

School of Realism: An Inadequate Approach to Account Insecurity in Global Politics?

สำนักสัจนิยม: แนวทางที่ไม่เพียงพอในการอธิบายความไม่มั่นคง
ในการเมืองโลก?

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Abstract

School of realism is a dominant school of thought in the discipline of International Relations. However, it has been vigorously criticized as an approach which overlooks many of the significant actors and phenomena in contemporary world politics. Therefore, it is contested as a theory that gives us an inadequate explanation of insecurity in world politics. This article argues that realist theory might primarily emphasizes states as the core actors but it does not overlook other important actors and phenomena in contemporary world politics. Since there is no single theory that can explain every aspect of world politics, realist approach solely articulates an account of insecurity of state actor rather than of other non-state actors. It remains one of the most influential schools of thought in explaining world politics.

Keywords Realism, Theory, Security, Insecurity, International Politics

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บทคัดย่อ

สำนักสังคมนิยมเป็นสำนักแนวคิดกระแสหลักในสาขาวิชาการความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศ แต่ถึงกระนั้นสังคมนิยมก็ถูกวิพากษ์วิจารณ์อย่างรุนแรงว่าเป็นแนวทางที่มองข้ามตัวแสดงที่สำคัญและปรากฏการณ์ต่างๆ มากมายในการเมืองโลกร่วมสมัย ดังนั้นสังคมนิยมจึงถูกท้าทายว่าเป็นทฤษฎีที่ให้คำอธิบายที่ไม่พอเพียงต่อประเด็นเรื่องความไม่มั่นคงในการเมืองโลก บทความนี้ต้องการโต้แย้งว่าทฤษฎีสังคมนิยมแม้ในเบื้องต้นจะเป็นทฤษฎีที่เน้นรัฐเป็นตัวแสดงหลัก แต่สังคมนิยมมิได้มองข้ามตัวแสดงและปรากฏการณ์ที่สำคัญอื่นๆ ในการเมืองโลกร่วมสมัยแต่อย่างใด ด้วยเหตุที่ไม่มีทฤษฎีใดที่เป็นทฤษฎีเพียงหนึ่งเดียวที่จะสามารถอธิบายทุกลักษณะที่ครอบคลุมการเมืองโลกได้ แนวทางสังคมนิยมนั้นจึงเพียงแต่มุ่งสร้างคำอธิบายความไม่มั่นคงของตัวแสดงที่เป็นรัฐมากกว่าความไม่มั่นคงของตัวแสดงอื่น ๆ ที่ไม่ใช่รัฐ สังคมนิยมยังคงเป็นหนึ่งในสำนักคิดที่ทรงอิทธิพลในการอธิบายการเมืองโลกต่อไป

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1. Introduction

In the study of International Relations (IR), there are several theories that have been formulated to explain world politics. Among many approaches in the discipline of IR, Realism, liberalism, Marxism, social constructivism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism are main theoretical perspectives which are widely employed to explain world politics. Realism is a school of thought, which is commonly accepted as the dominant theory of IR. Dunne and Schmidt (2008, p.91) explain that it is because realism is the most powerful theoretical approach to explain the state of war, which is the customary circumstance in the international system. The ‘real’ world politics appears to accord more with realist views than do other theoretical views. States still struggle for power and increase their national interest. This establishes school of realism as the key mainstream perspective to give us an explanation and understanding of global politics.

However, there are fierce criticisms of realism for being a flawed approach in many respects. One vital criticism is that realism is not adequate to explain or understand contemporary world politics. It overlooks scores of

the significant actors and phenomena. Our contemporary world politics has encountered several dangers ranging from transnational terrorism, interstate armed conflicts, pandemics such as Ebola virus disease, and environmental degradation. Trade and financial international institutions such as World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF) or leading transnational companies are more and more becoming powerful actors of the globalization of world politics. Realism is criticized that it does not offer an explanation for these unconventional actors and phenomena. Hence, it provides us an inadequate account of insecurity in world politics.

