The Past as Prologue

Realist Thought and the Future of American Security Policy

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Realism is dead, or so we are told. Indeed, events over the past 20 years tend to confirm the popular adage that "we are living in a whole new world." And although some individuals have proclaimed the death of power politics, it is worth remembering that we have heard all this before. Over the past 60-plus years, realism has enjoyed its time in the sun. Within the United States, realism initially arose during the interwar period in response to the perceived failures of Pres. Woodrow Wilson's internationalism. By 1954, with the publication of the second edition of Hans Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, those ideas had been discredited. During the 1970s, with gasoline shortages and a long, unsuccessful war in Vietnam tearing at America, the inadequacies of policy makers to properly frame world events led many people to pursue other alternatives. Economic, political, and social changes occasioned the rise of topics such as transnational politics, international interdependence, and political economy, each of which allowed nonrealist perspectives to carve out a substantial space for themselves.

The dramatic ending of the Cold War—combined with the inability of policy makers to adequately explain, anticipate, or even imagine peaceful global change—ushered in a new round of thinking. Today many decision makers frame their policies around democracy, seeing it as the historical force driving the apparent peace among the world's leading powers. Once an arcane argument among academics, democratization moved to the fore during the Clinton years and has defined America's role in the world ever

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since. That "America believes in democracy" is more than a slogan. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq marked the beginning of a democratization project of gargantuan proportions. But if the past is any guide to the future, policy makers will soon begin to reframe their thinking around realism. One can already see signs of realist resurgence within the present administration, with insiders calling for an end to the wars and other nations decrying American adventurism.[1] With so much at stake, it is time for strategists and policy makers to reexamine realism lest it be rejected out of hand.

From the earliest moments of recorded history, realist thought has dominated the study and practice of international politics.[2] Since the time of Thucydides, realists have never lost sight of the fact that we live in a world of states, large and small, that must look out for themselves.[3] Paraphrasing Thucydides, "The strong do what they will, while the weak suffer what they must." In such a world—where no world government exists to protect a state from the harmful intentions of others—survival is the name of the game. Thus, the essence of any security policy is the protection and preservation of the state itself. This article critically examines realism and its relationship to national security policy. Rather than focus on individual realist authors, it synthesizes their ideas into a general interpretation of the field and integrates them with the strong, symbiotic relationship between realist thought and national security policy.[4] The article outlines the realist argument and focuses on four premises—states, anarchy, interests, and power—illustrating the key differences between realism and other perspectives. The third section evaluates the usefulness of realism in terms of framing enduring security issues, and the final one discusses the future of realist thought with respect to framing emerging security issues.

What Is Realism?

Realism is the dominant theoretical tradition that defines the study of international politics. It begins with a pessimistic view of human nature, which Thucydides captures in his description of events during the Peloponnesian War. As his majestic history suggests, human nature drives men to repeal those "general laws of humanity," even when those deeds have the potential to hurt not only the guilty but also the innocent.[5] Why? Because people are not led by reason; they are led by reason *and* passion—and passion leads them into conflict and war. This point is worth stressing: that reason

can temper passion is never the issue; rather, the issue is that one can never be too sure that reason will temper passion *all of the time*.[6] For individuals interested in understanding national security, the lesson is simple, and the implications are enormous. States must constantly be on guard—not because statesmen are never honorable and peaceful but because they might at any moment become dishonorable and belligerent.

The pessimism found in realism certainly gives it a doom-and-gloom edge. Pessimism is not the same as fatalism, however, and in fact realists can be wildly optimistic on some matters, but at the heart of realist thought is the notion that mankind is flawed.[7] The world is what it is, and analysts must take it for what it is. Will it ever get better? The chances are slim. Why? Because people are what they are—passionate creatures, capable of reasoning right from wrong and shrewd enough to know that they should always hedge their bets.

Realist pessimism may accurately describe the human condition, but it does not capture the essence of international politics. After all, in international life, states—not people—matter more. Hence, some realists go out of their way to downplay the importance of humans themselves. In *Theory of International Politics*, still considered the most important work in the realist revival, Kenneth Waltz makes no index entries for ethics, justice, or morality.[8] Similarly, John Herz is emphatic about how his realism differs from that of Morgenthau, who, like Thucydides, "sees the chief cause of power politics in innate human aggressiveness."[9] Human behavior can be grounds for conflict and war, but the anarchic nature of international life remains an inescapable condition that leads to conflict, even in the absence of human aggressiveness.

