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Intro to International Relations

Take-Home Essay: Question 1

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In the world politics of today, levels of conflict and peace can be explained by the Realist approach. Realism says that in this anarchical world states act unitarily and are the primary actors in international politics. Realists believe that a state’s decisions are based on their security issues and self-interests. Contrastingly, some theorists believe that the Neoliberalist approach better explains today’s levels of conflict and peace. This theory on world politics states that some nations will in fact cooperate with one another in order to ensure peace and avoid conflict. Neoliberalists believe that, in order to cooperate, states are facilitated by institutions that serve as an intermediary between governments. Though both are valid theories, I believe that the Realist approach is more applicable to the current political culture.

Realists believe that international peace and conflict are completely controlled by the decisions made by the nations with the most power. Because realism deals with the decisions made by a state in relation to other states it is in the third level of analysis and its driving force is power. Realists believe that states act in their own best interest and that cooperation is simply a means to an end; this end being more power for the states who are cooperating. Even accumulating power is not the main goal of states according to realists: “…states seek power as a means to an end to ensure their survival in an anarchical world.” (Lansford 2000, 11) Realists view conflict as a way to ensure security for their own nation. Alliances between states are made to increase international influence, not because states are “friends”. Realists blame anarchy for creating states that work only in their self-interest because anarchy creates the need for external security. Realists believe that states act rationally, meaning they prioritize and analyze the opportunity costs of their actions. If states act rationally this also means that other states will be able to predict how rival states will act, therefore at times a “one-up” scenario is created. An example of this is in the Cold War with the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States. Their nuclear arms race and their race to space clearly showed how neither nation wanted to fully accept bipolarity and that instead they each wanted the power to defeat the other. According to realists, international multipolarity is only an interlude between the changing of main powers. Multipolarity leads to conflict over power, and whoever is successful in gaining more power will either be in a bipolar or unipolar world. The balance of peace and conflict is based on how much power one state has over another.

The failure of Wilson’s League of Nations after World War I is a primary example of realism. The League of Nations was an international institution that was formed after World War I to create a coalition of nations that would be able to cooperate and solve conflicts peacefully. But as history proves, it failed at its goal because it was not successful in preventing aggressive states from starting conflicts and wars. The League of Nations only tried to appease Nazi Germany, essentially giving Hitler free reigns to take power all throughout Europe. Realists would say that it failed because the United States did not join the League of Nations and at the time they were the most powerful nation in the world. Because the U.S. did not support the League, there was no power to back up its decisions; there was no one to enforce the international peace.

Contrary to the realist approach is the neoliberalist approach. Neoliberalists believe that peace and conflict are controlled by the power of international institutions that exist between states. These institutions represent the shared interests of states. For each shared interest, states create institutions to aid in cooperation. The importance of these shared interests determine the power an international institution will or will not have. Because this approach discusses international issues it is in the third level of analysis and its driving force is institutions. The basis for this idea is that security and power are not the sole desires of a state. If these institutions do not carry enough influence, then the level of peace fluctuates easily, but because these institutions are what states need to cooperate they often have a lot of influence; nations generally want to preserve peace. Neoliberalists view peace and gaining wealth as a reason for cooperation. They believe that anarchy is what allows this interdependence between nations to occur. Unlike the realist viewpoint, neoliberalists do not believe success follows a zero-sum pattern. “…cooperation is possible because the relative gains of one state do not automatically translate into the relative losses by another.” (Lansford 2000, 16) The balance of peace and conflict is based on how well two states cooperate and the influence of the international institutions that facilitate their cooperation.

The European Union is a real-world application of the neoliberalist approach. The EU is an international institution that does its job of solving conflicts between states. Using wealth as its motivation for cooperation the EU allows European nations to increase their wealth and create economic ties across borders; this translates into cooperation of states. They have a legitimate governing body and enforce the international laws that they have set.

Though neoliberalists present a valid argument with the European Union, cooperation in other international institutions, such as the United Nations, is much more difficult to coordinate because, as realists would say, nations simply work in their best interest. The United Nations, the League of Nations of today, is still not fully successful even with the support of the most powerful nations of today. There are too many internal conflicts within states, as well as seemingly unsolvable conflicts between states for the UN to legitimately enforce the resolutions they pass. Even with the European Union, realists argue that European peace is determinant on the great powers of today, mainly the United States.

Though I believe the Realist approach explains the levels of conflict and peace today, I feel that these levels have changeable explanations. The explanation depends on many factors in the world political culture of the time, such as the economy and the power of institutions. These factors are always changing, so it is difficult to use one approach to define all of history and the future. At this point in time, I believe states are acting according to the Realist approach because with the recovering economy and international terrorism as two main issues of the current political culture, states are seeking to protect themselves, and fight those who challenging their authority and security. Peace and conflict levels are not determined by institutions because institutions, such as the UN and NATO that should be strong and influential players in world politics, do not often succeed in carrying out their goals. However, this can change very easily in the coming future because the world political culture is constantly fluctuating.