

Unmasking International Relations in the Times of War in Africa: Beyond Rhetoric, Reality and Trust

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ABSTRACT

This paper unmasks the concept of international relations using the lenses of realist school of thought. Relations of nation states towards each other, and with international organisations, including sub national entities is what international relations (IR) is all about (Antunes and Camisao, 2018; Adams, 2003; Wendt, 1992; Axelrod and Keohane 1993). The significance of IR in the contemporary world, as it were in the past cannot be overemphasized. It seeks to comprehend the roots of war and the preservation of peace both stemming from the nature and exercise of power within the global system. To this effect, the discipline of international relations comprises of numerous theories, each attempting to explain the power relations and the resultant behaviour of nation states on the international scene. Of particular interest to this article is how the realism theory of IR enhances the prospects of cooperation within the international environment and the realists' main obstacles to achieving cooperation in international development. As one of the many theories in the IR discourse, Realism claims to explain the reality of international politics. Realists believe that sovereign states are the principal actors on the international political system, having at their disposal justifiable actions or tools for the protection of their interests. Proponents of realism argue that states are unitary and rational actors of importance seeking to secure their survival through reliance on their own means even if it meant war (Glaser, 1994; Brown, 2007; Milner, 1992). Drawing from secondary sources of data and using a desk top review approach, this study found that realists come close to explaining the actual happenings on the IR scene i.e. the survival of the state at all costs, also called the ethics of responsibility rather than by moral principles as other theorists argue. Realism as a school of thought in the IR discourse has generated a significant volume of debate and criticisms igniting valuable insights and remains an important analytical tool for stakeholders in IR.

Key Words: International Relations theories, power, security, sovereignty, corruption

INTRODUCTION

International relations are basically contending general theories or theoretical perspectives that stress its competitive and conflictual sides. The theoretical schools in international relations includes: realism, liberalism, Marxism, social constructivism/critical theory etc. These different theories are essential to illustrate what cooperation actually means and what it entails among member States. Scholars have epitomized cooperation as “when actors adjust their behaviour to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination.”^[1] Cooperation basically should lead to rewards for all states, not necessarily equal rewards, but everyone should benefit. Competition or conflict on the other hand is “goal-seeking behaviour that strives to reduce the gains available to others or to impede their want-satisfaction.”^[2] This article shall focus on realism theory of international relations on how it enhances the prospect of cooperation within the international environment and identify realists' main obstacles to

achieving cooperation in international relations such as Zambia.

Problem statement

The theory of Realism is related to international relations by emphasizing the role of the state, national interest, and power in world politics but not so for African states. Simply, African states have been marginalized in international global politics which international relations realism and neorealism theories fails to capture. This is because, both realism and neorealism fail to explain and capture the importance of Africa in the global political power. This means that Africa has much to teach and reinterpret and reconstruct international realism theories from her perspective. Therefore, the paper unmasks international relations realisms theories marginality of Africa in global political power basing on truth and trust. Of concern is that these theoretical arguments about the real, rhetoric and trust fail explain and capture global power in terms of sovereignty, security and nationality. For example, is it real that Africa is independent or simply a postmodern rhetoric? African citizens have no trust in postmodern political rhetoric doses hence their quest for collapsing the borders[3], redefining global corruption to a universalistic word[4] and interpreting realism theory from the developing world perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

Data used for this article was drawn from secondary sources using a desk top review. Through secondary sources, was an attempt to gain insights into the importance of international relations theories that helped the author in unmasking rhetorical doses about political power, sovereignty and nationality in times of wars in Africa, from her perspective. Phiri in 2021 on a similar topic, through skimming and reading various subjects assumed that realism theories are better explained through reciprocal interactions[5] between and among nations. This is because realism is an anarchic global system devoid of a centralized authority. Nevertheless, this paper unmasked the limits and merits of realism theory by exploring Africa's sovereignty and political power through secondary data sources.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS ACCORDING TO THE REALISTS

In the twentieth-century, realism was born in response to idealist perspective that dominated international relations in the aftermath of the First World War. The idealists of the 1920s and 1930s commonly called liberal internationalists had the goal of building peace in order to prevent another world conflict.[6] Idealists saw the solution to inter-state problems as being the creation of a respected system of international law, backed by international organisations. This interwar idealism resulted in the founding of the League of Nations in 1920 and in the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 outlawing war and providing for the peaceful settlements of disputes.[7]

The U.S. President Woodrow Wilson; other scholars such as Alfred Zimmerman and other prominent idealists of the era gave their intellectual support to the League of Nations. Instead of focusing on what some might saw as the inevitability of conflict between States and peoples, they chose to focus on the common interests that could unite humanity and attempted to appeal to rationality and morality.[8] According to idealists, war did not originate in an egoistic human nature, but rather in imperfect social conditions and political arrangements, which could be improved through international institutions.

