



"Realism" for The 21st Century: Climate Change, Nuclear Winter and A Changed Threat Environment

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Abstract

This article argues that the existential threats to the security of states that climate change, and the "nuclear winter" phenomenon represent requires a fundamental reconsideration of the core of "realist" theories of international relations. The core assumption of the "realist" understanding of international relations is that the primary existential threat faced by states are the military capacities of other states and that states are "rational" in the pursuit of security. For the vast majority of states in the international system other states are no longer the primary threat to their survival. The unintended consequences of an intentional or accidental use of nuclear weapons culminating in a nuclear exchange between other states and the resulting "nuclear winter", as well as climate change represent the most clear and present danger. This implies that states, who's primary function is to maintain their security, must embrace global governance, cooperation and diplomacy as the only viable security strategy in confronting these threats. The failure of the dominant states (U.S., Russia, China, France, U.K.) to adopt this approach to security reflects the excessive influence of domestic interests such as the fossil fuel industry and the "military industrial complex".

Keywords: Realism, Nuclear Winter, Climate Change, Military-industrial-Complex, Security

Introduction

I have spent many years teaching courses on international relations. I have always enjoyed awakening students to the realities of the international system and always suggested that the best way to do so is to understand the field through the lenses of competing theories that have been developed by scholars for this purpose. One of those theories has of course been "realism". I have immense respect for the scholars like Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer (just to name a few), who's clear eyed analysis of the international system and how states seek to function within it provides important insights. But like all theories, it is a simplification of an enormously complex picture, that like its competitors, puts certain factors in the foreground of explanations while relegating others to the background. In this essay I will argue that the growing evidence of the threat of climate change as well as the probability of "nuclear winter" resulting from the use of nuclear weapons, fundamentally changes the "threat

environments" within which states function in a way that has not been adequately understood by scholars in the realist tradition.

What is "realism"?

Realism puts states in the foreground, as the central (if not the only relevant) actors in the drama that is international relations [1]. States, in the eyes of "realists" are "independent variables", in that they act according to their own logic or rationality. States and their policies are not, as liberals would argue, a reflection of their own domestic institutions (democracy...), as constructivists would argue, a reflection of cultural values, or as Marxists would argue, a reflection of class power or capitalist logic. The key idea is that states are not primarily devoted to the pursuit of wealth or values like human rights and democracy but by the sole aim of survival in a system in which there is no supreme authority able to constrain the actions of any state. Realists call this a self-help system, in that each state must ultimately rely on itself in choosing the best strategy for its own survival.

In that sense states are formally equal, although in real terms there are of course enormous differences in the size and capabilities of states. Thus, one of the most well known descriptions of the international system is the quote by Thucydides that it is a system in which "the powerful do as they will and the weak suffer what they must" [2]. In this competition for survival, the only thing that really counts is power. States have no choice but to seek to become as powerful (primarily in military terms but obviously geographic, economic and scientific factors help) as possible, to make themselves as invulnerable to aggression by their neighbors as possible. War makes states, as Charles Tilly argues in his analysis of the rise of states in Europe [3].

Realism does not strive to be a nice theory with optimistic implications, but an accurate way of understanding international politics. As such it dispenses with the liberal notion that there are good states and bad states, democratic states and autocratic states and that promoting democracy in the autocratic states will change their behaviour. Neither regime type nor ideology can change the fundamental logic of states.

Most "realists" would describe themselves (though perhaps not personally) as pessimists [4]. The reasons are simple: despite technical, economic and social changes in human societies, the international

system has not changed in the 2000+ years, since Thucydides offered that description, and is not likely to in the future. The competition for security is a 0-sum game. As one state becomes more powerful and thus secure, its neighbors by definition become less secure. This is a never-ending story of rising and declining powers and alliances that eventually and inevitably tip into open conflict and war. Nothing has changed, except of course the lethality of the weapons in the arsenals of states (more on that below).

For realists there is no conceivable escape from this system. There is no way out of this global “state of nature” that is analogous to Thomas Hobbes notion of a state of nature: permanent war of all against all in which life is bound to be “nasty, brutish and short” [5]. The reasons for this pessimism are easy to understand. While weak states have every reason to want to create a system of law and rules to provide them security, powerful states have no reason to allow themselves to be constrained in their ability to “do as they will”. The UN system is the perfect illustration of this dynamic. Through its Charter, it imposes a set of rules clearly intended to constrain the sovereign impulses of states. However, the implicit condition of its acceptance by the most powerful states at the time of its founding was exemption, in the form of the veto power of the five permanent members of the security council (P5). International law applies to all but those states that can veto acts of the Security Council.

