

# Might Makes No Right: Realism and International Relations Theory

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## **Abstract**

The article describes the crisis of modern international relations theory (IRT) and assesses the prospects of political realism for developing a nationally oriented theory in Russia. The authors believe that realism can significantly contribute to the development of such a theory. However, the developmental tasks facing Russia go beyond the scope of realism; Russia must formulate a comprehensive idea of national development and IRT. The national idea should not be confined to the country's survival and security; it should include the national understanding of freedom, values and development resources. Realism is not the whole truth, and in some of its manifestations it substitutes truth by power.

**Keywords:** realism, Russia, theory of international relations, national idea.

The world is in transition from the Western type of global order and international system to a very different one. Nations and states will have to respond to new challenges and to handle a set of tasks crucial for their survival and further development. To cope with these tasks, any country needs a national strategy and the idea of development. Every country has to redefine its interests and values in the system of international relations (IR), revisiting the previous theories and concepts. IR experts in Western countries and elsewhere are currently locked in debate over an international relations theory (IRT) that would be capable of responding to the challenges of various national communities.

This article offers a short overview of the crisis in modern IRT and attempts to outline the basic guidelines for developing a nationally oriented theory in Russia. We believe that political realism can be of significant help in this respect. At the same time, Russia's development goals are far broader than those which realism can embrace and require formulating a comprehensive idea of national development and IRT.

## **THE CRISIS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY**

The contemporary, essentially Western, IRT is in crisis. An opinion poll in the United States held to assess the influence of IR theorists has

found a significant decline of the position of mainstream authors—liberals like Bruce Russett, Michael Doyle, Robert Keohane, the founder of structural realism, Kenneth Waltz, and other authoritative pundits. John Mearsheimer, the founder of offensive realism, has retained his foothold, and the authority of constructivism as represented by Alexander Wendt has significantly increased. As a theory most open to ideological and methodological experiments, constructivism raises hopes, which, however, are yet to materialize.

An important manifestation of this crisis in the West-centered IRT is associated with the ongoing debate over the possibility of global and universal knowledge about the world. This debate casts doubt on the ability of the West to define the parameters of theoretical knowledge of IR, thus taking the discussion and the very discipline of IRT outside of its customary Western domain. In fact, this is a dispute about the “nationality” of the theory, as well as its socio-cultural and civilizational roots, which representatives of non-Western cultures increasingly refer to in search of new guidelines for survival and development in a hectic and vibrant world.

In Russia, the crisis in question is fomenting the desire to get engaged in the discussion about the changes in the theory. The awareness of how important it is to develop a national understanding of IR has not yet brought about any noticeable results, though. Due to the lack of academic discussion and other reasons, some IR specialists tend to borrow Western theories without making any allowances for their limited capacity. And yet, the process of turning to national ideological roots is already in motion and it will continue to develop.

Amid world instability and growing national intellectual efforts many would like to overcome the ideological and theoretical crisis by reviving the theories of political realism. Realism has formulated and developed a number of fundamental theoretical postulates about world politics that remain relevant today. At the same time, in our opinion, realism can hardly provide a comprehensive understanding of IR and an image of a country’s desirable future. Both in Russia and elsewhere, realism remains a necessary but insufficient basis a national IRT can be built upon.

## **REALISM'S PROMISES AND LIMITS**

The contribution of realism to our understanding of how the modern world works and what actions should be taken to survive in it is enormous. Realist thinking emerged together with the need to strengthen the state and has been developing in polemics with various kinds of ideologized, value-loaded approaches. One of the strengths of classical realism, in contrast to American neorealism, is the awareness of how important it is to understand the local and internal conditions for a country's successful defense against external threats. Raymond Aron, Edward Carr and Hans Morgenthau formulated their theories during critical periods in Europe's development. Their authors did not confine themselves to discussing the tasks of restoring the stability of the international system. They linked such stabilization not only to achieving a balance of power in the world, but also to ensuring domestic political unity and economic modernization. Also, classical realism put emphasis on the search for global justice on the basis of respect for national sovereignty accepted in international law, interstate dialogue, diplomacy, and never-ending quest for generally acceptable norms of behavior by states in the international arena. This kind of respect for law and dialogue constitutes the foundation of international morality, which the realists see as the foundation of peace and stability and a source of hope for their strengthening in the future.

