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NOTES AND REFLECTIONS

EXAMINING REALISM & ITS LIMITATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Realism has long been regarded as the cornerstone of international relations (IR) theory, tracing its roots back to ancient thinkers such as Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Kautilya. Yet, this perception is not only historically dubious but also analytically misleading. When examining the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, the emergence of new actors such as China and India, and research on "Cold War 2.0," realism theory dominates the discussion in international forums on topics of power, security, survival, and state strengthening. However, my ambition in this essay is to offer an analysis of the readings by Mehmet Tabak, Jonathan Kirsher, and Alexander Vidman on Realism. Their book needs to be analysed in the forum of intellectual tradition, such as the Realism paradigm, Realism in IR, Realism in Foreign Policy, and its shortcomings, which they attempt to rewrite on Realism. This essay is divided into three parts. First, I examine Tabak's position of realism as a disarrayed tradition both philosophically and in scientific traditions. He analyses *Realism in International Relations*, and forcefully challenges the so-called "consensus view" that reflects realism as a unified, ancient, and self-contained school of thought. Secondly, I then discuss Kirsher realism in an uncertain world, emphasising the realism and its basis for the American world order. Thirdly, I analyse Vidman's folly of realism in relation to the "realist" philosophy of US foreign policy in Russia and Ukraine. As this essay will demonstrate, realism's disjointed evolution, contested foundations, and practical failures expose it not as a timeless doctrine but as a backfilled, unstable tradition that continues to construct more confusion than consensus.

Realism as a disarrayed tradition

Mehmet Tabak argues that realism should be neither considered an *ancient* nor a *sui generis* intellectual tradition. His book critically examines the "consensus view" of realism from three interconnected points: First, realism emerged during the inter-war period and, until the early 1980s, was conceived by every reputable IR scholar as a relatively theoretical development. Second, this actually existing realism has evolved into a disarrayed tradition to the present, lacking internal coherence. The third section demonstrates that, following incremental development throughout the 1970s, the full-

formed consensus *view* took shape in the early 1980s. This delayed formulation raises an interesting question: Why was such a narrative constructed so late, and without convincing evidence to support it? Tabak argues that the consensus view was created to meet the needs of certain scholars at a time when intellectual trends, such as those influenced by Kuhn and Lakatos, were in vogue, and new developments in the practice of international politics necessitated the formulation of new theories.

In the early 1970s, calls for a new paradigm in IR grew louder, given the proliferation of the Kuhnian discourse and the perceived shifts from the state-centric international system to "transnational relations." This desire urged the invention of the claim that IR had been dominated by a state-centric paradigm. For example, Joseph S. Nye and Robert O. Keohane among the prominent figures of this movement, contended in 1971 "that the state-centric paradigm," which "assumes that states are the only significant actors in world politics and that they act as units" is "becoming progressively more inadequate as changes in transnational relations take place" (Nye & Keohane, 1971, p. 721). Their influential work, *Power and Interdependence*, built on these critiques and proposed an alternative paradigm, explicitly positioning it against what they now labelled as realism.

Examining the consensus view, K. J. Holsti asserted that realism has its roots in the writings of Hobbes and Rousseau, although it was, by the 1980s, considered to be in disarray (Holsti, 1985, p. 1). Others, like Richard N. Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein, the realist tradition," is virtually as old as recorded history, tracing its origins to Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Rosecrance & Stein, 1993, p. 6, 14). However, the actual consent of early realist discourse, particularly in 1930s America, was highly inconsistent and consisted of an "array of contradictory positions" (Vitalis, 2015, pp. 88–89). During this period, "realism was not so much a well-articulated doctrine as a general Zeitgeist understood to transform simultaneously politics, literature, science, and philosophy" (Guilhot, 2017, p. 79). A standard survey of IR, published a year later, reported that "Thucydides is usually credited with being the first writer in the realist tradition as well as the founding father of the international relations discipline" (Viotti & Kauppi, 1987, p. 25). Authors like Mansbach and Vasquez also treated the "realist paradigm" as a historical tradition since, in their view, these three "fundamental assumptions" "have been passed down from generation to generation by historians as varied as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Ranke," and were received by such twentieth-century realists as "Nicholas Spykman, E. H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau, George Kenan, and Robert Osgood" (Mansbach & Vasquez, 1981, pp. 3–5). To make a long story short, the consensus view had become the "consensus view" by the mid-1980s, often based on the assumption that it had been sufficiently validated by the likes of Keohane and Gilpin. The "consensus view" was inspired by the debates in the 1960s and 1970s about scientific thinking and research, including Kuhn's use of the term "paradigm" to describe well-defined scientific disciplines.

