

## AN ASSESSMENT OF MODERN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY



### Social Science

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**Bledar Kurti**

Albanian University, Tirana, Albania

### Abstract

The scholarship of traditional International Relations Theory (IR) seems that has little to say to students, academicians and analysts at present days. The events of the last decade in world politics and the present geopolitical situation seem to have passed the centuries old relations between nations, accompanied with a new and unprecedented approach to international formal conventions and agreements. Modern political leaders often use elements of traditional IR theory when articulating solutions to national and international security dilemmas. But these solutions then translate into modern policies capturing courses of action for accomplishing national objectives with varying strategic implications. It appears that policies of today convert into acts aiming at strengthening power and influence, via corporations and military means. This paper presents the incompatibility of traditional IR theory with the modern one, accompanied with examples and analysis of the key events that have startled academicians, students and interpreters of IR studies.

## 1. Introduction

Despite the fact that the major conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have set a better understanding of IR and institutions, the new developments and unprecedented challenges of the recent years have altered the utility and the view on international relations theory.

Generally, the corporations and the military appear more concerned with the putting into practice military force than with understanding traditional IR theory. The scholarship of traditional International Relations Theory (IR) seems that has little to say to students, academicians and analysts at present days. The events of the last decade in world politics and the present geopolitical situation seem to have passed the centuries old relations between nations, accompanied with a new and unprecedented approach to international formal conventions and agreements. This paper presents the incompatibility of traditional IR theory with the modern one, accompanied with examples and analysis of the key events that have startled academicians, students and interpreters of IR studies.

Few questions arise for the academic circles: Is there any use of the traditional theories whilst the relations between states, and the hard disagreements between allies and members of world alliances, dictate a different turn, ignoring the foundations and competent institutions in international affairs? What do we teach our students? What academic references we use to support theories? How do we assess them? On what grounds: academic or analytical?

## 2. The Traditional International Relations Theory

IR Theories are the basis of understanding how things go in the world, bringing insight into the mindset of nations and leaders, bringing about a specter of perspectives and presenting a clear panorama on events, plans, actions and diplomatic stances. The IR Theories serve as a guide as well as raising questions and debates on current and past issues. Scholars and students are intrigued by certain events, and, furthermore, are eager to get straight to the real-life (often described as ‘empirical’) case studies of world events that made them want to study IR in the first place. (McGlinchey, Walters, Gold, 2017)

According to A. Acharya, the study of IR is taking a prominent role worldwide. IR students in Academic institutions in the west are composed by a bodies coming from different cultures and backgrounds, as well as inherited or developed certain perspectives on IR issues. But originating from a native, local, regional or continental mindset, they are unable to fully understand certain events, conflicts, or offer a poor fit for understanding and explaining them. (Acharya, 2017)

One aspect, certainly considered as the core of IR Theories, is Realism. This theory of thought gives emphasis to competition, race, arguments, disputes and conflicts. Its case studies are past events, believing that they will be repeated, just as history teaches us, and thus being the nature of human being, and somehow, a natural determination, that is, the ego prevailing over altruism, lack of trust, and that the war is a constant of human history, because in 3,000 years of written human history only 300 years are of peace between nations.

Niccolò Machiavelli agreed with such a stance, arguing that the human traits jeopardize safety, security and even the state. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century the heads of city-states were patriarchs of great influence in the affairs of the state. In his work *The Prince* (1532), Machiavelli emphasized the role of the prince or the head of the city-state to focus on the security of his state promote national security. He had to use his force, intrigues, cunningness, and any means to preserve his interests and those of his state. He promotes the concept of responsibility, of individual ethics and gains, rather than following and obeying moral and general rules and standards of society. In other words, use any means, no matter how inhumane or immoral to achieve the wanted results.

Now we turn, to Liberalism which is so popular in today’s IR Theories. We often read and hear in great amount, in analysis, debates, public discussions and political rhetoric about ‘liberal democracy.’ Liberal Democracy is a recent concept, a response to the events of the last century, aiming at ensuring democratic life of states, free and fair voting, equal rights of the individual, respect for the law and constitution, and so on. This theory is the opposite of realism, and presents a more utopist perspective on the national and international issues and relations. An optimistic approach that the human liberties prevail over the selfishness of human nature, his eagerness for power, expansion and war.

The third theory is Constructivism. This is a theory that emerges in the early 1990s after the failure of other, above mentioned, theories, which focused on the individual interests of powerful actors, the race for power between actors, and misbalance of states and parties. The ending of the

Cold War, the fall of Berlin Wall, and the collapse of Communism were not state initiatives, in contrary they came as a result of the ordinary people, who took action, detested the imposed regime, and the fight of the society as a whole. Constructivism stands for a world that is determined by the society itself and not a collection of leaders nor local, regional and international bodies. (Onuf, 2012). The individuals, being heads of state, important figures and so on, act or mobilize the society to form a new policy, bring change, affect IR, and open the path for new developments.

IR Theories also include Critical theory. This theory, as the name suggests, promotes the idea of criticism of the modern concepts of state governance, trade, tax, and economic systems, which enslave the population, thus, through this theory the citizens can reach emancipation, freedom and obtaining their civil liberties. This theory is centuries old and originates from the philosophy of Marxism and of Kant. These two figures raised the theories of the enlightenment, focusing on universalism, which today could be translated to globalism, that is, policies, concepts, issues and affairs that apply to every individual in the entire globe. A realm of utopia, of world peace and global governance, societies living in harmony, despite their differences and backgrounds, united under a common mission and ideal.