International institutions can play important functions in this system and are likely to be created by the most powerful states (as the UN was) but primarily as a means to cement and stabilize their dominant position within the system, not as a means to fundamentally change the international system. The support of these institutions by the powerful states, even those that created the institutions, is thus conditional. As soon as they cease to serve the purpose of maintaining their dominance they are likely to act to undermine them. In this context it is interesting to note that Venezuela in 2021 spearheaded the formation of the group Friends in Defense of the U.N. Charter, which has 18 members. The US, which played the dominant role in the UN’s creation, did not participate and its officials rarely mention the UN Charter anymore, preferring the phrase “rules based international order” [6]. The US may not be directly undermining the U.N. but it is clearly becoming selective in supporting its institutions, policies and especially its laws. (the military interventions by the U.S. in Panama, Granada, Kosovo, Iraq in 2003, Libya as well as the unilateral sanctions imposed on Cuba, Iran, Venezuela, Nicaragua... are all illegal unless authorized by the Security Council, which they were not).

Unipolarity, the dominance by a single state of the entire system, as we have experienced in the aftermath of the Cold War, is also seen as unlikely to fundamentally change the system, and indeed did not, as a number of “realists” predicted. As the dominant power, at the insistence of its citizens, uses its power to benefit its own interests, other states will come to resent it and will be inclined to counterbalance against that power, leading to renewed competition. This is what we’ve seen after the collapse of the USSR and the unconstrained use of coercive power by the US since, leading to the emergence of new alliances (Brazil, Russia, Iran, China and South Africa or BRICS... [7]). Thus renewed “great power competition”. Unipolarity is at best a temporary phenomenon.

Economic integration and “globalization”, the great hope of the liberal perspective, cannot change this reality, no matter how great the economic benefits it produces for the simple reason of “relative gains”. Liberals argue, and realists largely accept, that the economics of trade are not a 0-sum game. All states (though not all citizens within them) usually become wealthier by participating in free exchange of goods and services, allowing for specialization, higher productivity and thus wealth. The increased wealth produced by growing interdependence of the economies of states, liberals argue,

will increase the incentives to deepen integration and decrease the incentives for conflict, simultaneously stimulating the growth of institutions of governance. In the long term this process may create a single economic system and downgrade the role of individual states, as in the EU [8].

The problem here is that while all states may benefit from free trade, some benefit more than others. That differential will eventually lead to shifts in the balance of power intolerable to the states at the losing end of this process. This in turn will incline them to reject free trade in favour of protectionism. The dynamic between the US and China since the 1990’s illustrates this perfectly. Both states benefitted from the expansion of trade but as China’s economy grew more quickly than that of the US, it also became more powerful and influential in relation to Africa, Latin America and even Europe. This led the Obama administration to initiate the “Pivot to Asia”, the shift of military focus from the Middle East to the Asia Pacific region as well as to renewed economic nationalism. The Trump and Biden administrations have both pushed these policies further.

Realism seems to provide a clear-eyed assessment of the nature of the international system but are all states “rational actors” as realists define “rational”? Clearly not all leaders of states live up to that expectation. The irrational impulses of leaders are likely to be constrained by national security bureaucracies that are staffed by experts that spend their entire careers focused on international security. The theory is strangely simultaneously pessimistic regarding the prospect of international order but optimistic that these wise men (with a few women in the mix) are able to recognize the existential threats they face and act accordingly. These existential threats are more or less exclusively in the form of other states. The familiar lesson: “if you want peace, prepare for war”. Powerful military establishments are key to the security of the state.

The contemporary threat environment

The question I am pondering is first and foremost precisely this: *are other states still the primary existential threat most states face in the 21st century? Are military establishments still the key to our security?*

The most immediate threat to our collective survival in the 21st century would seem to me to be nuclear war, whether intentional or not. Since the 1980’s scientist understood that even a relatively limited exchange of nuclear weapons between two states (India and Pakistan for example) would likely be a civilization ending catastrophe [9]. The ensuing nuclear winter would lead to mass starvation and the collapse of organized human communities all over the planet.

This danger would not be the result of the intentions of the states that launch a nuclear attack against their perceived adversary but an unintended consequence of them. Would not this reality suggest that the “wise men” in the national security establishments around the world should recognize this existential threat and feverishly be doing everything in their power to eliminate it? Would not the institutions like the U.N. be seen by these officials as the only means available to create the cooperation and trust between states that might lead to their willingness to surrender their nuclear arsenals? It certainly seems that the global majority that supports the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) recognizes the threat and the possible solutions.

The P5 by contrast, with the U.S. by far in the lead, are doing precisely the opposite, modernizing their nuclear arsenals and undermining international law and institutions. The mantra is: “great power competition is back with a vengeance”. Even more ominously, almost all of the architecture created during the Cold War to prevent miscalculation and accidental launches (the Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty, the Intermediate Forces Treaty, the Open Skies Treaty...) have been abandoned. Still, the rise of China must be confronted.