The article does not support this notion. This article argues that realism might give us an inadequate account of insecurity but it does not overlook many of the important actors and phenomena in contemporary world politics. For realist school of thought, its central interests are sovereign states. Traditionally, realist approach offers an account that the referent object that needs to be secured is state, military might is the source of security, and the cause of insecurity comes from external military threat. This makes realism a theory, which appears to give us a deficient explanation of insecurity in international politics. In fact, realism, similar to other approach, merely provides a perspective which actors matter and which do not. States are the key actors in international relations. Realism might not emphasize several eminent non-state actors and phenomena in contemporary world politics, this does not mean that it do not notice them. Actually, realism does discern the existence of non-state actors and phenomena. They are perceived by realists within the context of the relationship between states, all other non-state actors such as multinational corporations, international organizations or non-governmental organizations are not the primary concern of realism.

In this article, realist theory is examined as to how and why its contribution to account the issue of insecurity of world politics is inadequate as the consequence of its concentration on states. As the illustration, the article seeks to discuss the following topics: (1) critiques of realism within an

academic circle of IR, (2) the discussion on realists' negligence in stressing non-state actors and phenomena in contemporary world politics, (3) facets of insecurity insufficiently considered by realists, and (4) the rationale for an inadequate account of a variety of crucial non-state actors and phenomena by realists.

2. Critiques of School of Realism

In scholarly realm of the study of IR, realism is an object of debate and has attracted a surge of critics, especially after the end of the Cold War. This is due to realists' failure to predict and insufficiently explain the demise of the Soviet Union (George, 2007, p. 40). It is incapable of anticipating the peaceful ending of American-Soviet antagonism and the dissolution of the Soviet empire. Because of its negligence on the change of ideology, the role of leaders or domestic politics, it failed to forecast the end of the Cold War. The realist approach, particularly structural realism, was thus discredited from this sudden Soviet collapse. Some scholarly papers portray this criticism, for example: "Is Realism Finished?" by Fareed Zakaria (1992) and "Is Realism Dead? The Domestic Sources of International Politics" by Ethan Kapstein (1995).

Scholars of critical theory, postmodernism, feminism, social constructivism, and Green perspectives target realist school of thought as the subject of their critiques (Steans & Pettiford, 2005, pp.69–70). Lynn-Jones (2008, p.14) demonstrates that after the end of the Cold War, school of realism was flooded with criticisms in numerous books and articles of almost every edition of the international politics' leading journals in which they pronounce that realist school is dead, irrelevant or inadequate. He exemplifies those who uttered these criticisms are Charles Kegley, Ethan Kapstein, Richard Lebow, Jack Snyder, Richard Rosecrance and Arthur Stein. The latter three scholars argue that a particular event or type of incident is poorly explained by the realist school whereas other theories offer better accounts, Lynn-Jones

declares. Terrorism, ethnic conflicts, infectious diseases and climate change are examples of key problems of contemporary international politics that the critics argue that realist theory is not useful to understand them, Lynn-Jones illustrates. Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (2001, pp.32–33) describe that the validity of a realist paradigm is contested by pluralists of the study of non-state actors and neo-liberal theorists who study economic interdependence for at least thirty years. They mention that these two groups view realists as an overly single-minded and narrow approach.

These criticisms are not much different from the opinions of other groups such as the International Society scholars and the emancipatory theorists. Jackson and Sørensen (2003, pp.96–99) clarify that the International Society tradition criticises realism on two points: realist theory is one-dimensional focusing on world politics too narrowly and it falls short of capturing the extent to which world politics is a discourse of various voices and perspectives. Jackson and Sørensen state that scholars of International Society tradition argue that many important facets of international life such as actors other than states: human beings and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) are overlooked, ignored and played down by realist school. Moreover, they further mention that Ken Booth, theorist of emancipatory theory, emphasises that the perspective of realists in security issues, which gives the main concern to problems of national security or national defence is now obsolete because the current security issues are also focused on other problems of individuals and global community e.g. citizens of failed states, nuclear extinction, ecological threats, etc. As a final point, Jackson and Sørensen contend that Andrew Linklater, another emancipatory theorist, and Booth dispute that realist school is going to be an outdated IR theory and becoming irrelevant to comprehend world politics.