Another theory of IR is the Post-colonial theory, which originated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the great empires of the world collapsed and colonial states lost their power and influence due to many national conflicts and two world wars. This big turn of events brought a post-colonialism reality that attracted important and major states to commence a new IR approach and profiting as much as they could, expanding their influence on the world arena. For instance, the United States, that emerged as the most decisive actor in the world stage, reshaping geopolitics and control. Post-colonialism is a theory that analyses the events in the optics of the less powerful states, in the viewpoint of the nations who suffered under imperialism, raising debates on the lack of national integrity, abuse of fundamental human rights, and the role of less privileged states in the world affairs and international relations.

In the new millennium we are living in, many theories have evolved, more and more utopist, almost turning the IR theories seem old and out of use. The post-modern theories use slogans and platforms the promote peace for everyone, heaven on earth, freedom for all the citizens of the globe. According to A. Dietzel, this is a theory that is founded under cosmopolitanism, based on the role of citizen versus the state, society, tradition, background or culture. This theory strongly believes in the individual and the human moral as the focus of all the developments in society of the state and beyond.

This theory believes in a global social justice, for all peoples in the world, regardless of their nationality or status, (A. Dietzel, 2019) aiming at achieving such a universal state of affairs.

### 3. International Relations Institutions

World War I marked not only the biggest conflict the world had ever seen in all its existence but in the aftermath it laid the foundations for a global alliance in preservation of peace, aiming at avoiding other conflicts. The US President Woodrow Wilson proposed his 14 point plan, leading to the idea of the League of Nations, later United Nations.

The establishment of the UN, the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the establishment of the International Court of Justice, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, as well as the European Union, Council of Europe, and other institutions and global alliances, accompanied by several important international law articles, created a peaceful sentiment after the WWII era. However the conflicts in the world did not cease to exist, and in the climax of the Cold War the International Relations sphere of study and understanding was affected immensely leading to a general realist theoretical orientation.

The UN was conceived as a body where states would join in discussing the common challenges, and despite their nature, share the solutions and act on them together as a whole. (UN, 1945) NATO was created with the aim to preserve peace, freedom and security for the members, using military, democratic, and political means. (NATO, 1949) The ending of the Cold War opened a new but unexpected path for such international bodies in their operation and activity regarding international crisis and issues. The states on the other hand, especially the strong and influential ones, adapted to the new geopolitical reality of post Cold War period. They set a particular objective that included altering the society of other states, spreading the sphere of influence, using hard and soft diplomacy, obtaining credentials on innovative economic initiatives and collaborations, etc.

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought a new agenda for states and international bodies. Most of the time these two parties, the state and the international institutions operated in opposite directions, considering the composition of the permanent five at the UN Security Council. And conflicts such as Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, the Pandemic Covid-19, showed a big handicap on the functioning of these institutions. They proved that despite IR theories and commitment to International Bodies, states continue to have their own agendas, and those agendas prevail over international agreements. Arguments emphasizing the importance of agenda setting, uncertainty, and strategic manipulation are based on the same game-theoretic formulations that have guided much recent work from more liberal perspectives. (Katzenstein, Keohane, Krasner, 1999.)

### 4. Conclusion

In the recent years we have witnessed a series of confusing stances and events with regards to IR traditional theories and approaches. In 1999, at the eve of the celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NATO the crisis in Kosovo divided NATO members risking the unity of the alliance. On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1999, NATO began bombing Belgrade, trying to stop the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo people. But, the decision, the process, the whole stance of the NATO

countries to the bombing is still a topic of controversy, (Holst, 1994) because of UN resolution issue. Until today NATO argues that the bombing of Belgrade was legitimate, moral and humane, which truthfully it was, because of the ethnic cleansing that already had commenced, yet, those who opposed and still oppose that decision do not accept the moral ground, i.e. a ‘humanitarian war’ (Roberts, 1999) but emphasize the issuing of the UN Security Council resolution that was never approved.

Furthermore, concerning the present integration of aspiring countries in NATO it is necessary to consider security, democracy, political stability, rule of law, in these countries. NATO is a geopolitical alliance that should continue to promote the democratic values, which is part of its mission, not only for the stability of the member country, the region and beyond, but also to minimize the risks that emerge from political instability, organized crime, trafficking and so on, that could undermine security. This remains debatable and undermines the traditional IR views.

NATO member states should be assets not liabilities. They should not be just another added piece to the puzzle of a new Containment Policy, by George F. Kennan during the Cold War, tailored to today’s great power competition or the current Russian conflict in Ukraine. NATO members must be strong, stable and democratic, vigilant at all times and prepared for any new security challenges, such as that of Covid-19 pandemics.

In addition, the collective security agencies and institutions marked a series of failures during the pandemics: failure of international and interstate cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic; NATO members focused on national security rather than a common security; concepts and notions like nation, sovereign power, citizenship, country, my government, my people, our borders, our lives, our vaccines, became paramount, undermining the European or universal love and cooperation between states.

These are issues that should be addressed. They are new challenges for NATO, combating a new enemy to the world, whereas the strengthening of democracy, accepting consolidated states as new members of the Alliance needs to be of paramount importance in preserving security. Democracy will also contribute to unity, as Stoltenberg emphasized “Standing together in NATO we will continue to keep the peace and protect our democratic way of life. As we have done for more than 70 years.” (Stoltenberg, 2022) These are issues that should be addressed in relation to the assessment of traditional IR Theories, and what do we teach our students? What academic references we use to support theories? How do we assess them? On what grounds: academic or analytical?

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