Whether conflict stems from the nature of humans or the nature of international politics, or both, remains unprovable; however, one thing is certain—states acting in anarchy must look out for themselves. Since states and anarchy play cardinal roles in realist thought, we should be clear about their meanings. A state is what we ordinarily call a country. Costa Rica, Russia, and Finland are good examples. States have four essential features: territory, population, government, and sovereignty. Territory, population, and government are self-explanatory. Sovereignty refers to a state's ability to conduct domestic and foreign policies without undue external interference. This does not mean that a state can do whatever it pleases. On the contrary,

although all states enjoy some measure of autonomy, great powers can do more than weaker ones; thus, they tend to enjoy even more freedom of action. Still, no state—even those with the greatest of powers—can do all it wants all the time. No matter how powerful, states are limited in what they can do in the world.

Similarly, anarchy does not mean chaos or the complete absence of order. It simply refers to an absence of rule or of a hierarchical order based on formal subordination and authority. There is considerable order in an anarchic international system, but that order is not the hierarchical order characteristic of domestic politics.[10] That being the case, the consequences of anarchy can be severe. Because of the absence of a higher authority to which states can appeal, statesmen must think in terms of security first.

No matter how good their intentions, national security policy makers must bear in mind that without a world government, states must provide for their own protection. To do so means marshaling their power or the power of friends and allies who will support and defend them. However, such self-help actions, even when taken for purely defensive purposes, will appear threatening to others, who will be forced to respond in kind. This interstate phenomenon is commonly called the "security dilemma," and it adequately explains why arms races occur and why some wars begin.[11]

Because the potential for violence in the international system is so great, states must prioritize their interests, which come in many forms.[12] Peace, prosperity, and freedom are good examples, and although those three might be in the interest of *most* states, survival is the sole interest of *all* states.[13] The means to ensure survival is power. The kind of power needed can be hard to define. During the 1970s, for example, a group of relatively small Middle Eastern states nearly brought the industrialized world to a standstill because they controlled access to oil. Were they powerful? It depends on how one thinks about power. Similarly, terrorists today seem to wrest considerable power from their dastardly deeds, but are they as powerful as some seem to think? An answer begins by recognizing what power can and cannot accomplish in international life. Realists believe that power clarifies international politics because it sets up a world of strong and weak states. For them, the distribution of military capabilities throughout the world makes stark the differences between states and, by doing so, conditions

the international system, setting up an informal set of rules that brings some order to a disordered world.

Think of the Cold War to understand this last point. The balance of power between the Soviet Union and the United States kept the Cold War "cold." Although hardly a perfect peace—several deadly proxy wars took place during this time—the balance of forces between the two great powers enabled international life to go on without producing a cataclysmic nuclear war. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the Gulf wars or the war in Yugoslavia occurring during the Cold War. Why? The superpowers—through threats or use of force—never would have allowed them to happen.

Regardless of how one thinks of power, it is important to point out that power is fungible and relative. Fungibility refers to the ease with which capabilities in one issue area can be used to solve problems in other issue areas. From a national security perspective, military power remains the most fungible of all the instruments of power, including economic, diplomatic, and informational. Reviewing the cases, one discovers that force, and threats of force, have been the instrument of choice for most states in times of crisis. Indeed, because war remains the ultima ratio in international politics, military power remains the first and foremost concern of most powerful states.

The word *relative* refers to relative gains, as the term is used in the study of economics. In brief, realists believe that relative gains matter more to states than absolute gains. Why? One can never be sure how a state will use *any gain from any transaction*. On the one hand, states might spend gains—in the form of money—on services to improve life at home for their citizens. On the other hand, they might spend those gains on a large military force capable of threatening others. Thus, in international politics the question is never "Who gains?" but is always "Who gains more?"[14]

Recall the fierce debate in the United States on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The debate was not over the issue of what the United States will gain. Rather, the debate—at least from the dissenters—concerned the fear that Canada and Mexico might gain more. Was the United States afraid that Canada or Mexico might build a large army to threaten the United States? Of course not, but the mere fact that tensions existed among these close neighbors only highlights the difficulty of achieving international cooperation, even on something as relatively

benign as free trade. In the end, we can think of international politics as a struggle for power, cooperation, and peace, but that struggle is defined by the idea that state security must never be impaired.

Summing up, realists think that the international system shapes what states must do by presenting them with overwhelming incentives to pursue self-interests or by eliminating those that fail to pursue self-interests relentlessly: "This . . . natural selection [process] may also be supplemented by a competition for influence: states that follow realpolitik maxims grow and those that rationally ignore the mandate of egoism decline and lose all influence. . . . To the extent that survival pressures tightly constrain states' behavior, internal characteristics cannot seriously affect state conduct."[15] In a world of realist politics, nations may inevitably settle their disputes through force or threats of force, acting purely in self-interest. In the end, states must look out for themselves.

