions between the Soviet Union and the US, and it used to be a US sphere of influence during the Vietnam War (Chomsky, 1972, pp. 5–42). The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), a NATO-modeled effort, had been established in 1954 to cope with the communist expansion. The region, however, had been more or less relinquished after the withdrawal of US troops. This led to a long power vacuum period which lasted until 9/11, in spite of continuing bilateral relationships between the US and its long-

time allies, namely, the Philippines and Thailand. During the vacuum period, the Chinese influence gradually extended over the region, eventually causing concern in Washington and prompting the US to review its policies toward Southeast Asia. What occurred on 11 September 2001 provided a great opportunity for the US to reengage with Southeast Asian states, especially with counterterrorism regimes, through both multilateral and bilateral frameworks. Nevertheless, as Beyer pointed out, the US has mainly taken a bilateral approach toward Southeast Asian states (Beyer, 2010, p. 121), since doing so could lead to comparative advantages, and this has placed pressure on other states, especially Muslim states, to engage with the US more closely. In terms of the economic interests of Southeast Asian states, the US is the largest market for exports, and, more importantly, the US can both guarantee the security of US-allied states and counteract the Chinese influence in the region. Thus, Southeast Asian states have no other options, unless the region acts as a backyard for China. For the US, reengagement with Southeast Asia can be seen as part of global geopolitical strategies which aim to contain China, the rival power, and tamp the revival of Russia's prominence in the region. The role of the US, therefore, can be seen as preventing China's transition toward greater power (Organski, 1958, pp. 299–338) and the endeavours of other great regimes to establish a foothold.

Consequently, the presence of the US in the Middle East and Southeast Asia after 2001 and the responses of other great powers and small states indicate the timeless validity of realist theories, from the sphere of influence theory to the theory of alliance and containment strategy. In sum, these reaffirm the realist premise that the international system is anarchic by nature. Conversely, they also expose the inadequacies of realism, namely, the religious aspects of international politics which are overlooked by realist theories, the units of analysis, and insufficient acknowledgement of other forms of power. However, these inadequacies do not mean

that realism cannot explain international politics at the present time, since the applicability of realism and its axiom, anarchy, have been justified in the aftermath of 9/11.

The inadequacies of realism

As mentioned previously, religion plays an important role in theories of international politics. Nevertheless, the religious aspect is often omitted from international politics scholarship because of the premise of secularization which derives from the origin of states and dates back to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which established the state as the only legitimate form of political organization. Thus, religious units have been excluded from the realm of international politics (Philpott, 2002, pp. 70–72) throughout much of modern history and political scholars have had little to do with them. This is furthered by the fact that the public/private distinction is one of the bases of Western knowledge and religion has been put in the private sphere since the Enlightenment. This premise, however, has been questioned following the events of 9/11 and their aftermath.

The impact of religious fundamentalism

Despite the fact that the anxiety caused by the impact of religious fundamentalism in general and Islamic fundamentalism in particular on international politics appeared before the twentieth-first century, studies tend to solely focus on the linkage between such anxiety and foreign policy regarding Muslim states. For instance, Piscatori (1993) focuses on the role of Islam in Muslim states, concluding that 'Islamic values are not, however, the sole determinant of the foreign policy of a Muslim country, and, as oil policy suggests, they are often not relevant at all' (p. 327). Therefore, Piscatori continues, 'the "Islamic challenge" to world order has not been as great as has been feared' (Piscatori, 1993, p. 331). From these statements, it seems clear that his study was confined by the premises of theories of international politics and the assumption that foreign policy is secular.

Furthermore, Piscatori merely focuses on states rather than other actors or units shaped by the events of 9/11.