Idealist's ideas were already being criticised in the early 1930s by Reinhold Niebuhr and within a few years by E. H. Carr. This became worse when League of Nations which the United States never joined and from which Japan and Germany withdrew, could not prevent the outbreak of the Second World War.[9] The fact, perhaps more than any theoretical argument produced a strong realist[10] reaction such that although the

United Nations, founded in 1945, can still be regarded as a product of idealist political thinking, the discipline of international relations was profoundly influenced in the initial years of the post-war period by the works of “classical” realists[11] such as Hans Morgenthau, though during the 1950s and 1960s, realism theory came under challenge of scholars who tried to introduce a more scientific approach to the study of international relations where during the 1980s it gave way to another trend in international relations theory known as neorealism.

Hans J. Morgenthau (1904–1980) developed realism into a comprehensive international relations theory and places selfishness and power-lust at the center of his picture of human existence. The insatiable human lust for power, timeless and universal, which he identified with *animus dominandi*, the desire to dominate was for him the main cause of conflict. Morgenthau systematised realism in international relations on the basis of six principles that he includes in the second edition of *Politics among Nations*. As a traditionalist, he opposed the so-called scientists who tried to reduce the discipline of international relations to a branch of behavioral science.

In the first principle he stated that realism is based on objective laws that have their roots in unchanging human nature.[12] He desired to develop realism into both a theory of international politics and a political art, a useful tool of foreign policy.

Morgenthau explains in the third principle, interest defined as power is a universally valid category, and indeed an essential element of politics, various things can be associated with interest or power at different times and in different circumstances.[13] Its content and the manner of its use are determined by the political and cultural environment.[14]

In the fourth principle, Morgenthau considers the relationship between realism and ethics. He says that while realists are aware of the moral significance of political action, they are also aware of the tension between morality and the requirements of successful political action.[15]

Prudence, and not conviction of one’s own moral or ideological superiority, should guide political action. This is stressed in the fifth principle, where Morgenthau again emphasised the idea that all state actors, including our own, must be looked at solely as political entities pursuing their respective interests defined in terms of power.[16] In taking this point of view vis-à-vis its counterparts and thus avoiding ideological confrontation, a state would then be able to pursue policies that respected the interests of other states, while protecting and promoting its own.

Insofar as power, or interest defined as power, is the concept that defines politics, politics is an autonomous sphere, as Morgenthau says in his sixth principle of realism. It cannot be subordinated to ethics. However, ethics does still play a role in politics. “A man who was nothing but ‘political man’ would be a beast, for he would be completely lacking in moral restraints.[17]

THE REALIST THEORY’S VIEW OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN AFRICA

Generally, realism is a set of related theories of international relations that explains the role of the States, national interest and power at an international stage. The theory has dominated international relations and debates since the end of World War II and claims to offer both the most accurate explanation of State behaviour and a set of policy prescriptions as the balance of power struggle between States for ameliorating the inherent destabilising elements of international affairs.

The theory focuses on abiding patterns of interaction of an international system lacking a centralised political authority, that condition of anarchy means that the logic of international politics often differs from

that of domestic politics, which is regulated by a sovereign power. They are generally pessimistic about the possibility of radical systemic reform as a broad tradition of thought that comprises a variety of different strands, the most distinctive of which are classical realism and neorealism.^[18] Unfortunately, both theories are far short of explaining factors that led to wars in Africa because of being Eurocentric. The theories also fail to explain how corrupt leadership and the fragility nature of African countries and the ease with which MNCs are able to peddle influence wars in Africa. Phiri on corruption suggests that people's ways of thinking and acting is missing in any universalistic understanding^[19] of realism theories for Africa. Such understanding the misunderstanding of corruption influence to wars. This implies that Africa is caught between a rock and a hard place when explaining relations theories. It also shows that Realists frequently claim to draw on an ancient tradition of political thought. Among classic authors often cited by realists are Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques who asserted that realism is a self-conscious movement in view of international relations that emerged during the mid-20th century.^[20] The theory was inspired by E.H Carr who attacked idealism of liberal internationalists and their belief in the possibility of progress through the construction of international institutions such as the United Nations. He focused instead on the role of power and self-interest in determining State behaviour.^[21] The problem with this as alluded to by Michael Foucault, is that it does not situate power contextually, linguistically and socio-culturally^[22]. Equally, most academic literature ignore the concept of power from Michel Foucault theory of relation of power^[23] connected to international relations from a fluidity position. This because power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure^[24]