Realism and Its Critics

Realism has many critics.[16] A number of them are convinced that realism is inherently limited because it takes little account of global change, a line of attack that sharpened considerably with the end of the Cold War. Others argue that realism overlooks the importance of global interdependence to international politics. Those who write on the importance of interdependence have provided illuminating accounts of international politics by calling attention to the role of international institutions. These authors, known as institutionalists, stress the mediating role played by institutions, which lowers transaction costs among states and increases the prospects for international cooperation. Institutionalists like to point to the development of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization as an example of an institution that not only has increased cooperation among its members but also has provided a framework for the economic and military integration of Europe itself. Moreover, institutional analyses have clarified the relationship between international politics and economics, opening up a line of inquiry known as international political economy. However enlightening institutional analyses might be, realists contend that these authors tend to exaggerate the possibilities for international cooperation because they do not understand—or have oversimplified the concern about—survival as a motivation for state behavior. States must look out for their own security—and they do so not

because they are greedy, selfish, or vile. States might be all of these, but that alone is not a sufficient reason to cause them to think in terms of security first. They must look out for their own security because of the lack of an authority capable of preventing others from using violence or threats of violence to destroy or enslave them.[17] This fact tends to be downplayed in institutional analyses, but it remains the driving concern for most states.

Another line of criticism comes from those who believe that the key to achieving a peaceful international system lies in radically altering state identity or transforming how states think about themselves and their relationships with others. Ideally, by not thinking of themselves as solitary actors responsible for their own security, states will develop a communitarian ethos and a broader sense of responsibility to the international community. This might sound desirable in principle, but in practice it will never work because anarchy and the danger of war cause all states to be motivated in some measure by fear or distrust, regardless of their internal composition, goals, or desires.[18]

This last point is lost on those who hang their hopes for humanity on democracy and are willing to risk blood and treasure to secure that goal. Democracy has had an impact on international life; it has both caused and affected the promotion of liberal capitalism. No doubt, democracy and free-market capitalism have taken hold of the world, and the apparent peace among the world's democratic states—both large and small—constitutes the "closest thing we might have to an empirical law of international behavior."[19] Put simply, democracies do not fight one another. Why not?

Some people believe that domestic institutions guard against the bellicose behaviors of kings or emperors.[20] Democratic leaders, if for no other reason than self-preservation, tend to hedge against risky wars because their own fortunes are tied either to maintaining the status quo or to assuring a victory, or both. Others are convinced that democratic states seem to prefer adjudication and bargaining to fighting.[21] In short, it is not that liberal states would rather trade than invade, as interdependence theory suggests; rather, liberal leaders prefer to "jaw, jaw rather than war, war," as Churchill might have put it.

As compelling as both explanations might seem, neither captures the essence of great-power politics, nor does either come close to describing what a democracy is like when it goes to war. According to George Kennan, democracy fights in anger. Democracy "fights for the very reason that it was

forced to go to war. It fights to punish the power that was rash enough and hostile enough to provoke it—to teach that power a lesson it will not forget, to prevent the thing from happening again. Such a war must be carried to the bitter end."[22] Because democracy also fights with vengeance, democratic wars resemble crusades, characterized by unlimited means, ultimate ends, and popular calls for unconditional surrender. But above all else, democracies are states, and all states have interests, not the least of which is survival. Again, peace might be an interest of some states, but survival is *the* interest of all states. When interests compete—as they tend to do—conflict arises, and war is the extension of that process. Thus, peace among the world's democracies will not last forever.

The Enduring Usefulness of Realism

Up to now, I have concentrated on description and analysis in an attempt to clarify the realist tradition. This section evaluates the usefulness of realism in terms of framing enduring security issues by focusing on war, intervention, globalization, and human rights.[23]

In an anarchic world, because *war* is always a possibility, realists present it as a standard—albeit destructive—instrument of statecraft or a continuation of politics by other means. One can attribute this practice to Clausewitz, who insisted that war was the result of some political situation: "The occasion is always due to some political object. War, therefore, is an act of policy."[24] As satisfying as Clausewitz might be, war often requires more than political justification. It requires moral justification. Yet realists ignore this aspect, insisting that most wars can be justified in terms of interests or the balance of power. The central premise of the balance of power is stability, not justice. In fact, realists argue that the very idea of a just war may be incoherent. Think about it—if one adopts the perspective of the statesman, which presupposes the protection and preservation of the state, there seems to be no escaping the demands of the national interest. This point is worth stressing: even though considerations about justice might be real and important, they are not as important as the demands of security. Other moral and political perspectives recognize this dilemma, but what makes realism so distinctive is its solution. When the demands of statecraft and of justice cannot be reconciled, realists argue that political leaders must choose injustice, even if it means war.[25]