That might have made sense prior to the discovery of the nuclear winter phenomenon but in the current context every nuclear arsenal is essentially a doomsday machine and nuclear deterrence is a recipe for collective suicide.

The other obvious existential threat all states and indeed humanity faces, of course, is the threat of climate change. Military institutions around the world are increasingly recognizing the problem and incorporating it into their doctrines by highlighting the importance of protecting borders from flows of environmental refugees, failed states providing havens for terrorist, projecting power into an open arctic ocean.... The problem here is that the focus is on symptoms not root causes. Military institutions are among the largest producers of greenhouse gases and are thus part of the problem, not a solution to it.

Of States and the Bureaucracies within them

So why are these supposedly rational actors so completely blind to the most obvious threats to our collective survival and what does that say about “realism”? I think a good place to start is to suggest that the “rational” state that realists describe and some take for granted, is what Max Weber called an “ideal type”, when he was describing the nature of bureaucracy. An ideal type is a hypothetical construct, an analytic tool with which one can evaluate real actual institutions and arrange them into types.

The “rational state” envisioned by realists is centralized, hierarchical, able to recognize threats, formulate policy options in confronting them and to subject these options to a cost/benefit and/or risk analysis to determine the most rational policy. This is an “ideal type” as at least some of the most prominent realists recognize. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt both describe themselves as realists but in their book *The Israel Lobby*, acknowledge that U.S. domestic politics has distorted U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East in a way that undermines rather than enhancing U.S. interests in the region [10]. By aligning the U.S. so closely with the interests of Israel, the U.S. has complicated its relationship with numerous other states in the region that are arguably strategically more important to the U.S. than its relationship with Israel. Whether one agrees with this assessment or not, it clearly allows for the possibility that domestic interests can cause even a state as sophisticated and powerful as the U.S. to act “irrationally”.

It is incumbent on scholars in the realist tradition to acknowledge that the same conclusion may obtain on a much larger scale, in the refusal of the major powers to take meaningful action in confronting the threat of climate change. Clearly the influence of the fossil fuel industry and its clients, on elections, legislatures and the media has been successful in preventing these states from adopting the policies that would protect their citizens from wildfires, floods, hurricanes etc.. The government of Canada is a good example. Its citizens are experiencing unprecedented heat waves, wildfires, hurricanes and torrential rain storms. They are clearly threatened by the changing climate but the subsidies to the oil industry continue and instead of expanding emergency services to fight wildfires and other climate induced emergencies, Canada is increasing military spending to meet its pledged 2% of GDP spending on its military, to please NATO.

It should also be understood that, while states are bureaucratic organizations, they consist of several separate and semi-independent bureaucracies, each with its own core mandate, clients and each with its own subcultures. While these bureaucracies are generally understood by the public as functioning in harmony with one another in a kind of division of labour, those that have studied or worked within bureaucracies know that they are to a considerable degree in competition with each other. As such they are highly protective of their core area of responsibility in order to justify and if possible, expand their budgets. Growing budgets are crucial to bureaucracies to provide opportunities for promotion to their members. Without larger budgets it's impossible to provide career advancement to their

most talented employees, who will thus seek better opportunities elsewhere. Like states, they are therefore organizations with interests, the most important of which is their own organizational survival. If this is the case then it is, at least in theory, possible that a set of policies that would appear to be in the interest of the state as a whole, runs counter to the interests of a powerful bureaucracy within that state. A policy that would enhance the security of the state might undermine the need for and thus the survival a bureaucracy within that state [11].

Bureaucracies are powerful organization, as Max Weber well understood. Their power rest to a considerable extent on their expertise and control of information. It is reasonable therefore to assume that under circumstances like the above, a bureaucracy may try to undermine a policy that would enhance the security of the state, but is contrary to the interests of a particular bureaucracy within it.

The elephant in the room, in regard to this question are of course the national security bureaucracies with their network of corporate, media and academic clients, usually collectively referred to as the military industrial complex (MIC). Such networks exist in states around the world (not just in the U.S.), and the very existence of them is drawn into question if global governance and cooperation is able to replace “great power competition”. This dynamic has been very evident in regard to the foreign policy of the United States since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It immediately set off domestic pressures for a “peace dividend”, the drastic reduction of the budget of the D.O.D. and with it, panic in the national security establishment whose budgets had been justified by that now absent threat [12].

The war on drugs and later the war on terror where jumped on to justify the continuation of military spending but were insufficient to justify investments in things like the F-35, air craft carrier groups, let alone nuclear arsenals. The only thing that could justify these kinds of investment was a return of “great power competition” but how can that happen when there are no other “great powers” willing or able to militarily threaten the U.S. and it's “allies”? We know the results.