Realists escape utopias and avoid formulating grand ideas or development ideals. While recognizing the importance of such ideals, they focus on conditions necessary to achieve security and tend to view politics as a tragedy rather than a story with a happy end. Realist thinking leaves no place for happy endings; there is only a cold-blooded recognition of the cynical realities of struggle for power and influence. Unlike liberal and critical IR theories, realism does not proclaim any irreversible results-goals and basically seeks to describe the conditions for protecting the state's sovereignty and security. Realism is politically conservative. It safeguards the basics of security and has no faith in ideological goals or historical progress. International cooperation is possible and desirable but limited by the conflicting interests of states. The deeper the mismatch, the more likely a political conflict is. The

realists maintain that conflicts arise from the very structure of the international system and are inherent in human nature, which is a blend of weakness and ambition. Major powers have special ambitions. Wars are unavoidable and history is cyclical. The tragedy of great powers, which Paul Kennedy and John Mearsheimer described in their works, results from the absolutization of power, which precedes the imminent fall of states that have no sense of measure.

Within realism, there are different schools and approaches. Among them one finds many critics of the absolutization of power and the desire to dominate the world. However, realism, locked up within a coordinate system of struggle for power and influence, has to make an effort to go beyond the customary conservative worldview and formulate far-reaching social, economic, and political solutions. Realism tends not so much to generate long-term solutions as to warn of the dangers any weakening of national independence or security may entail. For this reason—and insofar as any theory is implemented in practice—realism tends not so much to develop, as to preserve the established status quo in the world. The solutions proposed by realism are aimed at protecting sovereignty, but sovereignty itself is merely a form and a shell, yet to be filled with ideological content to the benefit of society. Otherwise, there is a risk the recommendations of realism may be used by narrow-minded groups in their own selfish interests, rather than national ones.

This incompleteness and conservatism limit realism's horizons. Its proponents are not always ready to offer society something going beyond the recommendations what is to be done to enhance the power resource and national independence. For this reason, the most radical realists, adamant about the universal priority of the goals they set, are capable of steering society to a dead end. If the problem of such realism is the absolutization of security and increase in power capabilities, then the solution, apparently, should include the relativization of the goals realism proclaims and the awareness of how important it is to formulate other fundamentally significant priorities. Identifying such priorities and ideals is one of the tasks of a nationally-oriented IRT.

## **DILEMMAS OF RUSSIAN REALISM**

Russian realism can be defined as an understanding of the unique geopolitical environment Russia has to develop in. Realism postulates that certain realities of international relations are universal. These include the absence of a single organizing center (similar to what the state has for implementing domestic policies), the importance of the state's efforts to defend the country's interests and sovereignty in the world and to maintain the balance of military-political forces and global order. Russian realism also possesses another strength, such as the analysis of the special conditions in which Russia exists, such as its Eurasian location between Europe, Asia and the Middle East, trans-ethnicity, vast territory, and the importance of a strong centralized state. These conditions have shaped what the world calls Russian political culture and development tradition.

However significant its contribution to Russian self-awareness and the knowledge of IR realities, realism is not self-sufficient for understanding them well enough. After all, these realities, as was noted above, are not confined to the issues of security and survival in an adverse external environment. It is not surprising that the best representatives of Russian realism strive to comprehend the diversity of interrelationships between the internal and the external factors in Russia's development. Russia has never been at the top of the international hierarchy. Historically it has been forced not only to defend itself against the pressures coming from the powers that be, but also to solve the problems of internal development. Unlike Western realists, who proceed from the West's central position in the international system, Russian realists have to take into account the importance of solving internal problems, such as modernization of the economy and technology, the administrative strengthening of the state, protection of political freedoms, ethno-cultural pluralism, etc.

Realism is not sufficient for comprehending the tasks facing Russian society. Each of the schools of realism is limited in this respect in its own way. In Russia, one can distinguish the proponents of the global containment of the West (Balancers), cooperation with Western countries for confronting common security threats (Westernizers),

and those who would like to see Russia's revival as a regional Eurasian superstate (Eurasianists). The insufficiency of the recommendations of these schools depends on how consistent in terms of realism they are. In some cases, they may contradict the broader goals of Russian development.

For example, the Balancers cannot but acknowledge that their recommendations are limited considering Russia's relative material and resource weakness, and therefore they often emphasize the importance of the country's asymmetric response to external pressure and attempts to weaken its military and political sovereignty. It is not accidental that one of the active supporters of containing the West, Sergei Karaganov, speculates not so much about the importance of a "victorious" foreign policy as about "neo-isolationism" and the revival of the "fortress country" concept. At the same time, he emphasizes the need for a new national idea and new geo-economic development projects. In doing so he goes far beyond the recommendations based on a purely realistic IRT.

