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1 Theory and international history

Ernest R. May, Richard Rosecrance, and Zara Steiner

Introduction

When a major power acts aggressively and unpredictably, opponents often are nonplussed. The targets of aggressive action first interpret the move as a deliberate challenge, and are tempted to adopt an offensive response. But, they hesitate to respond until they understand why the opponent felt impelled to issue the challenge. Chairman Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union placed “offensive” missiles in Cuba, although President John F. Kennedy had explicitly warned him not to do so. When the missiles were detected and the president informed on October 16, 1962, JFK reacted explosively. “He can’t do this to me,” Kennedy said (in more graphic terms than reproduced here). Kennedy’s advisers initially interpreted Khrushchev’s move as a completely illegitimate and unparalleled action in terms of Soviet foreign policy. No Soviet leader had ever placed such missiles in the Eastern European satellite countries – how could they station them ninety miles off the coast of the United States? From Khrushchev’s point of view, however, while the placement was abrupt and unprecedented, it was also a symmetrical response to American stationing of Jupiter missiles in Turkey near the southern border of the Soviet Union. The Soviet missiles were also sent in reaction to US threats to Cuba which were even more compelling than any Russian pressure on Turkey. “What was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander,” Khrushchev reasoned. The Soviet leader also believed that, since the missiles were to be installed in secret, they could be made operational before the United States could react, and then it would be too late. He did not reckon with the pressures of American politics which made any Soviet build-up in Cuba very sensitive, and a nuclear missile emplacement doubly so. Kennedy could not rationalize Russian missiles in Cuba and continue with business as usual at home. He had to respond, and the crisis was on.

The first reactions which Kennedy and his advisers discussed were belligerent ones, designed to block a general Soviet thrust against

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Berlin as well as in the Caribbean. Advisers talked of strikes on the missiles and storage sites (as well as on Soviet aircraft), and began to plan an invasion of Cuba. Later, however, the Americans formulated a cooler response. However unjustified the Soviet move, Americans reasoned, Khrushchev would not be able simply to back down without a rationale. He had to get something out of the crisis to please his Kremlin colleagues and bureaucratic constituents even if it could not be a nuclear missile base in Cuba. A US pledge not to invade Cuba might suffice, if the Russians were convinced that the United States was ready to act militarily and would do so if the Soviets did not remove the missiles and warheads. Such a deal was worked out between Robert Kennedy and KGB representative Alexander Fomin, closely monitored by the president. The US missiles in Turkey were also to be withdrawn, but only later and out of the glare of world publicity. In the Cuban crisis, the proposed US response was moderated to a “quarantine” of Russian shipments to Cuba which gave Khrushchev time to find a way to back down. He wrote Kennedy on Friday October 26, suggesting a compromise, and the way was cleared for a settlement two days later.

Decision-makers initially went wrong in the Cuban crisis because they were too influenced by international theorists who sought to understand world politics through the prism of realist theory. According to realist reasoning, states do only what they are permitted to do in terms of their strength vis-à-vis other states, and the Russians did not have the local or strategic strength to prevail in a contest over Cuba. But Moscow acted anyway. Realist theory could not explain why.

In ancient Greece, the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War was more comprehensible in realist terms. According to Thucydides, the Spartans made war on Athens because “they were afraid the Athenians might become too powerful, seeing that the greater part of Greece was already in their hands.” But though the shift in power might have dictated war, Athenian intentions did not. Athens had been peaceful for twelve years, and the only growth in its power had come as a result of the alliance with Corcyra, which was in turn caused by Corinthian pressure on Corcyra which Sparta had actually deplored and tried to prevent. When Spartans went to war against Athens, therefore, they acted to serve the interest of their ally, Corinth, whose support they deemed critical, and not because of any grievance against Athens. Neglecting Athens’ intentions, Sparta responded purely to Athenian power in ways realists could understand.

Thus, international history presents two different kinds of cases. In some instances countries calibrate their actions in terms of the power

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they possess, no more and no less. However, there are also instances in which countries act more aggressively or more modestly than their relative “power line” (i.e. their actual military and economic strength) would justify. They may be overambitious or too constrained in their demonstration or use of the power they enjoy. Violating the strictures of John Stuart Mill, realist theory does not account for the different actions which states take in similar circumstances, or for the same actions in different circumstances.

The writers of this volume contend that such “exceptions” to realism are not occasional but chronic. Some of the most important events in world history have occurred as a result of nations overexercising or underusing their power. When the two are juxtaposed in one episode, outcomes are even harder to predict. There is no evidence that these “exceptions” will not continue in the future. China and/or the United States may overstate or underuse their power in the next decade. It is terribly important therefore to account for these deviations and to explain them in theoretical terms. That is precisely what this volume seeks to do.