Moreover, like Carr and Morgenthau, many other IR scholars have justifiably regarded realism as a new theory. For instance, the historian Frank Tannenbaum lamented in 1952 that realism had recently "won wide acceptance by teachers and scholars in the field of international relations". Despite this, international theory, including realist strands, was seen as underdeveloped even into the 1960s. In 1960, Martin Wight observed in 1960s that earlier international theory was fragmented and largely inaccessible to the layman" (Wight, 1966, p. 20). Similarly, scholars like Cox and Harrison described that field as

unsettled and chaotic and in confusion as the contemporary world scene which it seeks to comprehend" (Cox, 1962, p. 261; Harrison, 1964, p. 3). In 1972, Hedley Bull noted that it would be a mistake to suggest that the principal realist theories, as realist thinkers agreed on only a few basic points, such as the importance of power, and otherwise lacked a shared doctrine (Bull, 1995, p. 189).

The publication of Kenneth N. Waltz's seminal work Theory of International Relations in 1979 marked a major turning point by significantly advancing neorealist thought. Yet Robert Gilpin, while embracing the consensus view of ideological and methodological diversity among so-called realists like Waltz, admits that they often had little in common, "except perhaps that they have all written on international relations from a rather disparate set of professional and political perspectives" (Gilpin, 1984, p. 287). Unsatisfied with Waltz's approach, many new-generation scholars opted to self-identify as non-realists, including Keohane, who eventually spearheaded competing theories, such as liberal institutionalism (Keohane, 1986, p. 7). As Tabak notes, until the early 1980s, the prevailing view among IR scholars was that realism was a modern theoretical development, one that lacked the consistency or coherence required by a distinct intellectual tradition. This actually-existing realism is too disarrayed to be meaningfully classified as a *sui generis* intellectual tradition. As Guilhot succinctly puts it, realism in international relations is mainly "a twentieth-century phenomenon."

In parallel, neoclassical realism further complicated the picture with idiosyncratic outlooks and numerous insights borrowed from many neorealists and the vast pool of "classical realists," ranging from Thucydides to Morgenthau. This proliferation has resulted in what some have called "an embarrassment of Realisms" (Wagner, 2007, p. 12). Thus, the field is now populated by numerous sub-variants: Christian realism, democratic realism, Enlightenment realism, leftist realism, liberal realism, progressive realism, radical realism, realistic Wilsonianism, utopian realism, willful realism, and environmental realism or ecological realism, illustrating that realism has never truly been a singular, well-defined tradition (Raschi & Zambernardi, 2018, p. 371; Lieven, 2020; Patrick, 2020).

Lastly, realism is internally disarrayed. As there are many different sets of alleged "realist" core beliefs in the existing literature, meaning that there is no consensus on just what these beliefs are Mearsheimer's well-known version of the "three core beliefs" of pan-realism, that states are central actors in world politics; that they behave as unitary actors; and that power calculations drive their decisions (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 17–18). Yet these are not universally accepted, nor do they set realism apart as a distinct paradigm. In short, the commonly supposed three core beliefs of realism do not qualify as the differentiating specifics of any sui generis paradigm or research program. This verdict also applies to additional assumptions that are commonly depicted as realist core assumptions. One of them is pessimism regarding "power politics" in international relations (Gilpin, 1984, pp. 289– 90; Grieco, 1990, p. 27). Also, many realists are not such chronic pessimists. For example, Carr was not a chronically pessimistic thinker either, given his efforts to incorporate a good dose of optimism into his theory of international politics (Chapter 2). Although some of Morgenthau's works are unrealistically pessimistic, many of them exhibit different shades of strong optimism and utopianism, namely, a belief in the possibility and desirability of a world government (Chapter 3). Due to his optimistic, "utopian" views, John H. Herz, another famed

"classical realist," was decried by some as an unauthentic realist (Thompson, 1979, pp. 941–42). Their respective works do not individually or collectively provide a coherent definition of realism, nor do they offer a progressive research program.

Realism in Practice

Jonathan Kirshner, in his *An Unwritten Future*, argues that classical realism now represents a minority perspective within contemporary International Relations (IR) theory. The broader realist community is largely dominated by structural realism, a framework that models states as identical units distinguished only by their relative power capabilities. Since the 1980s, this school of realist thought has become so predominant that both its supporters and critics often equate realism entirely with structural realism. Not surprisingly, as Tabak's illustration shows, while classical realism and structural realism do share some foundational ideas - since both identify under the realist label – they differ significantly in scope and assumptions. In fact, the theorists who, in the middle of the twentieth century, developed the approach now called classical realism do not see themselves as part of a sub-school; they simply thought of themselves as realists, just as Mozart and his contemporaries never labelled their music "classical". Structural realism, by contrast, confines its analysis to states operating within an anarchic international system, focusing solely on relative capabilities and systemic power dynamics.