In the advent of the World War II many scholars converted to that pessimistic vision. Thereafter, realism became established in many international jurisdictions and States. Its fortunes boosted by a number of émigré European scholars, most notably the German-born political scientist Hans Morgenthau. It is the realism of Carr, Morgenthau, and their followers that is known as classical realism.^[25]

According to realism scholars, States exist within an anarchic international system in which they are ultimately dependent on their own capabilities or power to further their national interests. The most cardinal national interest is the survival of the State including its people, political systems and territorial integrity. The other major interests for realists include the preservation of a nation's culture and economy.^[26] To this realists contend that as long as the world is divided into nation-States in an anarchic setting, national interest will remain the essence of international conflicts.

As by that time realism drew from a wide variety of sources and offered competing visions of the self, the state and the world. Realists were united mainly by that which they opposed critical of the optimism and explanatory ambition of internationalists, classical realists instead stressed the various barriers to progress and reform that allegedly inhered in human nature, in political institutions or in the structure of the international system.^[27] The fortunes of realism grounded as it was in a combination of jurisprudence and theories during the era of social-scientific behaviorisms in the 1960s. Its fortunes were revived by the emergence of neorealism during the 1970s.^[28] Unfortunately, realism theories in Africa fail to explain much of its political behaviour. For example, Africa's culture and governance system are grossed over in realism theories. At the heart of these argument are the concepts of "sovereignty" and national interest in a continent where states are weakly institutionalized, and leaders interest taking a central stage than public. Phiriconfirms that "the theories are particularly important because they allow us to delve into individual and institutional practices, which embody power"^[29]. But, realism theories from the European perspective supports the artificial positivism and excessive emphasis on rationality rather than national interest and power. In African states, political power is deeply embedded in cultural values.

Culture and identity play a vital role in international relations as they form the basis for interaction between states and societies. At its core, culture is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing material, symbolic, behavioral and cognitive dimensions. Culture and identity play a significant role in international relations by

fostering mutual understanding, tolerance and cooperation. Understanding different cultures is essential in international relations as culture plays a significant role in shaping behavior and interactions. Fostering international cooperation through cultural understanding and acceptance is a vital aspect of modern international relations. Central to international relations is the recognition of the influence of cultural heritage on our behavior, values, and beliefs and the importance of understanding and appreciating these differences to promote social inclusion, diversity, and respect for human rights.

REALISM ENHANCES THE PROSPECT OF COOPERATION WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

In the face of International Relations (IR), realism is a school of thought that encompasses the competitive and conflictual side of international relations. The assumption in realism is that the nation-state is the principle actor in international relations. Other bodies exist, such as individuals and organisations, but their power is limited.[\[30\]](#) It also holds that a State is a unitary actor where national interests, especially in times of war, lead the State to speak and act with one voice. Decision-makers further are rational actors in the sense that rational decision-making leads to the pursuit of the national interest. The significance of this rationale is that taking actions that would make your State weak or vulnerable would not be rational.[\[31\]](#)

The school of thought suggests that all leaders no matter what their international theory persuasion recognise an attempt to manage their State's affairs in order to survive in a competitive environment.[\[32\]](#) It also argues States live in a context of anarchy, which is in the absence of anyone being in charge internationally. States typically have police forces, militaries, courts and so on however, in an emergency, there is an expectation that these institutions will 'do something' in response. There is no clear expectation of anyone or anything 'doing something' as there is no established hierarchy internationally. Therefore, States can ultimately only rely on themselves.

Frequently, realism draws on examples from the past, where there is a great deal of stress on the notion that humans are essentially held hostage to repetitive patterns of behaviour determined by their nature. Realists believe that people are selfish with appetite for power and inability to trust others that may lead to predictable outcomes.[\[33\]](#) The argument explains why war has been so common throughout recorded history. Since individuals are organised into States, human nature impacts on State behaviour.

