**Neorealism in International Relations**

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**Neorealism**

**Definition**

A theory which explains state’s behaviour with reference to defences in their relative power instead of other factors such as values and types of government etc.

**Introduction:**

* Kenneth Waltz (1924–2013) in his book, “Theory of International Politics”, coined this theory.
* His views were inspired by behaviouralism.
* Neorealism holds that the nature of the international structure is defined by anarchy, and by the distribution of capabilities (measured by the number of great powers within the international system).
* The anarchic international structure is decentralized, meaning there is no formal central authority; every sovereign state is formally equal in this system.
* Neorealism is also termed as “structural realism,”

**Neorealism and Classical Realism:**

There are four key differences between classical realism and neorealism.

1. Classical realist locates the roots of international conflict and war in an imperfect human nature while neo-realists maintain that its deep causes are found in the anarchic international system.
2. States are the most important actors. The state is ontologically superior to the system in classical realism, in contrast to neorealism. Hence, it advocates more space to a state.
3. Classical realists differentiate between status-quo powers and revisionist powers while neorealism regards states as unitary actors.
4. Neo-realists attempt to construct a more rigorous and scientific approach to the study of international politics, heavily influenced by the behaviourist revolution of the 1960’s while classical realism confine its analyses to subjective valuations of international relations.

**Basic Concepts of Neorealism:**

The basic tenets of neorealism enable the systematic approach to studying shifts in state behaviour.

There are six fundamental neorealist concepts that are respectively discussed below;

1. Anarchy
2. Structure
3. Capability
4. The distribution of power
5. Polarity and
6. National interest

These concepts are evoked by many realist scholars of international relations, although with variations in their precise definitions.

**Anarchy and Structure:**

* Anarchy and structure, the first two concepts are intertwined.
* The ‘structure’ of the international system is said to be ‘anarchic’.
* ‘Anarchy’ according to Waltz does not imply the presence of chaos and disorder. It simply refers to the absence of an international government.
* With no overarching global authority that provides security and stability in international relations, world politics is not formally and hierarchically organized.
* International politics is structured by ‘anarchy’, in contrast to domestic politics that is structured by ‘hierarchy’.
* The international system is thus defined in terms of an anarchic international structure.

**Impacts of anarchic structure:**

* An ‘anarchic structure’ has two main implications.
* Firstly, every actor in the international system is responsible for looking after itself, rendering the international system a “self-help system”.
* This system is thus composed of self-regarding units, who primarily seek to survive.
* National states are the only entities in international relations that have the centralized legitimate authority to use force to look after themselves.
* Sovereign states are thus the constitutive units of the international system, and the primary actors in world politics.
* Therefore, the organizing principle of the international structure is ‘anarchy’, and this ‘structure’ is defined in terms of states.
* Secondly, states perpetually feel threatened by a potential attack from others. Where no one commands by virtue of authority, no one is obliged to obey.

**Capability:**

* As each state constantly feels insecure, each needs to be capable of fending for itself. This leads to the third concept of ‘capability’.
* Capabilities are instrumental for states to ensure their survival. The survival aim encourages relative gains.
* A neorealist assessment of the ‘capability’ of a state is determined by five main criteria;

1. Natural resource endowment,
2. Demography
3. Economy
4. Military
5. Technological capacity

* As each state achieves a different level of capability (which primarily serves its survival goal), states within the international system are differentiated via their level of capability.
* Neorealist scholars thus strive to paint a relational picture of the capabilities each state possesses at any given time. This is referred to as ‘relative capability’.
* Because states are perpetually insecure, they wish to acquire capabilities. This result into the grand paradox of international politics; the “security dilemma”.

**Security Dilemma:**

* In striving to attain security from a potential attack, states are driven to acquire more and more capabilities in order to escape the impact of the capabilities of others.
* This renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst.
* Since no one can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, competition ensues and the vicious circle of security and capability accumulation sets up among the rivals.

**The distribution of Power:**

* In the competition for security, states will achieve varying levels of powers.
* Thus, capabilities are distributed differently across different states in the international system.
* Such an assessment of the ‘distribution of capabilities’ constitutes the distribution of power.
* Countries’ ranking depends on how they score on all the aforementioned components of ‘relative capability’.