Moral considerations aside, realists believe that stability is present in an international system when the system remains anarchic—without a strong central authority—and when the principal parties within the system remain unchanged. If one state threatens to attain a position from which it might dominate the rest, a military coalition of the other great powers will form against it, and a general war will follow. Thus, balance-of-power arguments are not strong arguments for war any more than they are strong arguments for peace. They are antihegemonic in that a balance of power seeks to prevent, through war if necessary, the rise of one dominant power.

Since the end of the eighteenth century, the European balance of power changed five times. Early in the nineteenth century, Napoleon's bid for supremacy stopped at Waterloo when a coalition of states put an end to his ambitions by destroying the Grand Armée. In the early twentieth century, the kaiser similarly challenged the European balance of power. Again, a coalition of states fought desperately for four years to rectify the situation. In the 1930s and early 1940s, Hitler overran Europe from the English Channel to the gates of Moscow. Again a great coalition of forces fought to restore the balance of power. Following that war, however, the balance was not restored. Russia was left with half of Europe, while the rest lay prostrate before it. Tragically, the Western Europeans who had fought to defeat Hitler now faced Stalin, and the resulting imbalance of power led to the Cold War, which lasted nearly 50 years. An imbalance of global power has existed since the end of the Cold War. The current unipolar configuration cannot last forever and is already showing signs of changing with a rising Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC). Will the changing distribution of power lead to war? It need not. If realism is correct, a balance of power ought to emerge that will force states to make appropriate security preparations and, barring attempts at regional hegemony, produce stability.

Although many states have intervened in the affairs of other states, realist authors have surprisingly little to say on the question of *intervention*. When they do address the subject, it is usually under the heading of non-intervention. Realists do so because they tend to think of intervention as an empirical question, not a philosophical one. That being the case, those realists who do tackle it head-on often fall back on John Stuart Mill's notions of self-determination and sovereignty.[26]

We are to treat states as self-determining communities, whether or not they are free, because self-determination and freedom are not the same—or so Mill thought. Citizens have the right to fight for their freedom, and when they struggle and fail, they are still self-determining. This Millian view of self-determination sets people up for the right to become free by their own efforts, and it cuts against the grain of intervention in general. Sovereignty, which legally defines a state's ability to conduct domestic and foreign policies without undue external interference, is the arena in which self-determining communities fight and sometimes win their freedom. It goes without saying, then, that there are things the international community cannot do for states, even for their own good. By this measure, the intervening state must make the case that its interference in someone else's liberty is best served by something other than moral support.

This is not an academic question—it sits at the center of the current administration's policy agenda.[27] During the 1990s, the United States was involved in numerous interventions, some of which clearly violated traditional views of sovereignty. Somalia II sticks in the minds of most Americans as an intervention characterized as wrong: wrong place, wrong time, and wrong reason. In the face of the ethnic killings and displacement in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Kosovo, however, the idea of saving strangers came to the fore. Coupled with the attacks of 11 September 2001, the question of intervention posed new problems and challenges as arguments about preemption took hold of American policy. Some people within the Obama administration wish to see the United States continue to play an active interventionist role, while others seek to back away from it. In terms of framing the future of intervention, realism has something to offer policy makers. In multipolar worlds, great powers are prone to inattention. In bipolar worlds, overreaction is the concern. In unipolar worlds, like the one we are living in now, guarding against overextension is the problem.[28] In the coming years, the United States will have to balance the need for security against the humanitarian desire to save strangers. If it behaves shrewdly, it can reduce the risk of overextension and, perhaps, save a few but not all.

Unlike intervention, realists have much to say about *globalization*. More than a mere shift in economic policies, globalization is transforming state relations and remaking international politics before our very eyes, or so globalists insist. That globalization is occurring cannot be denied. Foreign

trade, travel, and communication seem to be transforming the world into a global bazaar where goods and services are traded openly and freely, and war among the great powers becomes less and less likely. Nonetheless, although international economics might be changing, international politics are not.