In that respect, Machiavelli N focused on how the basic human characteristics influence the security of the State. And in his time, leaders were usually male, which also influences the realist account of politics. In *The Prince* (1532), Machiavelli stressed that a leader's primary concern is to promote national security.[\[34\]](#) In order to perform the task, leaders need to be alert and cope effectively with internal as well as external threats to his rule; needs to be a lion and a fox. Power (the Lion) and deception (the Fox) are crucial tools for the conduct of foreign policy.[\[35\]](#) In Machiavelli's view, rulers obey the 'ethics of responsibility' rather than the conventional religious morality that guides the average citizen that is, they should be good when they can, but they must also be willing to use violence when necessary to guarantee the survival of the State.[\[36\]](#)

Hans Morgenthau (1948) sought to develop a comprehensive international theory as he believed that politics, like society in general is governed by laws that have roots in human nature. His concern was to clarify the relationship between interests and morality in international politics and his work drew heavily on the insights of historical figures such as Thucydides and Machiavelli.[\[37\]](#)

In contrast to more optimistically minded idealists who expected international tensions to be resolved through open marked by goodwill, Morgenthau set out an approach that dealt with power over morality. Indeed, morality was portrayed as something that should be avoided in policymaking.[\[38\]](#) In Morgenthau's account, every political action is directed towards keeping, increasing or demonstrating power. The thinking

is that policies based on morality or idealism can lead to weakness and possibly the destruction or domination of a State by a competitor. In this sense pursuing the national interest is ‘a moral’ meaning that it is not subject to calculations of morality.

Realism is improvable assumptions about human nature and structures. Rather than a State’s decisions and actions being based on human nature, they are arrived at via a simple formula; first, all States are constrained by existing in an international anarchic system. The theory also urges that any course of action they pursue is based on their relative power when measured against other States. So, Waltz[39] offered a version of realism that recommended that theorists examine the characteristics of the international system for answers rather than delve into flaws in human nature. In doing so, he sparked a new era in IR theory that attempted to use social scientific methods rather than political theory criteria.

These realists believe the theory most closely describes the image of world politics held by practitioners of Statecraft and perhaps utilised in the world of policymaking. However, realism’s critics argue that realists can help perpetuate the violent and confrontational world that they describe in assuming the uncooperative and egoistic nature of humankind and the absence of hierarchy in the State system.[40]

It encourages leaders to act in ways based on suspicion, power and force and thus be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy. More directly, realism is often criticised as excessively pessimistic, since it sees the confrontational nature of the international system as inevitable. However, according to realists, leaders are faced with endless constraints and few opportunities for cooperation.[41] Thus, they can do little to escape the reality of power politics. For a realist, facing the reality of one’s predicament is not pessimism it is prudence. The realist account of international relations stresses that the possibility of peaceful change or in fact any type of change is limited. For a leader to rely on such an idealistic outcome would be folly.

Perhaps because realism is designed to explain repetition and a timeless pattern of behaviour it was not able to predict or explain a major recent transformation of the international system in specific the end of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union in 1991.[42] When the Cold War ended, international politics underwent rapid change that pointed to a new era of limited competition between States and abundant opportunities for cooperation. This transformation prompted the emergence of an optimistic vision of world politics that discarded realism as old thinking.

Realists are also accused of focusing too much on the state as a solid unit, ultimately overlooking other actors and forces within the state and also ignoring international issues not directly connected to the survival of the state. For example, the Cold War ended because ordinary citizens in Soviet-controlled nations in Eastern Europe decided to rebel against existing power structures.[43]

This rebellion swept from one country to another within the Soviet Union’s vast empire, resulting in its gradual collapse between 1989 and 1991. Realism’s toolbox did not and does not account for such events: the actions of ordinary citizens or international organisations, for that matter have no major part in its calculations. This is due to the State-centered nature of the thinking that realism is built upon.[44] It views States as solid pool balls bouncing around a table, never stopping to look inside each pool ball to see what it comprises and why it moves the way it does. However, realists recognise the importance of these criticisms, but tend to see events such as the Ukrainian-Russia conflicts as exceptions to the normal pattern of things.[45]

Many critics of realism focus on one of its central strategies in the management of world affairs an idea called ‘the balance of power’.[46] This describes a situation in which States are continuously making choices to increase their own capabilities while undermining the capabilities of others.[47] This generates a ‘balance’ of sorts as no State is permitted to get too powerful within the international system. Where a State attempts to push its luck and grow too much, like Russia, it will trigger a war because other States will form

secret alliances to try to defeat it in order to restore a balance. This balance of power system is one of the reasons why international relation is anarchic. Therefore, no single State has been able to become a global power and unite the world under its direct rule.[\[48\]](#)

