

REALISM, IMPERIALISM, AND DEMOCRACY

A Response to Gilbert

STEPHEN D. KRASNER
Stanford University

REALISM IS NO DIFFERENT from other social science theories in its effort to provide both analysis and prescription. Alan Gilbert finds the analytic aspects of realism inadequate and its normative implications unfortunate if not reprehensible. Gilbert argues that realism is self-contradictory and antithetical to a world order based on democracy that could lead to peace and prosperity. He maintains that an internationalist perspective would oppose “aggression, colonialism, and neocolonialism, and sustain democracy abroad” (p. 10). He criticizes realism for endorsing concern with the life and well-being of the citizens of one’s own state while ignoring the material and political condition of individuals in other states. Realism, Gilbert asserts, endorses the development of a national security apparatus that can be used to suppress the freedom of ordinary individuals domestically as well as in other countries.

These are serious issues, worthy of careful consideration. In my view, Gilbert misunderstands the basic analytic claims of realist theory because he confuses domestic politics arguments, which are not realist, with international systems arguments, which are. He misrepresents the normative implications of realism by suggesting that it is an approach that encourages imperialism and expansionism, while, in fact, both the logic of the theory and its most prominent exponents, such as Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, and Robert Gilpin, argue exactly the opposite. Gilbert does, though, raise more serious concerns about the relationship between realism and democracy both domestically and internationally. Given the Machiavellian tradition from which realism springs, these concerns cannot easily be dismissed. Neverthe-

AUTHOR’S NOTE: I would like to thank Susan Okin and Susan Woodward for their comments.

POLITICAL THEORY, Vol. 20 No. 1, February 1992 38-52
© 1992 Sage Publications, Inc.

less, the normative implications of realism are not necessarily antidemocratic, although realism suggests skepticism about the ability of even the wisest states to promote democracy beyond their own borders.

REALIST ANALYSIS

Realism is a theory about *international* politics. It is an effort to explain both the behavior of individual states and the characteristics of the international system as a whole. The ontological given for realism is that sovereign states are the constitutive components of the international system. Sovereignty is a political order based on territorial control. The international system is anarchical. It is a self-help system. There is no higher authority that can constrain or channel the behavior of states. Sovereign states are rational self-seeking actors resolutely if not exclusively concerned with relative gains because they must function in an anarchical environment in which their security and well-being ultimately rest on their ability to mobilize their own resources against external threats.¹

There are, obviously, many other entities whose activities transcend national boundaries, such as international organizations, foundations, multinational corporations, and terrorist groups, but for realism these actors can only be understood in the context of a system composed of sovereign states. International organizations are created by states. Multinational corporations depend on property rights guaranteed by states. Foundations operate according to the laws of states. Terrorists act beyond the bounds of state organization, but they are likely to be ineffectual without the support of states and they aim at changing the nature of states (either their boundaries or their political systems).

For realism, the fundamental analytic argument, the basic explanation for the behavior of states, is the distribution of power in the international system and the place of a given state within that distribution. If there is a bipolar distribution of power, two states much larger than any of their competitors, then these two states are bound to be rivals. Smaller states will align themselves in ways that provide them with the maximum security and freedom of action. In a unipolar distribution of power, very weak states have no alternative but to bandwagon with the dominant power; somewhat more powerful states will attempt to balance (Walt 1987). Relations between Japan and the United States, for instance, will become more troubled, not just because of the American bilateral trade deficit and differences in domestic

structures but because Japan, as the second most powerful state in the contemporary international system, as measured by gross national product (GNP), is bound to pursue a more independent policy.

Beyond specific alliance patterns, realism attempts to explain overall characteristics of the international system. In general, realism does not simply produce standard prescriptions for standard situations. For example, some realists support the claim of hegemonic stability theory, which asserts that an open international trading regime is most likely where there is a single dominant power (Krasner 1976; Hirschman 1945). Others (e.g., Lake 1983) claim that a stable international order can be created and sustained in nonhegemonic systems. The point is that a realist perspective may easily generate several different analyses and prescriptions for the same state of affairs because analysts may differ in their estimation of the distribution of power.² They might, for instance, make different assessments about the military capacity of states. They might disagree about how various kinds of power capabilities might be aggregated. They might differ about the ways in which various capabilities might be applied in different situations. The United States was able to use military power in the Gulf to secure lower oil prices by reversing the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, but could American leaders use military threats to influence Japanese decisions about investment in U.S. Treasury notes or German judgments about macroeconomic policy? Realism is not a formula which churns out a single logically necessary answer given a set of initial conditions.

Analytically, realism is most definite when it is investigating situations in which constraints imposed by the international system threaten minimalist state objectives: the protection of territorial and political integrity. Realism can offer its most precise explanations when states have few options because they are narrowly constrained by the international distribution of power. Britain was bound to balance against Germany in both the First and Second World Wars because Germany was the one state that had the potential to dominate the continent and thereby pose a threat to the physical security of the British Isles. After the Second World War, Western Europe was compelled to ally itself with the United States because of the size and geographical propinquity of the Soviet Union.

