



Realism in the post-cold war era: Analysing policy stances of USA

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Abstract

The paper is divided into three parts. It first traces the aspects of the Cold War that were based on the theory of realism in international relations. Next, it highlights the concept of national interests and how it influences a state's actions in the international arena. Finally, it highlights the realist stance adopted by the U.S.A. since the Cold War by exploring the War on Terror under George Bush and the Trump administration's immigration crackdown as per the 'America First' policy. It then tries to draw a comparison between America's and Russia's (heir of U.S.S.R.) condition on this front.

Keywords: Realism, cold war, USA, Russia, national interest

Introduction

MOST wars witnessed in world history had sprung up because of a struggle for power between the warring states or the want of domination by one state or a group of states over others.

One such example is that of the Cold War which started after the end of the World War II as United States of America (the U.S.A.) and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) emerged to form the two centres of international power due to their national prowess. The occurrence of the Cold War (1947-1991) was majorly attributed to the struggle between the two nations for acquiring more power for the fruition of other interests.

Both the superpowers tried to establish and expand their sphere of dominance. They sought to get other nations to conform to the ideology promoted by them, capitalism or communism. This would serve to embolden them and increase their sphere of influence.

It led to the division of the whole world into two blocs. The western bloc supported the U.S.A. and its liberal-capitalist ideology and the eastern bloc backed U.S.S.R. and its socialist-communist ideas. It gave the superpowers validation as the more states backed them, the more powerful they became ideologically and militarily. The Cold War clearly showcased that the major bones of contention and struggle were in sync with the theory of realism in international politics.

Core Premises of Realism

Realism, in simple terms, suggests that all nations in the international sphere work as per their own national interests. They perform acts that would benefit their state and sideline ideas of morality. National interests are disguised as universal moral ideals. The arms race that followed the War was due to the problems of 'security dilemma' and 'survival threat' because of the involvement of the weapons of mass destruction in this equation.

Security dilemma is defined as a situation in which an action taken by a state to increase its security cause reactions and responses from other states, which in turn lead to a decrease rather than an increase in the first state's security^[1]. This means that when the U.S.A. acquired 'x' new weapons during the Cold War, U.S.S.R. would feel insecure. To reduce this threat, U.S.S.R. would acquire 'y'

weapons. This would then trigger U.S.A.'s insecurity and so on. So, no state would feel secure and the dilemma would continue.

Survival threat suggests that the prime concern of the state is the need for the continued existence of the state itself. Survival thus becomes a pre-requisite for the leadership to achieve all other goals. The need for the state's survival is a common goal of all nations^[2].

The two concepts of survival threat and security dilemma are interdependent. Because when the state is engaged in a conflict then its security is at stake and in turn so is its survival in the international arena.

Classical Realist thought with proponents such as Hans Morgenthau, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes assert that this drive for acquiring power stems from the innate human nature. Here, the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza extended the state of nature theory to the international arena. He pointed out that as man is man's enemy in the state of nature, similarly one state is another state's enemy in the international sphere.

This tradition evolved to give birth to Neorealism with thinkers like Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer. They support the line of thought that the structure of the international sphere, where there is no such world body, to act like the government does in the state, to control law and order and get citizens to abide by the rules for harmonious living.

This leaves the nations at risk and so every nation needs to fend for itself in case of conflict and consequences arising from it.

Invasions During Cold War Through the Lens of Realism

Many states were invaded by the superpowers. The motive and the stance adopted towards moral principles during these invasions are similar to the account given by thinker Thucydides about the conquering of Melos by Athens after the Melian dialogue. He pinpoints the lack of concern for morals and the drive to accumulate as much power as possible by the army generals of the ancient polis of Athens^[3].

Some instances that support this claim are the U.S.S.R. invasion of Hungary in 1956. Soviet forces marched into Budapest to stop Hungary's departure from the communist

bloc as it was announced that Hungary was withdrawing from the Warsaw Pact (the Soviet bloc's equivalent of NATO)^[4]. Afghanistan was invaded by U.S.S.R. in 1979, in order to establish a favourable communist government to face and fight the rise of insurgent feelings there. The U.S.A. had invaded Vietnam to curb the spread of communism in Vietnam and hence to stop it from spreading to all of south-east Asia from there. Here, all moral claims were side-lined and ended up in a great human loss for both the invaders and the invaded party.

Realist thought goes on to emphasise that the interests of each nation are to acquire more and more power to satisfy all other possible needs and requirements in the best terms and conditions for the state itself regardless of unfavourable terms for the other nations^[5].

Since there is a legitimate government as the topmost authority (whether democratic or autocratic) within a state so moral principles are followed within the state. As there is no such world government that has the consent of all nation-states and one which would be accountable to all constituents, these rules are not followed in the international sphere. The United Nations is not one such world government as it exercises limited powers and is not above its constituent states. The moral responsibilities and regard for human values are not respected in the international sphere for the simple reason that each country is inward-looking and assumes that they are only responsible for their own fellow countrymen and not to citizens of other nations.