Classical realism, on the other hand, includes much more than just power. It considers both 'power' and 'purpose,' and insists that understanding world politics requires attention to both material and normative dimensions. Classical realist also holds to a reserved analytical modesty due to their dyed-in-the-wool sensitivity to the fundamental, unbridgeable distinction between the natural and social sciences. Moreover, classical realism emphasises the persistent dangers inherent in anarchy, the need to respect the limitations and strengths of power, and the inevitability of recurring conflicts, all within the context of irretrievable uncertainty.

Krishner uses Thucydides as a case in point. While his *History of the Peloponnesian War* recounts an ancient conflict between two slaveholding city-states, filled with battles between spear-wielding hoplites, its insights into the dynamics of power and politics remain highly relevant. Despite the text's age, incomplete structure, and disputed authorship, IR scholars still find it valuable. In *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, Donald Kagan's scholarship is often eager to contest Thucydides' accounts; he blames Athens for the conflict (Kagan, 1969, p. 269). For Kagan, Athens's serial troublemaking eventually "put the Spartan war party into power," and even then, a sluggish Sparta had to be roused into action by the Corinthians and other allies that had suffered at the hands of Athenian aggression (ibid. pp. 285).

In contrast, G.E.M. Croix in *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* reaches the opposite conclusion. Engaging Kagan explicitly as a foil, Croix rejects the view "that Athens was the aggressive party in 433–1" and reports that he has no "doubt that the real aggressors were Sparta and her allies" (Croix, 1972, p. 65). Both Kagan and Croix, if with somewhat different shadings, highlight the role of the Corinthians in considering the origins of the war. Thucydides reminds his readers of the stark consequences of anarchy, where behaviours may be restrained, norms may be respected, and actors might behave in a

civilised fashion. Also, everywhere, the balance of power profoundly shapes decisions. This is considered the peripheral conflict that emerges as the proximate cause of the war, the confrontation between Corinth and Corcyra. This is why the attentiveness to power dynamics, where balance of power is much more consequential than its distribution at any moment in time, is Thucydides' most visible influence on contemporary IR theory. Classical realism emerged as a recognisable school of thought in the middle of the twentieth century, in response to the international traumas of that time. To establish the contours and core elements of the paradigm, Kirshner draws principally on the contributions of five figures: E. H. Carr, George F. Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, Raymond Aron, and Robert Gilpin. In so doing, it remains necessary as always to take note of the usual truckload of qualifications, of which three in particular stand out.

But for realism, or it should be said for classical realism, which focuses on what goes on within states and societies (whereas structural realism, of course, tends to "black box" such things). It is an oversimplification, but a productive one, to describe the contours of world politics in the seventy-five years from 1945 to 2020 as shaped and characterised by "an American order." Later, the United States chose a different path after World War II, as it sought to learn from the past and avoid the catastrophic blunders of the interwar years. The intervention of the Americans had decisively brought the mass slaughter of the Great War to a conclusion, but after flirting with internationalism, the United States chose not to join the League of Nations, and then to pursue shortsighted economic policies, and finally to hide behind isolation and timid neutrality as the fascist powers embarked on their bids to conquer Europe and Asia.

Contradictory Realism

In *The Folly of Realism*, Alexander Vindman deliberately uses what seems like a contradiction in his book title to highlight a central issue: the long-standing overreliance on the "realist" philosophy of US foreign policy has played a major role, though not solely, in the blame for the persistence of Western delusion regarding Russia.

The realist school of thought, championed by figures such as Henry Kissinger, John Mearsheimer, Stephan Walt, and Kenneth Waltz, rose to prominence during the Cold War in reaction to the idealism of leaders like Woodrow Wilson. Wilsonian idealism held that the US had a moral vision to spread democracy and freedom in foreign lands. In contrast, realists argue that advancing vital US interests, defined as aggressive national defence, immediate commercial prosperity in trade, and short-term crisis aversion in pursuit of greater stability, should serve as the main standard for American engagement abroad.