With this in mind, one ought to wonder what globalization is doing to security. Does it mean more peace, as globalists contend? Realists conclude it does not. Why? Economic interdependence among nations is not capable of altering the nature of international relations, which puts a premium on politics, not economics. Globalists fail to see this fact because they do not understand that international peace, underwritten by the great powers, produces interdependence and not the other way around.[29]

The logic is obvious. If I rely on you for something essential, like oil, then I am vulnerable to your whims and fancies. The more vulnerable I become, the more demanding you might become. You might demand more money, more services, or if your commodity makes me stronger, protection. I may be willing to go along in the short term, but the longer this transaction goes on, the more dependent I become. In short, interdependence creates vulnerabilities. For states this is a dangerous game, which is why international cooperation is so difficult to achieve. The enduring lesson is simple. Whether a state gains in an economic transaction is never the issue. The issue is always who gains more. Without a higher authority to appeal to, successful states will always hedge their bets when it comes to interdependence. Thus, globalization, at least from a security perspective, will not be enough to ensure a lasting peace.

Most realists eschew the idea of *human rights* as the basis for making decisions about national security, doing so largely because of realism's professed amorality.[30] Kennan expressed it best: "Government is an agent, not a principal. Its primary obligation is to the interests of the national society it represents, not to the moral impulses that individual elements of that society may experience."[31]

Even if survival is the main concern of all states, it is not the only interest of all states all of the time. Clearly, at times interests compete. When they do, it is worth remembering that security is the primary concern, but sometimes moral concerns should matter. The war in Kosovo is hard to justify simply in terms of interests. This, in fact, may be a case where interests

(stopping the spread of a wider war in Europe) coincided with a moral concern (stopping the slaughter of innocent civilians). Afghanistan, too, seems to fall into this category. In any event, sometimes interests and moral concerns do coincide. Realists recognize this fact but consistently come down hard on the limits of international action. As the discussion on intervention pointed out, human rights are a domestic—not an international—concern. States face real limits to what they can do to—and for—other states, but those restrictions do not necessarily exclude lending moral or material support in defense of human rights.

Realist Thought and the Future of US Security Policy

The previous section examined four enduring issues in an attempt to illustrate how realist thought can help frame policy responses. This section explores four emerging issues that will dominate security discourse in the coming years: counterinsurgency, social revolutions, nuclear weapons, and power transitions.

Within the marketplace of ideas, *counterinsurgency* casts a long shadow but has a short life. Why? Policy makers are beginning to realize that the return on the investment is simply not worth the costs. Consider Afghanistan. After 10 years, billions of dollars spent, and thousands of lives lost, Afghanistan remains one of the poorest states in the world. With a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of $800, a life expectancy of 42 years, and a mortality rate of 250 per 1,000 live births, it is a brand name for suffering. Moreover, if the United States were to stay in Afghanistan for another 10 years—adding billions of dollars and countless lives to the equation—it would create a state equal to but not greater than Pakistan. We would do well to remember that, in many ways, Pakistan is an American creation. American money began flowing into that country in 1954. Over the decades, the United States has sent billions of dollars to Pakistan, training and equipping its military and intelligence services. The goal of this activity sounds all too familiar: "create a reliable ally with strong institutions and a modern, vigorous democracy."[32] But after nearly 60 years, Pakistan is one of the most anti-American states in the world—a far cry from what was originally intended. That is a sobering thought, one that will loom large in the minds of policy makers as they stare into the budget abyss; it is also why counterinsurgency is destined to become a thing of the past. Another reason is the killing of

Osama bin Laden. Although it represents the high-water mark for special operations forces, whose courage and performance have been nothing but heroic and extraordinary, his end marks the beginning of America's withdrawal from Afghanistan.

As with intervention, when realists write about counterinsurgency, they usually do so under the heading "We Should Not Try That Again." Why? From a practical perspective, the US experience in this sort of war has not been a happy one. Guatemala, Iran, Cuba, and Vietnam add up to a bad scorecard, and recent events have continued this negative trend. Contrary to popular opinion, there is nothing small about these "small wars." In colloquial terms, their largesse is captured by the words "hearts and minds," which translates to "we can save you if you'll let us." In general, saving strangers is a noble goal but not necessarily good policy because it rarely works, at least not for long. In the constellation of cases, only Malaya and the Philippines seem to be unequivocal successes. The others—most notably Algeria, Indochina, and Namibia—all ended as something less than originally imagined.[33] With that rate of success, the demand for counterinsurgency will inevitably decrease.