The theory argues for unsavory actions like war are necessary tools of statecraft in an imperfect world and leaders must use them when it is in the national interest. This is wholly rational in a world where the survival of the State is pre-eminent. Where one's State ceases to exist due to attack or internal collapse, then all other political objectives cease to have much practical relevance. The leader therefore must be extremely cautious when deciding where and when to use military power.[\[49\]](#)

It is worth noting that the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, undertaken as part of the Global War on Terror, was opposed by most leading realists as a misuse of power that would not serve US national interests. This was due to the possibility that the disproportionate use of US military force would cause blowback and resentment in the region. Indeed, in this case, realism yielded strong results as a tool of analysis, as the rise of the Islamic State group in the years after the Iraq invasion demonstrated.[\[50\]](#)

REALISTS' MAIN OBSTACLES TO ACHIEVING COOPERATION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN AFRICA.

The main obstacles to cooperation observed by the realists lies in the natural human aggression which is absorbed by individual States exist in an anarchical international system in order to encourage them to seek power and distrust other States which makes cooperation very difficult to achieve.[\[51\]](#) Secondly, States are also more concerned with relative gains rather than absolute gains. In contrast, liberalists acknowledge the above points made by realists but believe that the main obstacles are the lack of international institutions which provide international law, encourage disarmament and integrate states closer.[\[52\]](#) Lack of democratic and liberal States is also an impediment to cooperation between States in Africa. Further, realism's weaknesses lie in the position developed by John Mbiti, Alexis Kagame, Placide Temple and Chidongo Phiri, for example. Thus the very reality of Africa as a formation itself, with diverse culture and languages, let alone that of its philosophy, means that realism theory should be tailored towards management of African conflicts than those that are Eurocentric.

According to liberalists who encourage us to believe that cooperation has evolved and States are more than likely to trust each other, citing an example of the recent nuclear disarmament agreement between Russia and the United States is clear evidence that even past disagreements is put aside and major, powerful States are content with minimizing their military power.

However, realists disagree with that by demonstrating that the nature of world politics has not changed. Even after the end of the Cold War, the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, constant threat of war and chaos in the Middle East as well as the Iraq War in 2003 shows how the world today may not be as safe as hoped.

Therefore, at international relations it seems if security is achieved cooperation will follow automatically however the concept of security is a sharply contested concept.[\[53\]](#) After the end of the Cold-War, new security issues were raised like environmental degradation, poverty, hunger and diseases and weak/failing States. Scholars also started to believe that security should be centered on people, not the States. But security should provide personal safety to individuals and freedom from threats.[\[54\]](#)

Security for the Third World and underdeveloped States is different from security of developed States.[\[55\]](#) This is because after the decolonisation, the number of States increased dramatically and these States had a very limited time to develop and catch up to European States so therefore the security in the Third World

does not just refer to military dimensions but also search for food, health and economic security. As such unlike European States, the security of Third World countries comes from within the States, not external.[\[56\]](#)

An attack on the American Twin Tower of September 2001 has also changed the way we think about security and cooperation. While years ago conflicts may have occurred between States or leaders, but after that incident States are fighting an unknown enemy, a group of people rather than a State.[\[57\]](#) This is because where there is no clear explanation of what security is, how can the States achieve it? Will we ever live in a world where cooperation is constant but war and conflict is just the thing of the past?

The other obstacles that many theories do not take into consideration is the widening gap between the rich and the poor, food sufficiency, finite natural resources like oil and occasional economic recessions that may lead all lead to more conflicts.[\[58\]](#) The world at the moment looks bleak and only time will tell if we can come up with some solutions to these never ending problems.

CONCLUSION

Realism is a theory that claims to explain the *reality* of international politics. It focuses on the constraints on international cooperation that result from humankind's egoistic nature and the absence of a central authority above the State.[\[59\]](#) The realists', highest goal is the survival of the State, which explains why States' actions are judged according to the ethics of responsibility rather than by moral principles.[\[60\]](#) The dominance of realism has generated a significant strand of achievements despite the value of the criticisms, which continues to provide valuable insights and remains an important analytical tool for every stakeholder of International relations. It is also clear that most academics and critics fail to acknowledge internal factors that impeded international relations theory to be realised in Africa. For instance, foreign armies and criminal cartels are all over in Africa, strengthening skeptics to pay a blind eye for its relevance in Africa.

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FOOT NOTES

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