Nevertheless, this criticism does not provide the other side of the coin – there is no single theory that did predict the end of the Cold War. Neither realists nor other IR theorists recognized beforehand the possibility of this revolutionary change to take place. Wohlforth maintains that IR theories

cannot make a prediction, they are capable only of making the prediction about patterns of behaviour (1994, p.92). The complexity of this event is difficult to foresee. As Scott Burchill and Andrew Linklater emphasizes, “no single theory identifies, explains or understands all the key structures and dynamics of international politics” (2009, p.25).

Another precise instance indicating realist school as a subject of critical scrutiny that it proposes an inadequate account of insecurity in global politics is exemplified by Benjamin Frankle. He cites that neoliberal institutionalists and critical theorists are disapproving of the realist versions of security dilemma and anarchical world (1997, pp. xii-xiii). He clarifies that neoliberal institutionalists see that institutions and cooperative practices can lessen insecurity inflicted by realist world of security dilemma and anarchical existence. For critical theorists offer the more radical comment. Frankle points out that those critical theorists did not only regard realist theory as a flawed explanatory and unreliable guiding one but also the hurdle to a more peaceful world itself. Frankle contends that critical theorists blame realist school of being a source of conflict by instilling the idea that the world system is filled with anarchy, self-help, security dilemma and relative gains and these are created and perpetuated to states in reality. This viewpoint of critical theorists extremely objects to realist ones. It is far more a poor paradigm in explaining insecurity in global politics. Realist theory generates insecurity to the world.

This stance of critical theorists is overstated. Realists are not always fond of using force or formulating idea to make the world become an insecure place. They sometimes recognize the necessity of employing military power but do not support to use military force to achieve ambitious goals in expanding power. For example, Hans Morgenthau, a well-known realist had warned the United States involvement in Vietnam since the late 1950s and he had made an opposition of Vietnam War with almost all American realists except Henry Kissinger (Mearsheimer, 2005). Evidence is clearly shown from the movement called ‘realists against war’ in 2002. Before waging the US

invasion of Iraq in 2003, a group of leading realists in the United States opposed their government to wage war in Iraq. By signing an advertisement in the New York Times, the prominent 33 realist scholars insisted that “war with Iraq is not in America’s national interests” (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2008, p. 44).

3. School of Realism, Non-state Actors and Phenomena

This section discusses the problem that non-state actors and phenomena in contemporary world politics are not stressed by the realists. At present, the world is encountering several challenges posed by these things. Because of this, the vigorously debates of whether or not realist theory are outdated, irrelevant or dead are increasing.

What those critics validate their criticisms of realism are that this theory cannot accommodate many of the essential non-state actors and phenomena within its analysis of contemporary world politics. Non-state actors such as terrorist organisations – Al Qaeda, transnational corporations, international organisations are not counted in the state-centric assumption of realism (Dunne & Schmidt, 2008, p.101). The breakdown of Global monetary system, international terrorism, nuclear accident and global warming are examples of important phenomena that threaten to security of global scale (Baylis, 2008, p.229). Among these non-state actors and phenomena, international terrorism is the most prominent one as well as transnational terrorist groups which become unavoidable actors in the international arena. After the 9/11 attacks, there is no vivid indication that realist theory could offer a better description than other theories and perspectives in addressing this kind of threat to national security (Elman, 2007, pp.14–15).