American policy makers have not had to deal with the political impact of *social revolutions* for some time, largely because they are such rare events. Social revolutions can be thought of as "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures; and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below."[34] A unique aspect of social revolution is that changes in social and political structures occur together and in mutually supporting fashion. France, Russia, and China are the classic examples, but American policy makers last had to deal with the aftermath of such cataclysmic events in 1979. Revolutions in Nicaragua and Iran changed the social, political, and economic landscapes of Central America and the Middle East while consuming one presidency and distracting another. In both cases, few saw them coming, and even fewer knew how to frame a response. As we watch popular uprisings sweep through the Middle East today, one cannot help wondering if social revolutions are far behind.[35] Here realism can help.

First, we must realize that we can do little to influence the outcome of social revolutions because they are so difficult to predict. Few saw the Sandinistas overthrowing the iron rule of Somoza, and even fewer foresaw

or understood events in Iran. In both cases, US policy went into a period of confusion. In Nicaragua this resulted in the ill-fated Contra war, and in Iran it led to a long period of exclusion and denial; neither response produced a long-lasting, positive strategic effect in the region. Second, we must be prepared to deal with the revolutionary government as it is, not as we wish it to be, while keeping in mind that the policies of today can become the problems of tomorrow. In the case of Nicaragua, this meant supporting a long, brutal war; in the case of Iran, it ultimately meant Saddam Hussein. In both, it resulted in the ill-fated Iran-Contra Affair. Third, whatever the outcome, we must come to grips with the fact that social revolutions can be short- or long-lived, and we cannot tell which direction they will take. In Nicaragua the revolutionary government lasted just over 10 years; in Iran, much longer. In all of these instances, realist thought forced policy makers to come to grips with humility—in fact, one could do little after the revolution had occurred. In foreign affairs, humility is a rare but valuable commodity nonetheless.

Within the nuclear arena, policy makers will need to learn how to cope with the rising demand for small, reliable *nuclear arsenals*. In this regard, China, India, and Pakistan are the "new normal" when it comes to nuclear arsenals, and other states like Iran have been watching closely. We know that, within most nuclear countries, large arsenals assure statesmen little. As in other areas of competition, there comes a point of diminishing returns, and with nuclear weapons that point comes quickly; one needs only a few weapons to achieve relative security, even against a larger, better-equipped opponent. After watching nearly 50 years of arms racing during the Cold War, these states have reached the central conclusion that statesmen are not sensitive to the actual number of weapons a state might possess; they are sensitive to the idea that a state might have them at all. All the tough talk between the Soviet Union and the United States did not amount to much regarding nuclear numbers—both raced up but backed down as soon as they safely could. This fact has not been lost on others.

Overcoming bureaucratic resistance to the idea of minimum deterrence will not be easy. The toughest obstacle is located within the cognitive domain.[36] Minimum deterrence poses a challenge to the perceptions that many political and military leaders have about how nuclear deterrence works. Cold War paradigms characterized by numerical and technological

parity, large numbers of weapons, and sophisticated counterforce war-fighting plans provide the mental focal points around which policy makers' thoughts turn. In their quest for cognitive consistency, they will flatly reject or ignore evidence that challenges their well-formed perceptions about deterrence. Solving this problem will not be easy because it demands that decision makers take time to analyze their own preexisting perceptions. Realism can help frame this dilemma. Policy makers should keep in mind that Cold War policies of deterrence were based not so much upon real-world evidence of how leaders would actually react to nuclear threats but upon expectations of how those leaders would react—expectations drawn from policy makers' own deeply held beliefs about deterrence. In other words, Cold War notions are no more real than post–Cold War ones. One hears calls for new thinking about deterrence all the time, but that thinking usually turns out to be more of the same. In essence, old nuclear states are trapped within their own psychic prisons—the newer ones not as much, and they have adapted quickly. The age of minimum deterrence has arrived.

All of the above pales in comparison to the effects that will result from *global power transitions* in the world. Already ongoing, the effects of the redistribution of power will become more apparent in the next 10 to 20 years. The changing balance of power among states in the world poses the greatest challenge to US security, and, in this regard, the United States is in a precarious position. Large-scale economic changes, together with ongoing wars, have placed the United States in a relatively weaker position with respect to its rivals than it occupied eight years ago. In economic terms, the costs have been staggering, with estimates as high as $3 trillion. In military terms, even if the United States were to achieve its current war aims, American forces are less capable than they were in 2000. Continual deployments, along with the accompanying wear and tear on personnel and equipment, have left the US military in desperate need of replenishment. As the new administration has made clear, coming to terms with these structural challenges will be demanding. Harder still is trying to find another case that rivals or even approximates the United States' relative decline, the pitch and speed of which appear unusual.

Complicating this are the BRICs—Brazil, Russia, India, and China. Policy makers may be familiar with the BRIC countries, but few of them have thought seriously about the challenges they pose to US leadership.