Realism is less analytically precise when the international system is not tightly constraining. A hegemonic state, for instance, does not have to be concerned with its territorial and political integrity because there is no other state, and no likely combination of states, that can threaten it. A hegemony has slack resources. Realism does suggest that in the absence of constraint, a dominant state is very likely to be tempted into an expansionary and

ambitious international agenda. The content of such an agenda, however, cannot be explained from realist precepts alone. A hegemonic state whose domestic order was based on the beliefs of Shiite Islam, for instance, would not necessarily follow the same policies as a dominant state whose domestic order was guided by the precepts of Marxism. In the absence of systemic constraints, states may follow a wide range of policies. The most likely explanation for the policies followed by a particular state would be the values embodied in its domestic political order, although other interpretations, such as the interests of particular bureaucracies or the unconscious psychological drives of specific leaders, might be equally compelling (Allison 1971; George and George 1964).

In sum, to the degree that the international system is highly constraining, it is possible to explain state behavior purely in terms of the distribution of power in the international system and the place of a particular state within that system. As constraints loosen, it may be necessary to introduce other arguments, such as domestic social purpose and bureaucratic interests. A realist explanation always starts with the international distribution of power, but it may not always be able to end there (Jervis 1976).

In the international relations literature the main challenge to realism has always come from some variant of a domestic politics. Following Lenin, Marxist scholars have generally maintained that a world of socialist states would be peaceful because war is a product of imperialistic drives propelled by a capitalist dialectic. The Kantian tradition holds that democratic or republican states are inherently more peaceful because citizens, who must bear the costs of war, are less likely to endorse hostility than autocrats, who do not have to shed their own blood (Doyle, 1983). Arguments from domestic politics (which Kenneth Waltz has called reductionist) start with the nature of the individual state. For realist, or systemic, argument, the starting point is the distribution of power in the international system (Waltz 1979).

REALIST PRESCRIPTIONS

Realists, like advocates of other social science theories, recognize that policymakers will not always act according to realist precepts, just as, for instance, firms do not always act according to neoclassical economic precepts by equating marginal revenue and marginal cost to maximize profits. If realist analysis is correct, in the longer run, states will conform to the pressures emanating from the international system or they will be conquered or suffer lesser forms of deprivation; in the shorter run, however, states may err. The

purpose of policy prescription is to illuminate the path which policymakers will ultimately be compelled to follow, at least if the international system is sufficiently constraining.

The most important policy prescription for realism is that states must equate their commitments with their capabilities. This is true for all states whether they have a preponderance of power in the international system or command very limited resources. The two great mistakes in the conduct of foreign policy are doing too little and doing too much.

A state that does too little may jeopardize its security by tempting other states to follow aggressive policies or by allowing international economic regimes on which its well-being depends to deteriorate. When such a state is ultimately compelled to act, the costs are likely to exceed those that would have been borne had policies more appropriate to capabilities been adopted from the outset.

Too modest policies are most likely to be followed by states whose relative power capabilities are increasing. The United States, for instance, involved itself in two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century only after lengthy periods of internal debate, which were in part resolved because of external attacks: against American shipping in the case of the First World War and against Pearl Harbor in the second. It failed to stabilize international financial markets during the interwar period, even though assuming a leadership role in resolving issues such as German reparations payments and acting as a lender of last resort would have served its interests as well as those of other states (Kindleberger 1973).

Similarly, Japan is the most obvious candidate for a state with a too modest set of foreign policies in the present environment. While its armed forces are substantial, popular sentiment and constitutional provisions have made it difficult to increase military expenditures above one percent of gross national product. Japan, which is heavily dependent on imported energy, contributed money but not personnel to the Gulf War. While Japan now holds more international reserves than any other country, it has only hesitantly assumed a higher-profile role in resolving international financial issues. Despite its huge importance in international trade, initiatives for modifying the contemporary regime have come primarily from the United States and the European Community. So far, Japan has fared very well by acting as a free rider. But should the United States reassess its military commitments and its economic policies, Japan could find its economic well-being, if not its security, in jeopardy.³

The second major error in foreign policy is that a state will attempt to do too much. Such hubris is most likely for declining powers whose policies and

values have been established at an earlier period when its resources were more formidable. Overly ambitious policies will ultimately fail because they are challenged by other states or because they exhaust the resource base of their progenitors by allocating too much to external activities and not investing enough in maintaining the capacity for future action (Gilpin 1981; Kennedy 1987).

In the contemporary world the United States is, from a realist perspective, the most likely candidate for excess. The United States devotes about six percent of its gross national product to defense, a higher percentage than any other major market economy industrial power. Japan commits a little over one percent, most of the major European countries between three and four percent. The United States continues to maintain an extensive array of foreign military bases and commitments. It is pledged to defend Europe even though the combined gross national product of the European Community is considerably higher than that of the United States. It took the lead in the Gulf War, even though it was relatively less dependent on Middle Eastern oil than either Europe or Japan.