The criticisms discussed above embrace both false and true reflections. The claim that realism is not able to notice many of the important actors and phenomena is a misapprehension. Indeed, their existence is not neglected by realists. Realists insist that they do maintain that states are the

‘primary’ actors but they do not claim that states are the ‘only actors’ in world politics (Lynn-Jones, 2008, p.22). Kenneth Waltz (cited in Griffiths & O’Callaghan, 2007, p.58), for example, firmly insists that ‘...states are not and never have been the only international actors’. Steans and Pettiford (2005, pp.71–72) disagree with the criticism claiming that ‘realists ignore so much’ in favour of focusing on states, interest of states and power of military. They oppose that this is a misleading thought and claim that realists do not neglect to some crucial issues such as environmental degradation, human rights abuses and several other issues. Realists do not refute the appearance of other issues, actors and interests but they do deliberately restrict the scope of their study for the sake of their better comprehension of what is essential to them, Steans and Pettiford argue. Jackson and Sørensen (2003, p.68) maintain that in the study of world politics, realists regard states as the pre-eminent actors and all other actors such as individuals, NGOs and international organisations are either less significant or insignificant. This suggests that realists acknowledge the existence of non-state actors but they just downplay the importance of these actors. Furthermore, realists do not refuse the existence of environmental and humanitarian issues but they are indirectly viewed through a realist prism – the behavioural responses of states and international community (Lynn-Jones, 2008, p.32). Therefore, the comment that school of realism overlooks many of the important actors and phenomena in global politics is unfounded.

What is true is the criticism that realism is a single-minded approach which gives an inadequate explanation of multifaceted aspects of world politics especially the features of non-state actors and particular type of incident. Although realists recognize the existence of those actors and phenomena, they do not pay much attention to them. Griffiths & O’Callaghan (2007, p.62) indicate that the significance of non-states actors such as nongovernmental agencies, international institutions, and multinational corporations (MNCs), which are inadequately explained by a realist theory due to its being ‘state-as-actor’. It is universally known among people who study

the IR theories that realists consider that there are no other actors that would be more important than state actor.

John Mearsheimer has made it clear for critics of realist theory. He accentuates the fact that realist theory primarily focuses on state behaviour and places the states as the principal actors in the global politics. He emphasizes that “there is no place in the theory for non-state actors like Al-Qaeda” (2006, p.234). In his opinion, there is no need to adjust the realist theory for those non-state actors such as terrorist groups because it would make realist theory weaker or less effective. Mearsheimer still underlines the significance of state actors over non-state actors, specifically terrorist group like Al-Qaeda of Osama Bin Laden, by demonstrating that this kind of non-state actor has to operate within the state system. He suggests that we should all realize the fact that there is no theory is capable of explaining every aspect of international politics (2006, pp.234–235).

4. Inadequate Account of insecurity

There are some facets of insecurity that realism has given us an insufficient account. Significantly, there are two interesting interrelated themes revolving around realist theory. Firstly, realists do not underscore the significance of numbers of non-state actors and phenomena. Secondly, realist theory is principally determined to concern the issue of national security or national defence are interrelated. Since realist theory does not put an emphasis on several eminent non-state actors and phenomena in contemporary world politics but only shows the interest in state actors and national security, the realist account of insecurity in the world politics is not enough.

Realist theory is the most influential paradigm in the international security studies which is a sub-field of IR (Lynn-Jones 2008, p.14). This affects the traditional study of IR in perceiving security in international system. For realism, national security and state survival are its normative cores (Jackson &

Sørensen, 2003, p.100). Therefore, security is primarily defined in terms of state security by conventional IR scholars who are the realists (Tickner & Sjoberg, 2007, p.192). The very foundation of security for contemporary realists is military capability and alliances (Lebow, 2007, p.56) in which the realists perceive that the objects of security are states and military forces, and economic competition between states initiates the primary threat of national security (Burke, 2007, p.147). State inherent insecurity can be accounted from anarchy of international system in which there is no world government (Griffiths & O'Callaghan, 2007, p.55). This reflects that insecurity in the sense of realists is originated by state actor under the anarchic world, as Raymond and Kegley (2005, p.27) assert that 'the quest for absolute security by one state would be perceived as creating absolute insecurity for other members of the system'. Because of this, realist theory has left no room in its analysis of security issue for other actors and phenomena.