Realist approaches

The theory of “realism” asserts that all states (certainly great powers) seek power and sometimes as much as is available.¹ As a result, the only means of disciplining the forward thrust of major states is to create a “balance of power” against them. Threatened nations form alliances or rearm to protect themselves. Such cooperation as emerges is only tactical and temporary, because nations do not have permanent allies, only permanent interests. One version of realism – “offensive realism” – contends that great powers must seek regional hegemony and possibly world hegemony; otherwise they will be overmatched by others nearby or overseas. The United States and China, therefore, will be in conflict as Chinese power rises and as it seeks to dominate Asia. The United States cannot be indifferent to China’s gain because it threatens the American position both more generally and ultimately even in the Western Hemisphere. As a result, the United States should today move to cut the Chinese growth rate, through tariffs and other restrictions. “Defensive realism,” in contrast, is less certain that nations have to expand “offensively.” They may find the status quo acceptable for short periods of time. But they can never reach a lasting accommodation.

¹ There is a difference here between offensive and defensive realism (the latter does not predicate a continuing attempt to increase power).

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The amount of cooperation in the system is a constant, which can never structurally be increased.² It can only be redistributed. If A and B form a cooperative coalition, C is automatically worse off.

This volume attempts to look at the general weaknesses of realist theories both analytically and in terms of specific case histories. It combines essays by theorists with studies of crises or longer-term historical developments in an attempt to outline what were and are the decisive ingredients that determine national action. Why do nations sometimes act realistically and why do they often aim at goals that are far in excess of what their limited power will permit? Why, also, do great nations sometimes minimize their participation in international politics and fail to exercise their power? We conclude that domestic factors and leadership ideology, along with systemic considerations, institutional, economic, and technological, affect the behavior of states. The United States did not have to adopt “isolation” as a policy after 1920. It possessed as much power, relative to the rest of the world, as it enjoyed in 1945. Yet both internal politics and domestic Republican leaders pressed America to stay out of entanglements with Europe save for episodic attempts to bolster the world economy or to encourage disarmament. When Japanese nationalists and National Socialists in Germany came to power, the United States remained on the sidelines. It did not exert its manifest naval and potential military might to curb their ambitions.

Britain was similarly constricted. It failed to support France’s desire to restrain Germany and instituted a pervasive “appeasement” policy of the German dictator. But when Poland was threatened by Hitler in August 1939, an unready Britain pledged itself to make war on Germany even though the immediate power situation was weighted against it. The decisive factors were domestic as well as external, and had much to do with a change in both official and popular perceptions of Germany rather than purely balance-of-power considerations.

Germany and Japan, in contrast, were guilty of hubris and overweening ambitions. They believed their European and American opponents were decadent and could not stand in their way as they asserted their rights to expansion. Fanaticism and unfulfilled nationalism pressed them forward in ways that their slender power resources could not possibly sustain. The wars in which the attacking countries engaged were not brought on by aggression or expansion by their foes. Germany and Japan resolved upon them coolly in the rarefied confines of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin and the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. Neither

² It is, of course, true that two nations moving to defense-dominant postures (from offense-dominant ones) can both improve their position.

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country was “forced” into war. They both initiated conflicts they could not possibly win as the Cassandras in their own countries had warned. How do we explain such blunders (and their associated moral crimes)? Militant ideological leadership and domestic acquiescence, cooperation, or enthusiasm dictated the result. Although the two cases were obviously different, in both instances the international power balance did not facilitate their ideologically driven quests for territorial gain.

Such behavior is not exceptional in international politics or limited to marginal cases. For long periods the United States has hesitated to use its great power. Britain has combined restraint with overexercise. Germany and Japan, in the 1930s, moved well beyond their economic and military limits. Our case studies, which deal with different states in different periods of time, speak to some of the weaknesses of prevailing theory. Realism errs both in its treatment of the domestic factors which may determine state behavior and in its depiction of the restraints applied by the international system. Realists see “power” and “power perceptions” as the single key to understanding what will take place in international relations. In dismissing papal influence, Stalin once asked: “How many divisions does the Pope have?” Yet the Polish pope, John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła), helped to sustain the Polish resistance which in turn led to Soviet concessions and an end to the Cold War in 1989. Further in the past, international restraints and incentives – not related to the balance of power – caused countries to limit their depredations upon the European body politic. Even during the retrograde seventeenth century, traditional usages and notions of hierarchy restrained state behavior, though hierarchy was deposed as an organizing principle by its end. Later in the nineteenth century, international conferences and the concert of great powers filed down the sharp edges of political disputes and offered an ameliorative and restorative diplomacy to keep Europe together. Wars themselves, paradoxically, often led to periods of peace as nations and peoples resolved that they should not recur.