In the long run, the failure to invest will undermine the relative international position of the United States. Its military capacity, and the economic base on which this capacity ultimately depends, will erode. In a nuclearized world this is not likely to put the territorial integrity of the United States at risk, but it will make it more difficult for American policy makers to pursue valued objectives in a wide range of issue areas.

There are two ways to rectify excess, a situation in which commitments exceed capabilities. A state may either increase its capabilities or reduce its commitments. The policy prescription offered by most realist analysts over the last ten or twenty years has been that the United States must reduce its commitments; enhancing resources is too difficult. Hans Morgenthau, generally regarded as the founding father of modern realist analysis in the United States, was an early opponent of the Vietnam War. Realists like Robert Tucker, Robert Gilpin, and myself have endorsed what could fairly be called neo-isolationism (Tucker 1972; Gilpin 1981; Krasner 1989).

I have argued, for instance, that the United States should reduce, if not eliminate, its military commitments in Europe. Europe is strong enough to balance against any threat from the former USSR. Germany is unlikely to become such a dominant power that continued American presence would be necessary. An American military presence in the Far East might be useful to reassure the smaller states of East Asia by balancing against Japan. Such a policy would, however, be extremely complicated for the United States and

Japan because of domestic political constraints, even if it would provide stability for the region (Krasner 1989, 1991).

In the economic area, the United States should move away from a policy of diffuse reciprocity, which has systematically disadvantaged American economic interests, and adopt a strategy based on specific reciprocity. Different rules ought to be applied in different circumstances. Because the domestic political economies of different states are organized differently, especially those of the United States and Japan, diffuse reciprocity, which is based on general rules and treats all countries in the same way, has opened American markets while allowing foreign markets to remain closed. For instance, in a market-based system like that of the United States, reducing tariffs results in increased imports; in a corporatist system like Japan, where great emphasis is placed on the stability of long-term relationships among firms and between the private sectors and the state, marginal changes in price resulting from lowered tariffs will have little effect on imports (Krasner, 1988).

Most areas of the Third World are, from a realist perspective, of little interest to the United States. Mexico matters because of its proximity, size, trade, and migration. Brazil, India, and Nigeria matter because they are relatively powerful actors within their own regional areas. The Middle East is consequential because of oil. But Central America, most of Africa, Indo-China, and most of the other countries of the Third World are irrelevant for the United States. Interventions in these areas waste resources and lives. These countries cannot affect either the security or economic well-being of the United States. American involvement should, from a realist perspective, be minimal (Krasner 1985, chap. 10).

In sum, realist prescriptions for the United States have hardly been imperialist and expansionary; in fact, they have been just the opposite. Over the last two decades, most prominent realist analysts have argued that the United States has engaged in imperial overreach. It has tried to do too much. It has failed to assess its own interests properly. American leaders have been obsessed with an ideological struggle with the Soviet Union. Were the United States more constrained by pressures from the international system, this obsession could not have run rife and squandered so many resources, both human and material. Absent such constraints, domestic values, widely shared by the masses as well as the elite, led to policies that weakened the United States by undermining its human and material resource base. The Vietnam War, in particular, undermined trust in government and other institutions, and war-related expenditures contributed to inflation and macroeconomic instability more generally.

Gilbert's assessment of what realism implies for American foreign policy is thus at variance with what most realists have themselves argued—and argued in ways that are logically consistent with the premises of their analysis. Realism does not maintain, as Gilbert asserts, that power-based expansion “is prudentially justified whatever the waste of life” (p. 12). Any expansionary policy would have to be assessed in terms of costs and benefits, and a costly expansionary policy could only, from a realist perspective, be justified if it enhanced the territorial and political integrity of the state, that is, if it prevented an even more threatening, and potentially more costly, situation from developing in the future.

Regimes do not serve the interests of “advanced capitalist powers, notably the United States and increasingly Japan, at the expense of poor people” (p. 25). On the contrary, the problem with contemporary economic regimes is that they serve the interests of Japan too well and the United States not well enough. The overweening power of the United States in the immediate post-World War II period, made it too easy for American policymakers to accept free riding by allies. Moreover, until the instability precipitated by the oil crisis of the early 1970s (a crisis triggered by Third World exporting states), many developing countries were doing extremely well not only in aggregate national income account terms but with regard to physical quality-of-life indicators, such as infant mortality, life expectancy, literacy, and caloric intake (Krasner 1985, chap. 4). While the benefits to Third World states are irrelevant for the United States (because almost all Third World states are too weak to threaten American interests), the relative gains enjoyed by Japan are a problem because Japan, with the second largest GNP in the world, is the most important long-term challenger to the United States.

REALISM AND DEMOCRACY

The weight of Gilbert's objection to realism, however, is not just that it promotes imperialism but that it undermines democracy at home and abroad. Unlike Gilbert's misunderstanding of the foreign policy prescriptions that follow from a realist perspective, this is a charge that must be examined with greater seriousness, for he is not wrong in some obvious and manifest way.

Realism has not directly confronted the issue of the impact of domestic regimes on foreign policy or vice versa except to say that it does not matter. The most lucid contemporary explication of realism, Waltz's (1979) *Theory of International Politics* focuses its attention on distinguishing realism from