This realism dominated US policy during the George H. W. Bush administration, and to some extent, in the Clinton administration (Chapter 2). A key example was their intense focus on nuclear disarmament after the fall of the Soviet Union. Ukraine and other newly independent states were pressured to give up their nuclear weapons to Russia, with little concern for the broader implications. During the late 1980s, there was no serious effort to tie denuclearisation to Russia's behaviour or to support the democratic aspirations of the post-Soviet republics.

That narrow focus, Vindman argues, backfired. Without a commitment to Western democratic values, even the realist supposed priority of projecting US interests was

ultimately undermined. Realism's tendency to avoid immediate conflict led not to a long-term but a deeper crisis. The results of the 2014 and 2022 crises stemming from the Russian war on Ukraine were shaped by these early post-Cold War decisions (Chapter 7).

At that time, US leaders feared nuclear proliferation more than anything else. They saw the collapse of the USSR as a threat that could create multiple new nuclear states or result in a loose nukes scenario. So, realism at its most short-term and transactional prevailed, against any supposedly misguided idealism about supporting the self-determination of the new republics as a fundamental Western value. Well before the fall of the USSR, the goal of Bush's administration prioritised preserving arms control deals with the Soviets over supporting independence movements in the Soviet republics.

There was a viable alternative, one that wasn't blind idealism or zombie liberal internationalism, nor isolationism couched as restraint, or morally bankrupt realism, which served short-term interests and was, in that sense, purely transactional (Chapter 5). But a mix of those short-sighted strategies that dominated US foreign policy only helped Russia regain a position to re-engage in regional aggression and nuclear extortion of the West.

This deeply ingrained realpolitik approach persisted through both Republican and Democratic administrations. The US remained focused on the war on terror as a paramount concern, confident in its global dominance and slow to adapt. The realist school, operating across party lines throughout the Clinton and Bush presidencies, was quick to deride the statement as nothing but chest-beating provocation. According to McCain, Henry Kissinger, the father of foreign-policy realism himself, called him to say the speech had gone too far or used such rhetoric as unnecessarily provocative. As reported by the *New York Times*, Charles King, a professor of international affairs at Georgetown University, encapsulated the objections, blaming rhetoric like Mr McCain's for encouraging "Georgia to try to push maximalist positions 'We've got to get this territory back at all costs, and if we get it back, the United States will support us'" (Cooper & Bumiller, 2008).

In the end, the realism approach for achieving security through denuclearisation had not brought about a real threat reduction but had only left Ukraine and the West vulnerable to new forms of nuclear blackmail. Despite McCain's cogent and pointed advice, it was not taken in 2008 and 2009, either by the outgoing Bush administration or the incoming Obama administration, which did not take his advice seriously. The post-Soviet history of US relationships with Russia and with Ukraine—presented in this book as a test case for the prevailing US approach to international relations in general makes overwhelmingly clear that realism isn't, in its own too-simplistic terms, realistic. Vidman's account of the US relations with Russia and Ukraine offers a broader lesson: realism, for all its claims to hard-nosed pragmatism, has failed in practice. By sacrificing the West's values, the West failed to deter a dangerous but deterrable adversary and missed the chance to build a strong alliance with a strategically vital partner, i.e., Ukraine. Vindman concludes that the history of missteps in US policy for Russia and Ukraine demonstrates the folly of realism, and while it is now very late to abandon our folly, it's still not too late.

Conclusion

Realism, as presented in the essay, is a complex and fragmented tradition, which is not a unified or ancient doctrine, as many believe. It functions more as a label for a variety of loosely connected approaches than as a coherent theory or even a paradigm. So, an attempt to classify or canonise realism is historically dubious and often serves strategic academic or political ends rather than reflecting the true evolution of international thought. As Tabak argues that realism is not a timeless, unified school of thought, which is what he highlights, the consensus view of realism was just constructed in the 1980s, shaped more by academic and political needs than historical continuity. It was scholars like Keohane and Nye who pushed the idea of a dominant state-centric paradigm, i.e., realism, in order to propose their own alternatives, such as liberal institutionalism. Despite historical evidence, realism has always been internally fragmented and inconsistent. In Kirshner's view, classical realism is a minority view today compared to structural realism. However, thinkers like Thucydides still offer insight due to their focus on uncertainty, power dynamics and human motivation. While in practice, the overreliance on realist thinking in US foreign policy is heavily criticised in *The Folly of Realism*. The theory of realism that focuses on stability, deterrence, and short-term national interests often fails to account for long-term strategic concerns, which include moral concerns of self-determination. Thus, realism is less a coherent school of thought and more contested, often reshaped to serve the evolving needs of scholars and policymakers, sometimes at the expense of clarity, consistency or effectiveness.

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