International history is as much a chronicle of change as it is of “realist” constancy. Exceptions, therefore, will always emerge to contradict static theory. Sometimes the economic and military failure of empire emboldened a few hardy decision-makers to renounce it as a policy. Territorial gain went, at least temporarily, into the discard. Institutions created after 1945 enabled the rebuilding of the international economy and the construction of a united Europe. Both continued to draw in new members and adherents in the twenty-first century, even though the unification of Europe should have led excluded nations to balance against it. Equally if not more important, the United States amassed

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more military force than the rest of the world combined, but multiple factors, both domestic and systemic, have so far prevented attempts to balance against it. Meanwhile the globalization of the world economy knit the great powers together in a way that had not been possible in 1914. It might be that the ubiquitous threat of terrorism, unlike past “isms,” will act, not to divide the major powers, but to bring them together.

Tasks of this volume

We hope to show, through the use of case histories addressing different countries and covering different periods, that, even in those episodes where power is centrally involved, “realism” characteristically fails to explain what is happening. In some of these, leadership, ideology, and domestic politics as well as non-power international impulses and restraints enter the equation. Some of these illustrations show the change that has occurred in the way that nations and statesmen behave. In international history, nations focusing on economic growth have come to adopt a much longer-term perspective than nations which in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries were focused on military strength. The very attitude toward war has altered and this in turn affects the timescale adopted by decision-makers. Some powers are more likely to seek long-term gains; for them, no short-term reverse proves necessarily decisive. The quadrille of international politics continues without a necessary resolution and major powers can persevere without issuing external challenges. The very pervasiveness of change contributes to judicious restraint. Powers and regions rise and decline unpredictably. A country or region may gain in one element of power while losing in another. Domestic upheavals can reinforce or transform international relationships. They certainly cannot be omitted from narrow considerations of power.

Conclusion

The authors of this investigation do not seek to overthrow the “base-line” perspective which realism has historically provided. But they are convinced that in attempts to find “regularity” in historical outcomes, realists have seriously misunderstood what actually transpires in international politics. Realists and neorealists have neglected “change,” disregarded ideological, economic, and social constraints, and understated the role of ideological leadership. They have ignored the key factor of geography, in itself a changing circumstance; they have omitted

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transnational ties and institutional, economic, and social factors which affect the international environment in which states operate and indeed alter the balance between the state and the international order. Smaller powers sometimes challenge large and established nations and succeed in their aims. Great powers have been and are sometimes circumscribed by reigning institutionalism. Countries do not attack one another simply because they can.

While offensive realism dictates a univocal concentration upon power, statesmen and women are devising non-political and non-military means, including economic, technological, and propaganda tools, to change attitudes and behavior and to persuade others to cooperate rather than to fight. This does not mean that conflicts will not occur or that war among great powers can now be dismissed as a realistic possibility. But it does suggest that the levers of influence which statesmen use (and in some cases, have used in the past) are much more various than traditional military instruments. More malleable tools have become available than pure resorts to force. The use of these will determine outcomes even more effectively than the hierarchy of state-power relations. Realism suggests that the quantity of cooperation among nations is fixed and cannot be increased.³ Pervasive change, both within and outside the state, suggests that an enlarged and multilayered approach to the study of international relations would provide a greater insight into the behavior of states than the existing variants of realism.

³ Technically, however, if great powers moved from offense-dominant to defense-dominant strategies, both sides could benefit.

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2 Transformations in power

Richard Rosecrance

Summary introduction

Contributors to this volume contend that countries act in ways that sometimes violate established patterns of power among them. Countries with less power are sometimes egregiously ambitious and aggressive; countries with more power sometimes do not assert it politically. In the chapters which follow, authors explain that domestic politics, particular tendencies of leadership, or feelings of national dissatisfaction (or satisfaction) may account for the deviation from expected power outcomes. The present chapter offers another reason for this discontinuity: the very notion of what constitutes “power” may have been in flux and transformation. In very general terms it appears that major nations have changed short-term into long-term time horizons – territorial objectives into economic ones, tangible into less tangible ones, extensive development strategies into intensive ones. Normative transformations have occurred as well. These have permitted states to derive the benefits of cooperation within institutional frameworks and regimes – benefits that would not accrue outside such institutions. Participants in such regimes have been able to save on defense and security costs, attaining rates of growth not permitted to heavily armed states incurring large defense burdens.