The recommendations proposed by the Westerners and the Eurasianists are also limited in their own way. The former are well aware that their recommendations will remain impracticable as long as the West is unprepared to see Russia as a partner, and not as a strategic adversary. The latter, probably, realize that given the relative internal weakness and proximity to politically and economically strong states of Europe and Asia, building a Eurasian superstate that would be self-sufficient in military and political terms remains a hardly achievable goal.

Thus, in Russia, too, no single realist theory is able to comprehend the diversity of the problems facing the country. Only a comprehensive IRT, based on the idea of national development, is capable of reaching such an understanding. The future of a comprehensive nationally oriented IRT to a large extent depends on the dialogue of various schools and traditions inside the country and abroad. Such a theory would couple the importance of the issues as security, sovereignty, and the balance of power, emphasized by realism, with the tasks of modernizing the economy and the political system, strengthening moral and legal principles, and others.

## **TOWARDS A NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IDEA**

Any nation needs not only survival and security, but also development. These goals are interrelated and can be achieved on the basis of a correctly formulated national idea, adequate to local and international conditions. Russia cannot and should not strive to become another America or China in the sense of borrowing their ideas and values. Without realizing its own conditions and values it is unrealistic to hope to retain superpower positions comparable to those of the United States or China. These positions would have remained unachievable without the successful mobilization of the American and Chinese national ideas. These ideas continue to be specified and developed and serve as the basis for the grand strategies of these countries. A grand strategy is impossible without a grand idea.

The grand idea of national development is multifaceted and cannot be based on one of the existing theories. The main components of such an idea include a national understanding of freedom, values, and resources for development, as well as protection from external threats. Realism is not the whole truth, and in some of its manifestations it replaces truth with power. And power, according to a well-known Russian proverb, “knows the truth but prefers to stay silent.” Therefore, while remaining an integral part of the national idea and IRT, realism cannot serve as their only basis. The most important cornerstone should be the development and implementation of a set of comprehensive goals in the interests of the nation and, as far as possible, in the interests of the global community.

Socialism has been and remains an example of the idea of development. The main question is whether socialism is adapted to the needs of national development, as in China, or caters to the global ambitions of the elite, as in the Soviet Union. Any grand idea is a message to the outside world and in this sense it contends a global status. However, its roots and target audience are national in the first place, because they are consistent with the needs and capabilities of the national community. The Soviet system’s collapse was due not to its doctrinal focus on fair distribution of resources in the world, but due to the global absolutization of the socialist idea. This absolutization resulted, firstly, in the idea of complete socialization and elimination of private property, and secondly, in the inability to properly estimate the



country's potential amid external pressure (the Cold War). Attempts to compete with the West in military spending, while imposing a "socialist orientation" on the world, ended in failure.

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What a modern national idea should be like is the subject matter of an important and complex debate far beyond the scope of this article. This discussion has already begun in some Russian periodicals. It is important to consider national and global conditions together and work for development, and not for the preservation of the status quo. As an option, emphasis may be placed on Russia's predisposition to initiate political and civilizational dialogues in the world. By virtue of Russia's geographical location between Europe and Asia, tolerance of the Eastern Christian culture and the political and economic "semi-periphery" between the Western center and the non-Western periphery, Russians—to a greater extent than many other peoples—occupy a cross-border position in the world.

Life itself pushes Russia towards a dialogue as a national idea. Russia successfully mediates and stops wars in the Caucasus and the Middle East. It has initiated a basically positive idea of Greater Eurasia. It contributes to the development of multilateral formats that ease political contradictions in Asia and other regions. In a sense and to a certain extent Russia could facilitate dialogue between the United States and China in order to prevent a big war and build a fairer and more sustainable world. Of course, Russia should strengthen itself internally. The weak bite the dust, and do not enjoy recognition as dialogue partners or mediators. Realism as a theory of beefing up the strength of the state must therefore remain an important part of Russia's vision of the world, including its understanding of dialogue.

The Russian idea has always been focused on changing the world for the better—most often by the power of its example, and not necessarily positive, but also, according to the well-known thought voiced by Pyotr Chaadaev, its negative example. In one way or another, Russians have more than once "taught the world some important lesson." There is no reason to think that it will happen otherwise this time.