Though, the new faces of actors and phenomena emerging in our contemporary world politics have challenged the realists' traditional security. Nowadays, global security is intimidated by transborder phenomena such as environmental degradation, pollution, transnational crimes, drugs and arms trafficking and international terrorism (Brown & Ainley, 2009, p.5). As a consequence, the threats of security are classified with a broader scope. Buzan (cited in Mutimer, 2008, p.37) redefines the understanding of security into military, political, economic, societal and environmental facets. The insecurity agenda of world politics is thus no longer constrained to the traditional threat such as inter-state wars.

An illustration to this new interpretation of insecurity is climate change. This incident, of course, has an application to the problem of environmental insecurity. Besides its impact on our planetary biosphere causing many kinds of vulnerability to countries around the globe, climate change becomes the discourse in world politics. Burgess (2008, pp.67–68) describes that in an academic realm there is the study of the relationship between environmental issues linked to climate change and military conflict,

especially intrastate conflicts and armed conflicts in the form of inter-group violence and civil war, which verifies that environmental problems are directly related to security issues. Burgess further comments that the Kyoto Protocol, an international agreement of the United Nations proposed to reduce carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases is well responded by a large number of countries, which do not hesitate to sign this agreement except the United States. He asserts that this country opposes the Protocol because it does not see climate change as its national threat. Does this mean that the behaviour of the United States is best understood through a realist lens?

A more explicit instance is 9/11 attacks on the United States' soil, a phenomenon of terrorism, which is committed by a non-state actor, the Al Qaeda. Without doubt, this incident has become the insecurity issue not only of the United States but also of the world politics. However, this event does not matter for realists. 'Realism does not have much to say about the causes of terrorism' contended by Mearsheimer (as cited in Lynn-Jones, 2008, p.30) is an excellent example how realists respond to this phenomenon. Mearsheimer (2002) accedes that the realist theory does not have much to say about non-state actor, the terrorist group. He demonstrates that this is because the focal point of realist theory is the relations among states, not non-states. He further makes clear that the fact that the most well-known transnational actor as the Al Qaeda is not a state actor, thus, not to be the subject of interest of realist theorists.

If security is 'the absence of threats' as defined by Ken Booth (cited in Mutimer, 2008, p.41), the presence of the above threats means that there are insecurity conditions in global politics. Because realism merely stresses the importance state actor so it gives us a mere one-dimensional account of national and military insecurity, other insecurity issues created by these non-state actors and phenomena such as human insecurity, economic insecurity, societal insecurity, domestic political insecurity are beyond the concern of realism. As a result of the realist limitation in focusing on the role of state

actor and national security, realism becomes an inadequate theory to account the insecurity in world politics for us.

5. Rationale for an Inadequate Account

There are many reasons of realist account for not having particular attention to many important actors and phenomena. These rationales have caused realist theory to make an inadequate account of insecurity issue in world politics. The following reasons are inextricably linked to each other.

Firstly, as mentioned earlier, it is because the nature of realist theory in regarding states as the most important actors. Realist theory is dubbed as state-centric, since it concentrates on the behaviour of states and governments (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 2002, p.29). In spite of the existence process of globalisation, realists continue to observe world politics under the umbrella of the terms 'state-centric' and 'inter-national' (Hey, 2007, p.276). Since states are the most important actors in world politics for realists, they thus tend to pay less consideration to other actors, which are being 'individuals' and 'transnational actors' but concentrate to account state behaviour (Lynn-Jones, 2008, p.15). And, the source of insecurity for realists is from the quest for security of another state (Dunne & Schmidt, 2008, p.102). This is why realists do not spend their time to inspect the source of insecurity perpetrated by non-state actors.

Secondly, realist theory does not credit globalisation despite the fact that this process has brought latest risks and perils to world politics., Baylis, Smith, & Owens (2008, p.7) assert that realists are adamant that international political system of states is not transcended by globalisation. They further argue that realists continue to believe that states still retain their sovereignty and globalisation neither alters the nature of states in struggling for political power nor weakens the significance of the balance of power and the threat of using force. This explanation clearly indicates that realists still focus on the national security dimension among states, but do not recognise other types

of non-traditional insecurity issues coming with the force of globalisation that has brought a range of threatening phenomena such as transnational terrorism and global climate change to the world politics. Issues that states do not have the ability to cope with such as climate change and global pandemics, which proliferate around the globe are profoundly associated with globalisation (Hey, 2007, p.269). The very recent examples of pandemics as SARS, avian flu, swine flu and Ebola outbreak can create non-traditional insecurity condition to international community as well.