Concept of National Interest

Every nation acts on the basis of its national interests in conducting affairs with other countries. This is a globally accepted right and forms the basis of every foreign policy. The countries usually aim and work to secure their identity, politico-economic ideals and defined goals/core national values by this exercise. A nation even decides to wage war to protect its vital interests in dire circumstances. This underlines how 'national interests' are given the highest pedestal in conducting external affairs. During the cold war, the 2 superpowers would defend all moves by invoking 'national interests' whether the case in point was invasions or arms race. The concept is closely linked with the question of well-being and state security

National interests are inward-looking, so much so that the state can ignore what repercussions the pursuit of these interests can lead too. It is the empirical reality, that more often than not, a nation pursues its national interests in the economic sphere. So, a more balanced trade, access to foreign markets etc. become the areas where nations aspire to assert their position. But the U.S.A. is known to take a stand on issues in the international arena to avoid a threat to its core national values more audaciously than anyone else.

According to Morgenthau, diplomatic resolutions are effective means for reconciling divergent interests of a state. At the same time, nations use coercive means whenever they find it practical and so military power is used to achieve desired objectives. National interests could be executed in the form of guarding bases, protecting areas of strategic importance and sources of national prowess (or the creation/establishment of such sources).

Nations take up to alliance building for the promotion of shared common interests. On rare occasions, national interests of multiple nations end up intersecting which leads to cooperation in their pursuit and execution. This feature

has been prevalent in the past where many countries have lined behind the U.S.A. when it went on missions to 'stabilise' the world order for the simple reason that all countries stood to benefit from this exercise.

The War on Terror-America's Survival Motive

The war of terror, launched as U.S.A.'s drastic retaliation for the 9/11 attacks, was one such incidence of policy stance where the U.S.A. worked on the survival threat as its dominant position was at risk from non-state actors like terror outfit Al-Qaeda.

The step that the U.S.A. took was to ignore all moral standards and human rights to arrest and transport whosoever would seem to be involved in the 9/11 attacks. Without regard or permission from any state government, the U.S.A. would send these detainees to the naval base in Guantanamo Bay where they were kept in inhuman condition.

The U.S.A. acting on the survival motive exerted all its power to counter this threat to retain its dominant international position. The fact that the U.S.A. could not be stopped by any state or international organisation went on to show its supreme position to the world. It gave the message that the U.S.A. has the power to take on any security threat in the most aggressive way possible. This survival motive was articulated well by Machiavelli in 'The Prince'. The Prince's primary aim was to make certain the survival of the state. Even if the actions to attain this aim leads to other people fearing, not loving The Prince. This is exactly what the U.S.A. did on the ground. Even the UN could not stop this transgression of human rights and moral standards. In a unipolar world, the UN failed to control the U.S.A. exerting its power. The U.S.A. was able to pursue the realist goal of survival of the state.

America First- Trump's Stance on Immigration

The 'America first' concept revived by the Trump administration is based on national interests, as the name suggests in unequivocal terms.

Among other ideas that are promoted under the aegis of 'America first' such as trying to correct deficits^[6], the President's stance on immigrants is the most notable that focuses on national interests and side-lines morality. The US has always attracted global talent and individuals from diverse backgrounds who found many successful brands.

Trump's administration banned the entry of people from countries like Syria, Libya, Somalia and Yemen under its executive orders which clearly signify these countries as conflict zones and zones of terrorism. Another demand for creating a wall along the porous Mexico border to curb illegal chain immigration and acts to separate children from their migrant parents kept in camps have drawn an international backlash.

Policies like a lottery for 50,000 visas available for the fiscal year 2020 are being revised and the country seeks to welcome legally only those who come with 'merit, skill, love and respect' for the U.S.A. They seek to let only the qualified enter their borders who are sure to add value to their economy and hence to their national prowess. His attempt to safeguard the borders for America's benefit by reducing crime, terrorism and saving jobs shows pursuing national interests as adopting patriotism in the eyes of the world.

Caatsa- Russia's Mellow Answer

In the recent past, Russia has been at the receiving end. The irony is that in a lot of these cases the U.S.A. had a major role.

Trump had signed the 'Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act'. In simple terms, it put sanctions on the country that traded with Russia's defence and intelligence sectors. This would serve as a form of negative reinforcement. This act of America was seriously damaging for Russia as well as other countries like India, Vietnam and Indonesia (all asked for a waiver from CAATSA)^[7].

As a response, after the bill passed, on 28 July 2017, Russia's foreign ministry announced measures as a response to the bill passed by Congress.

Russia, in turn, had demanded that the U.S. reduce its diplomatic and technical personnel in the Russian embassy and its consulates in St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok to 455 persons—to make it equal to the number of Russian diplomats posted in the U.S.—by September 1^[8].

This has taken US-Russia relationship through a rough patch and Russia has not been able to counter this action and preserve its national interests as satisfactorily like it would have wanted to.

Conclusion

Since the Cold War ended to form a unipolar world, the U.S.A. has been clearly able to put its national interests before any other consideration which is visible in many stances such as pulling out of the Paris Agreement, Trade Wars with China, and withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear deal etc. the U.S.A., especially under the Trump administration is boldly following its 'realist' ideas in foreign affairs.

Given that the U.S.A. has a decisive role to play in all major international organisations from political and security arrangements as UN and NATO to economic institutions like IMF and World Bank; it is likely that it will continue to act in a realist fashion. This was curbed during the Cold War due to the presence of another superpower that would balance its approach. China and fast-growing India pose a challenge to this realism and to some extent protectionism adopted by the American administration.

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