Neither China nor Russia where an ideological or military threat to the US or its allies in the 1990s or the first decade of the current century but the US continued to act toward them as if they were. This was not of course official policy. The US, at least with regard to China, welcomed them into the global community as trading and investment partners. But on the military side, the bases in Japan, South Korea etc. remained active and more bases where constructed to create a virtual “pearl necklace” around China. Perhaps most importantly the U.S. has put into question the “one China” policy upon which the rapprochement between the U.S. and China in the 1970's was based. With respect to Russia, the expansion of NATO, not to mention the abandonment of treaties (already mentioned) played a similar role. The consistent protests by the Russian and Chinese governments where simply ignored, leading to the clash in Ukraine and the “great power competition” that the national security state needed to justify its existence. China has yet to take the bait but the US and NATO are working hard to make sure it too will see itself as having no choice but to rise to the bait in Taiwan, or by accusing it of being an enabler of Russia.

This trajectory points to a potential nuclear conflagration that doesn't just threaten the survival of the states involved but of all of humanity. It is also obvious that this renewed “great power competition” makes impossible the global cooperation required to halt the collapse of ecosystems all over the planet, let alone the threat of climate change. The insistence of scholars like John Mearsheimer that the rise of China must be contained, even while he rightly points to the irrationality of US policy in Ukraine/Russia and the Middle East, must be questioned. Is China's rise an existential threat to humanity that justifies us ignoring or putting on the back burner the existential threat of climate change?

Is the threat of thermonuclear war (one that could arise not just due to the strategic calculations of the states involved but more likely as a result of accident or miscalculation) worth incurring, to contain China or to teach Putin a lesson about international law? Anyone that answers yes to those two questions is not a “realist” but a crackpot.

Today a true “realist” would have to recognize, as Richard Falk argues [13], that the decentralized system of independent states must give way to a system of global governance and cooperation if humanity is to survive the current century.

What is to be done?

It is worth noting that the observation that domestic elements can influence the foreign policies of states, mentioned above, has other implications. Most importantly in this context, it implies that if a lobby (like the Israel lobby) can alter the foreign policy of a state as powerful as the US and cause it to act in ways that undermine its wider security interests, it is certainly possible that a powerful peace movement can pressure states to acknowledge and act upon the threats that most imminently threaten that state and ultimately all of humanity. While scholars in the “realist” tradition may not yet have recognized the changed threat environments faced by states, they are none the less correct in arguing that the behaviour (foreign policies) of states have historically been shaped by their national security bureaucracies. As such their insights remain crucial to understanding the challenges ahead.

At least some scholars who identify themselves as “defensive realists” argue that states are (or should be) security maximizers, not power maximizers [14]. To amass too much power, to pursue hegemony or empire is to fall into the trap of what is often referred to as the “security dilemma”: increasing the security of one state at the expense of the security of its neighbors. This is likely to stimulate countermeasures, resulting in arms races and counterbalancing. Excessive pursuit of power may thus undermine rather than enhance the security of a state, making it “irrational” [15]. The unipolar/hegemonic ambitions of the U.S. since the end of the Cold War would fall into that category. They are seen by these scholars as a kind of pathology the roots of which are to be found at the domestic level (as argued above) [16].

The scientists that run the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist and its famous “Doomsday Clock” have sent their loudest warning about the dangers of nuclear war by setting the clock 90 seconds from midnight. They also for the first time included climate change as a justification of this decision. The increasing risk of escalation in the conflict between Russia and NATO in Ukraine, as well as the nuclear doctrine regarding nuclear conflict with Russia, China and North Korea, recently developed by the Biden administration, may well justify moving the doomsday clock even closer to midnight. The recently announced tariffs on electric vehicles produced in China suggest that policies to deal with climate change are being sacrificed in favour of geopolitics as well.

In this context it is essential that scholars become actively engaged in promoting policies that can reverse these trends. Crucial to this project is a well informed and activated public. A good start would be the elimination of land based intercontinental missiles in regard to which there is a consensus among experts that they a. are the most dangerous because their locations are known, they are targets and are thus subject to the “use it or lose it” dynamic in a nuclear crisis; and b. they provide no deterrent capacity that submarine or air-based systems don’t already provide.

Above all what is required is a willingness on the part of nuclear states to communicate and engage on this issue and to begin a step by step process of building confidence and trust. The U.S. and Russia, having the largest nuclear arsenals must obviously make the first moves. Public pressure changing the policies of the Russian or Chinese states, given their authoritarian qualities, are not likely to emerge but a reinvigorated peace movement in the U.S. and democratic West could go a long way in creating the necessary

momentum. It is the role of intellectuals to inform the public on crucial matters within their fields. In the field of international relations there are no issues more in need of clear analysis than the existential threats that nuclear war and climate change pose for the survival of states. Putting this issue at the center of “realist” analyses is long overdue.

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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