Poised to become the four most dominant economies by the year 2050, these four countries encompass over 25 percent of the world's land coverage as well as 40 percent of the world's population, and they hold a combined GDP of approximately $18.5 trillion. On almost every scale, they would represent the largest entity on the global stage. Hardly an alliance, they have taken steps to increase their political cooperation, mainly as a way of influencing the US position on trade accords. Among the questions facing the United States, few are more important than this one: Can the United States successfully play the role of junior partner in some places in the world? If so, what strategies should it devise to ensure its well-being?

For the past 20 years, American policy makers have been in love with dominance. Military doctrine, trade papers, and journals are strewn with ideas of global hegemony. But America has never been a global hegemon. In fact, the idea of global hegemony is more illusory than real; one finds no case in history of a true global hegemon—a state that ruled the entire world. Its influence stretching north to south, the United States is a regional hegemon, but even here it will have to back away from its love affair with dominance, especially in light of pressing fiscal constraints. Here, again, realism can help. When faced with historic global-power transitions, states have essentially three choices: dominate, accommodate, or retrench. Domination strategies tend to be most appealing, which explains the United States' attraction to them at the end of the Cold War. Accommodation strategies tend to be effective but not as popular because they are based upon the realization that one cannot "win." This strategy is not about winning but about attaining some continuous advantage.[37] Retrenchment strategies tend to be least appealing but can prove effective in some instances. Britain successfully retrenched following the war, allowing America to ascend to new heights, while enjoying the benefits of American hegemony herself. No doubt, the United States would have more difficulty doing this with the BRICs but would not find it impossible. The countries have much in common economically and could forge a new future together, but much of that effort rides on America's forgoing the urge to dominate.

Conclusions

Accepting the tenets of realism is an act of humility—a rare commodity in international affairs but a useful one nonetheless.[38] American policy

makers will eventually come to it, even if they do so reluctantly. Is realism in our future? The answer is yes. Advances in technology, health care, and communications are shaping the world we live in. Yet beneath it all, international politics has not changed significantly since Thucydides. In spite of economic interdependence, global transportation, and the information revolution, we live in a world where states must look out for themselves. As long as that holds true, statesmen are well advised to frame policy responses in terms of interests; no other tradition does that better than realism. In so doing, they should remember that a foreign policy based on a realist assessment is neither moral nor immoral but merely a "reasoned response to the world about us."[39]

Notes

1. Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy," *New Yorker* 87, no. 11 (2 May 2011): 44–55.

2. Originating with the Greeks, realism is found throughout contemporary European politics. One sees elements of realist thought, however, in various cultures throughout the world. Thus, realism is not "Western," per se. Interestingly, American policy makers have traditionally shunned realist thought. Woodrow Wilson thought balance-of-power politics was part of the "old world"; thus, he sought a "concert of power" to replace it. Since then, many US policy makers have followed Wilson's lead, seeking to make the "world safe for democracy."

3. Although it is true that the Greek concept of the state differs from our own, citizens of the Greek city-states possessed rights and freedoms not readily found elsewhere in the ancient world—the right to vote, assemble, own property, and pursue scientific knowledge, to name a few. For this reason, imperial Athens remains the archetype of contemporary democratic life.

4. Many realist authors and many forms of realism exist. The classical argument begins with Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes, and Niccolò Machiavelli. The theological argument is found in the works of Reinhold Niebuhr and Herbert Butterfield. Nicholas Spykman and A. T. Mahan represent the geopolitics school. The modern account begins with Hans Morgenthau, E. H. Carr, and George Kennan. The English School is best represented in the work of Martin Wight and Hedley Bull. The contemporary argument is found in Kenneth Waltz, Robert Gilpin, John Herz, Robert Tucker, Robert Osgood, Colin Gray, and John Mearsheimer. The strongest voice among sympathetic critics is Jack Donnelly.

5. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 245.

6. See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), chap. 2.

7. Arms control is but one example of such optimism.

8. Kenneth N. Waltz remains the most prominent modern realist. His *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1979) dominated discussions of international studies throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s. Even though the field has moved in other interesting directions, Waltz remains a force to be reckoned with.

9. John H. Herz, *The Nation-State and the Crisis of World Politics: Essays on International Politics in the Twentieth Century* (New York: D. McKay, 1976), 10. Even though Waltz is often cited as the father of "structural realism," John Herz first wrote about it. His book *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) remains a standard for readers interested in international politics.