Thirdly, the redefining and broadening of the concept of security has impacted on realist inadequacy of explaining insecurity. There is a debate on the definition of security, ‘whose security?’, whether it is the security of states or the security of individuals. Traditionally, the referent object of security is state. In this traditional security approach, realist theory offers an effective explanation of insecurity in world politics. However, after the end of the Cold War, the concept of security is widened. The essential incident, which affected this broadening and redefining, is the end of the Cold War itself and the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks. After these global shocking incidents, the scope of security has shifted from states to embrace the individuals as another important referent object. From viewing the global politics by employing the lens of this non-traditional security approach, realist theory is no longer sufficient to provide the explanation of the threat to the security of the individuals since realist perspective does not consider this kind of non-state actor as important as state actor.

Finally, realist theory cannot explain every aspect of international politics similar to other theories and perspectives of IR. We have to keep in mind that there is no single theory that can account all actors and phenomena or every detail in world politics. Burchill and Linklater (2009, p.25) obviously declare that all of international politics’ dynamics and key structures cannot be identified, explained or understood by a single theory. Even the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath in which realist theory failed to predict and leads to a spate of its criticism, Gaddis (cited in Burchill

& Linklater, 2009, p.25) accentuates that no foremost traditional theories of international relations could predict such phenomenon. This reason could be an excuse for the realists in offering a poor account of non-state actors and phenomena, which have the capability to generate insecurity. The realists themselves react to the criticism by saying that they account things that are most important (Donnelly, 2009, p.55). The objective of realist theory is to capture specific aspects of international relations and it is not designed to describe every aspect of the world (Steans and Pettiford, 2005, p.69). Each approach has both strength and weakness in describing contemporary world politics. The strength of realist theory is what the realists argue that their approach is able to clarify many of the most crucial aspects of world politics (Lynn-Jones, 2008, p.22) while its weakness is on this article. Because of this, IR is the field that filled with various conceptual lenses with different types of approach to look at the world politics.

6. Conclusion

This article discusses two central critiques of realism: realist theory overlooks other important actors besides states and particular incidents, and the central concern of realists in security is the issue of national security has triggered an inadequacy of current insecurity of global politics. It argues that realist theory does not overlook other non-actors and phenomena. Realists simply do not pay enough attention to them. So it offers us an inadequate explanation of insecurity.

Undeniably, realist theory is still an influential approach of IR in studying international politics. Nevertheless, each theory has its own strengths and weaknesses. Viewing the world merely through realist lenses renders us an inadequate understanding to insecurity in the world politics at present. There have been many new, emerging security challenges threatening security of the international community and humankind such as international terrorism, refugee flows, environmental degradation, pollution, climate

change, infectious diseases, poverty and starvation etc., which are becoming more important threats than the traditional military security issue (Lynn-Jones, 2008, p.32). Thus, our contemporary international politics is beyond the traditional perspectives of realists in focusing state as the only principal actor and considering the interrelationship between states in threatening each national security or struggling for their survival. Non-state actors and phenomena are more and more becoming prominent in generating global insecurity. Paying less or no intention to the above discussed actors deprive us of full understanding on security issues of international politics. So does the realist school of thought. The fact that realist theory pays less or no attention to many of the important actors and phenomena in contemporary world politics cannot make it a satisfactory approach to give us the adequate account of insecurity in world politics.

Despite this inadequacy, realist theory is still relevant to describe or comprehend contemporary world politics. The current system of international politics which consists of state actors still persists. This is the reason why it is widely regarded as the most enduring and influential school of thought in the discipline of IR.

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