Analysts and historians agree that some states act – use their power – differently from others. Yet, traditional realists cannot explain why certain countries apparently exercise more power than they possess, taking excessive risks, while others use much less of their power, becoming hesitant or even isolationist. As a result, one cannot predict a country’s course of action by knowing the amount of power it possesses. American President Calvin Coolidge continued his predecessor’s isolationist policies even though the United States in the mid-1920s possessed about 30 percent of world gross domestic product (GDP). It had a very large stock of gold. America could have sent troops to Europe, maintained a vast network of military bases overseas and provided large amounts of

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economic aid to other nations. It perhaps should have done so because its economic and political interests were tied to maintaining the balance of power in Europe. But it did not. When Nazi Germany overthrew the Versailles peace settlement in the mid-1930s, Washington decision-makers were slow to react despite their all-powerful mobilization capability. Equally, early Victorian Great Britain was the first and for a while the only industrialized nation in world politics. In the 1830s and 1840s it might have harnessed that strength to a policy of expansion on the European continent, but it did not do so. American and British patterns of domestic politics may be involved in an explanation of the two countries' hesitancy to exert power overseas.

At the opposite extreme, some countries with a slender base of power behave extremely aggressively. Eighteenth-century Prussia undertook to redraw the boundaries of central Europe even though Prussia was the weakest of the great powers. Frederick the Great – Prussia's king – not only seized territory (Silesia) from Austria, he defended it against a coalition which included three greater powers – Russia, France, and Austria. With English financial aid, he escaped unscathed even though the Seven Years War which ensued involved an estimated 500,000 deaths in Prussia. He was very lucky. Operating on a slender base of power, German dictator Adolf Hitler aimed to attack the “liberties” of Europe. In 1939 he mounted a well-nigh impossible program of expansion which involved making war against France, Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States, under conditions in which Germany's economic strength had become lower relative to opponents than it was in 1914. Of course, Hitler initially planned to eliminate his enemies one by one (as one peels an artichoke), but he later discarded this policy and waged war with the Soviet Union and the United States at the same time. Hitler believed that dynamic military victories would paralyze his enemies' will, giving him the political triumphs he wanted. Finally, Imperial (interwar) Japan chose an expansionist policy in Asia which could not possibly be sustained, given the opponents it would certainly confront. Japan might have taken territory from north China and perhaps occupied colonies owned by Britain, France, and the Netherlands – who were then totally absorbed by Hitler's threat in Europe. But it could not possibly have prevailed against the naval and military might of the United States. In addition, Japan declined to be drawn into a German–Japanese war before the United States cut off raw materials and oil supplies, even though defeating the Russians would have opened the door to expansion further south and also forced the United States to send most of its troops to Europe. Would America have entered a war with Japan if Russia had already been defeated and

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if there was no attack on Pearl Harbor? We don't know the answer. We do know, however, that the course the Japanese chose was disastrous for themselves and for the world.

These examples appear to conflict with normal realist assumptions, where power balancing should be as characteristic in international relations as corporate price adjustments are in economics. If countries (or firms) expand too far, rivals will supposedly chip away at their position, preempting territories or markets for their own use. As we know, however, countries do not always act in this way. Balancers sometimes hesitate for reasons of domestic politics, international norms, or institutions.¹ Countries would prefer to be free riders rather than balance against apparent aggressors. Ideologies shape state response. States are impressed by apparently successful strategies of others and they often emulate them, irrespective of broader political and economic realities. Persistent ideas or intellectual fashions may govern policy even when they may not be appropriate to a given situation. Dissatisfied countries may exist in what Kahneman and Tversky have called the "domain of loss"² and be accordingly more disposed to take risks. For these and other reasons nations do not respond smoothly to power incentives, taking the appropriate measures prescribed by the extant power balance. To put the matter most baldly: (1) some states underuse their power; (2) others overuse it. Analysts have difficulty predicting what states will do under these circumstances. In fact it is partly because of the first possibility that the second is allowed to occur.

Realists respond that if power balancing adjusts too slowly to changes in threat, or if nations do not seize their power opportunities, they will simply suffer the consequences.³ Countries will be attacked or eliminated if they do not defend themselves. Highly aggressive states – operating on narrow power resources – will not succeed. Thus countries should be constrained to respond more promptly to power incentives and challenges. But, as history shows, they aren't.

There remain continuing differences in the perception of what constitutes power. The definition of power for one state may be different from the definition of power entertained by another. Who is right may not be determined until a military clash occurs between them. A state located in the heart of Europe may worry greatly about the land

¹ The collective action problem involved in maintaining a balance of power also led to free-riding and non-balancing.

² D. Kahneman and A. Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decisions under Risk," *ECONOMICA* March (1979), 263–92.

³ See Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1979).