**Polarity:**

* The notion of ‘polarity’ can be explained in light of the earlier explained concepts.
* The ‘polarity’ of the international system is determined by examining the ‘distribution of capabilities’ across units (states), at any given time. This approach enables the distinct typification of the nature of the international system.
* Generally, polarity is distinguished into three types; unipolarity, bipolarity and multipolarity.

**Unipolarity:**

* Unipolarity prevails when a single state in the system is markedly superior, relative to all other states in terms of demographic, economic, military and technological capabilities.
* Example: The current state of the international system can be described as unipolar; the United States maintains military, economic and technological primacy in the world.

**Bipolarity:**

* Bipolarity exists when these capabilities are mainly distributed amongst two prominent actors,
* Example: the Cold War era when the US and the Soviet Union represented the two ‘poles’ of power.

**Multipolarity:**

* Multipolarity occurs when more than two actors possess nearly equal amounts of relative capability.
* Examples: the periods following up to and lasting throughout the First and Second World Wars.

**National Interest:**

* ‘National interest’, generally speaking, is an elusive concept.
* In striving for security, states seek to expand their capabilities vis-à-vis rival states.
* Thus ensuring territorial, economic and military security constitutes the national interest calculus of a state.
* At the same time, the level of capability a state possesses vis-à-vis others, constrains or equips states to pursue such interests.
* In turn, the scope and ambition of a country’s interests are driven by its level of capability.
* Therefore, within a neorealist conceptual framework, national interests of states are best understood with reference to their relative capability ranking

**The Concept of Balance of Power**

At the core of the balance of power theory is the idea that national security is enhanced when military capabilities are distributed so that no one state is strong enough to dominate all others

The balance of power theory is a core tenet of neorealist theory and seeks to explain alliance formation.

Due to the neorealist idea of anarchism as a result of the international system, states must ensure their survival through maintaining or increasing their power in a self-help world.

With no authority above the state to come to its rescue in the event of an attack by a hegemon, states attempt to prevent a potential hegemon from arising by balancing against it.

According to neorealist, balance of power can only be maintained by International structures and not by individual states

**Criticism:**

Kenneth Waltz structural realism or neorealism has had widely criticized by other scholars.

**Criticism by Robert Cox:** Robert Cox claims that Waltz’s has sacrificed the interpretive richness of classical realism as a critical theory in order to transform it into a positivistic problem-solving theory.

Cox argues that the inability of this particular approach in differentiating between times and places are the cause of major flaw in Waltz’s theory of neo-realism.

According to Cox, neo-realism is unable to explain structural transformation, since the positivist approach cannot account for variations whether in the basic nature of the actors (power seeking) or in their mode of interaction (power balancing).   
  
**Criticism by Richard Ashley:** Richard Ashley points out several weaknesses of neo-realist.  
  
1. **Statism**: State-centric approach of neo-realists denies the recognition to global collectivist concepts on transnational class relations or the interest of human kind.  
  
2. **Utilitarianism**: Utilitarian perspective of neorealism has undermined the notion of state as actor whose interests and interactions shape the structure of international system.   
  
3. **Positivism**: By embracing positivist approach neo-realism disregards the value laden social action such as social consensus that may perhaps coordinate practices as well as distribution of resources.  
  
4. **Atomist** **conception**: Neo-realist defines international structure not as an independent internal relation prior to and constitutive of social actors, but as a joining of states.

Therefore the international structure is not established independent of the parts taken together, since it is emerged as a result of joining the parts together.  
  
**Criticism by John G. Ruggie**: Furher, John G. Ruggie criticizes that Waltz has ignored changes in the density of interactions in the international systems

In the short term, states may be the dominant units and play a similar functional role, but over long periods other units may grow in importance, and roles may alter.

**Criticism by Robert Keohane:** Another critique comes from Robert Keohane, a liberal institutionalism theorist.

However, Keohane argues that the concepts of states “maximizing power” and states creating a “balance of power” are in fact contradictory.

He points out that “states are concerned with self preservation do not seek to maximize their power when they are not in danger”.

**Conclusion:**

Since WWII, experts usually constructed theories from the realist perspectives.

But 1990s opened a window to expose quite different dimension of world politics where we saw globalization, EU, WTO, Breakup of USSR and third wave of democratization.

It was a time when realists were shocked and someone while censuring realists even asked question, “Is there anyone still realist?”

However, 9/11 rekindled realism momentum