What occurred on 9/11 told us that sub-state actors and transnational actors, units which represent illegitimate political organizations, can behave more formidably and more productively destabilize dominant and great powers than state actors. Moreover, the demands posed by these kinds of actors appear to be theoretically infeasible, since they oppose the Westphalian premise, namely, the rights inherent in the existence of states. In addition, the interdependence between religious fundamentalist units and states, which can be seen in the case of al-Qaeda and the Taliban or Islamic fundamentalist groups and the Syrian government, contradicts the secularization of international politics. Such interdependence also conflicts with theories of international politics. For example, the English School faces problems since the shared norm of Westphalian polity, which continues to have an essential influence on international society, has been shaken by religious states which claim rights of Westphalian state-ness while embracing non-Westphalian doctrines and exerting transnational influence on other states. Consequently, the lesson to take from the aftermath of 9/11 is that international politics are not secularised.

This article does not suggest that states should not be key units of analysis. Rather, it argues that other units, both secular and not secular, should be examined as well in order to calculate potential threats. Additionally, a space for possible fusion or collaboration between states and unconventional units should be promoted by theories of international politics. However, ultimately, states remain the main actors in international politics since they must take responsibility for any activities that occur in their territories, especially those which could transcend territorial boundaries, as seen in the case of Afghanistan. In this regard, this article defends the stance that states must be main units of analysis but suggests that they should be the only units. The aftermath of 9/11 has revealed that realism is a valid

theory in the present age, especially since it maintains that the state is not the only actor but is the most significant one (Brown & Ainley, 2009, p. 29).

The transnational aspects of religious fundamentalism and the power over opinion

The events of 9/11 also revealed the transnational aspects of religious fundamentalism. In spite of the states' continued position as the most important actors, the effects of transnational relations on international politics should be considered even from the standpoint of realism since the society-society relations, as Keohane and Nye (1992) pointed out, can lead to 'the emergence of autonomous actors with private foreign policies that may deliberately oppose or impinge on state policies' (p. 554) and the Al-Qaeda is the explicit example of this kind of autonomous actor. From the transnationalist perspective, it is plausible that the notion of nation could become diluted, while the notion of transnational society could become stronger. As Aron (1992) explained, 'a transnational society reveals itself by . . . common belief . . . that cross frontiers and . . . flourishes in proportion to . . . the strength of common beliefs' (p. 547). As this article asserts, international politics are not secular; religion and state cannot be totally divided; and some religious states are inclined to promote religious fundamentalist doctrines beyond their boundaries. These claims have impelled scholars to revise the realist concept of power over opinion, first introduced by Carr (2001, pp. 120–130) in 1939. According to Carr, power over opinion manifests in the form of propaganda, examples of which span from the campaigns of leaders of the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages to political advertising spearheaded by Adolf Hitler during the Second World War (Carr, (2001, pp. 120–122). Dominant powers, therefore, have repeatedly had to exert power over opinion in order to tamp the expansion of transnational religious society.

The extent of the exertion of power over

opinion by dominant powers has not been exaggerated. This article argues that theories, including realism, must acknowledge this form of power, since it influences programs initiated and encouraged by dominant powers through international organizations such as the UN. Such programs often aim to modernize the traditional societies of lesser-developed states, hence making them more secular. In this sense, the efforts of dominant powers can be seen as propaganda meant to encourage societies in other states, especially religious ones, to forgo fundamentalist ideas.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the events of 9/11 indicated that theories of realism in international politics still best explain the circumstances of this age of the War on Terror. As this article explains, the practices of the US and the responses of other states to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq reflect realist theories. Nevertheless, a reconstruction of these theories is needed, as the incidents of 9/11 and their aftermath revealed theoretical inadequacies. First, the premise guiding the study of international politics must be revised to embrace non-secularization rather than just secularization. Such a revised premise will make theories more suitable for analyzing the behavior of religious states, such as Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. Second, despite the fact that the state remains the most significant actor in the political arena, other actors, including religious groups, must be carefully examined since they can have intense effects on state and international politics. Finally, unconventional forms of power must be recognized by realist theories since these offer explicit examples of the exertion of power over opinion within international regimes and organizations. In conclusion, great events always affect the world of scholarship. The ten years following 9/11 have disclosed an inconvenient truth to scholars: anarchy has not changed; hence, realism remains generally applicable. Notwithstanding the timeless applicability of realism,

weaknesses must be addressed in order for realist theories to more effectively apprehend international politics of the twentieth-first century.

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