10. See Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977) for a superb illustration of this relationship.

11. The phrase comes from Waltz's first book, *Man, the State, and War*. First published by Columbia University Press in 1959 and released by that press in a 2001 edition, it outlines the basic argument around which studies of war and peace still take place.

12. Some critics like to talk in terms of values rather than interests. Their point, I assume, is to cast the discussion of state motivation in terms of normative rather than material concerns. But nothing is more normative than thinking of security in terms of survival. Besides, few states, if any, pursue interests that they think are "valueless."

13. Waltz makes this point time and again, and it reverberates throughout his writings: "I built structural theory on the assumption that survival is the goal of states" ("Evaluating Theories," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 [December 1997]: 913). "The survival motive is taken as the ground of action." "By assumption, economic actors seek to maximize expected returns, and states strive to secure their survival." "I assume that states seek to ensure their survival" (*Theory of International Politics*, 92, 134, 91).

14. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, chap. 7, "Structural Causes and Economic Effects."

15. David Halloran Lumsdaine, *Moral Vision in International Politics: The Foreign Aid Regime, 1949–1989* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 13, 12. In this book, Lumsdaine offers a superb illustration and critique of this line of reasoning.

16. Liberalism itself might be considered a critique of realism or an optimistic response to realist pessimism.

17. See Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 485–507.

18. See John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994/95): 5–49, http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/A0021.pdf.

19. Jack Levy makes this observation in "The Causes of War: A Review of Theories and Evidence," in *Behavior, Society and Nuclear War*, vol. 1, ed. Philip E. Tetlock et al. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1989).

20. The literature on democracy and war is voluminous. For the philosophical argument, see Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Parts I and II," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 205–35, 323–53. For a quantitative account, see Rudolph J. Rummel, "Libertarianism and International Violence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 27, no. 1 (March 1983): 27–71. For an example of the structural account, see Clifton T. Morgan and Sally Campbell, "Domestic Structure, Decisional Constraints, and War: So Why Kant Democracies Fight?," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35, no. 2 (June 1991): 187–221.

21. Similarly, see Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post–Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

22. George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 66.

23. Jack Donnelly originally examined the issues addressed here. I do not intend to refute his interpretation or conclusions—merely to update and expand them. See Donnelly, "Twentieth Century Realism," in *Traditions of International Ethics*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations: 17, ed. Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 85–111.

24. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 86–87.

25. Donnelly, "Twentieth Century Realism," in Nardin and Mapel, *Traditions of International Ethics*, 101.

26. The best modern argument on nonintervention remains Michael Walzer's in *Just and Unjust Wars*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1977). Although hardly a professed realist, Walzer makes the strongest realist case I have found. See "A Few Words on Non-Intervention," in J. S. Mill, *Dissertations and Discussions* (New York, 1873), III: 238–63.

27. Lizza, "Consequentialist."

28. This theme reverberates throughout realist writings, particularly those of Waltz, Gilpin, and historian Paul Kennedy.

29. Again, this theme reverberates throughout Waltz's and Gilpin's writings, as well as others.

30. In the debate regarding human rights, some individuals think that rights are universal. That is, rights are applicable to all humans by virtue of the fact that they are human. Others believe that rights are relative. That is,

rights are culturally relative to the different societies found throughout the world. Recently, and in large part due to a reaction to cultural relativism, some realists have sided with those who support universal human rights. They do not, however, advocate intervention as a cure to human-rights abuses. Instead, they hold true to the principles of self-determination and sovereignty.

31. George F. Kennan, "Morality and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 64, no. 2 (Winter 1985/86): 206. George Kennan was one of America's leading realist practitioners as well as one of its most prolific authors. The architect of the containment policy, Kennan is revered as one of those rare intellectuals who actually had a dramatic impact on foreign affairs. His most important book on international politics remains *American Diplomacy*.

32. Lawrence Wright, "The Double Game," *New Yorker* 87, no. 13 (16 May 2011): 91.

33. I thank my colleague Dr. James Kiras for this information.

34. Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 4. Skocpol's work, along with Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), remains iconic in the genre.

35. I thank Dr. Mary Hampton for this observation.

36. See Jeremy Olsen, "The Best Defense: Making Maximum Sense of Minimum Deterrence" (thesis, School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 2011).

37. I thank my friend and colleague Dr. Everett Dolman for tutoring me on the importance of this idea.

38. Lastly, I thank Jack Donnelly for encouraging me to think about realism and human rights. His unselfish attention during my student years remains the model I strive to emulate. See his *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000) for the definitive, synthetic treatment of the realist tradition, and his *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989) for the same regarding human rights.

39. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 238.