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Note: This paper uses US English (with punctuation and rule of style).

**Realism and liberalism: Are these IR theories relevant and practical
from the perspective of an active diplomat?**

1) Introduction

The study of International Relations (IR) has attracted a deluge of theoretical attention from scores of thinkers spanning several centuries. But it is evidently clear that there were pioneers in the discipline. As early as the fifth century, Thucydides propagated some realist thought to earn himself the acclaim of “the father of realism.”¹ Martin Griffiths² also provides a helpful reference on key IR thinkers of the twentieth century and the traditions they represent. To many, realism and liberalism are considered as amongst “the dominant schools of thought in the contemporary study of international relations.”³ Some have argued that “political realism is the most successful and perhaps the most compelling of classical paradigms that shaped the development of the discipline.”⁴ Joseph S. Nye Jr. also

¹ Joseph S Nye, Jr. *Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History*, 6th Ed., New York: Pearson, 2007, p. 12.

² Martin Griffiths, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*, New York: Routledge, 1999, pp.vii & viii.

³ Martin Griffiths, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*, p. ix.

⁴ Penguin *Dictionary of International Relations*, p.465.

agrees with the assessment that realism is indeed “the dominant tradition in thinking about international politics.”⁵

The ideal starting point for this discussion would be to define IR. But this paper deliberately avoids that route. That is because of the acknowledged difficulty of adopting a commonly-denominated definition that transcends all paradigms and can indefinitely withstand the test of time. In a way, I sympathize with the view that our understanding and interpretation of the world is partly dependent on how we define the world we are seeking to understand and interpret.⁶ I have therefore left the definition of IR open and proceeded to express a view on whether, from my perspective as an active diplomat, theories of realism and liberalism are of any relevance and practicality to diplomacy.

I begin by reflecting on why we should care about theory in the first place. Secondly, I identify some core tenets of realism and liberalism, and also make effort to specify the thinkers associated with them. To meaningfully measure the degree and thus address the relevance and practicality of these two theories, I deem it necessary to also highlight some fundamental concepts the development of which the two paradigms contributed. For ease of reference, the concepts appear in italics form in this paper.

With the above-outlined approach, I hope to demonstrate that while the total body of thought underlying these theories may not collectively add much value in addressing real world problems that diplomats are entrusted, it can nonetheless be acknowledged that

⁵ Joseph Nye Jr., *Understanding International Conflicts*, 6th Ed., p.4.

⁶ Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 4th Ed., New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 1-7.

realism and liberalism made an indelible input to the conceptual development of the discourse of IR. My personal appraisal is presented in the conclusion to the paper.

I also make an attempt to identify a few pros and cons of realist and liberalist thinking, judging primarily from the accolades and criticisms leveled against them by other rival thinkers, including by succeeding generations of their fellow theorists. Such criticism is crucial in assessing the practicality and relevance of these theories to diplomacy – a profession whose objective is, by necessity, to deal with real and sometimes life-threatening issues that may not simply lend themselves to abstract theory. Before the conclusion on the relevance and practicality of realism and liberalism, I also briefly describe the profession of diplomacy itself, including its broad objectives.

Clearly, the literature I utilized for this paper exposes a daunting challenge of ably ‘distinguishing the wood from the trees and the trees from the forest.’ It is true that different thinkers within each tradition broadly subscribe to core assumptions underlying their paradigm. For instance, realists advocate continuity and are *pessimists*, while liberalists focus on change and are *optimists*. But there is also evidence⁷ that differences exist within similar traditions, such as between classical and contemporary theories.

As an example, one finds a series of strands⁸ of thought within the realist and liberal camps. In realism, there are ‘conventional’ or ‘classical,’ ‘radical’ or ‘critical’ and ‘extreme’ realists (like Henry Kissinger). I came across a category of ‘Christian’ realists (such as Reinhold Niebuhr), who are pacifists associated with the belief that a state does not

⁷ See also Martin Griffiths, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*, p.1.

⁸ For example, Joseph Nye Jr., *Understanding International Conflicts*, 6th Ed., pp. 45 – 48, identifies and discusses three strands of liberalism, namely economic, social and political.

necessarily need to rely exclusively on force to pursue its interests.⁹ There are also so-called ‘fundamentalist,’ ‘structural’ and ‘constitutional’ realists. One also finds within the realist school ‘defensive’ and ‘offensive’ thinkers. Variances are equally visible among liberalists. Within their troupe there are, amongst others, ‘interventionist’ (like Woodrow Wilson), ‘non-interventionist’ and its American form of ‘isolationist’ liberalism, as well as a compromise between the interventionists and non-interventionists, referred to as ‘containment’ liberalism.

There is also a version of liberal thought referred to as ‘republican.’ As in realism, ‘radical’ liberals (such as Richard Cobden) also exist. The emergence of the ‘neo-neo’ generation within both the realism (such as Kenneth Waltz) and liberalism (such as Robert Keohane) also brings a divergence of paths amongst the thinkers belonging to these theories. Neo-realists, for instance, brought in simplicity. They disagree with the classical theorists that ‘aggressive and violent’ is what humans are. Instead, they argue that the situation around humans and the states is inherently dangerous. They also contend that the state is in fact impersonal to neither have friends nor enemies.

In view of the above, I therefore concluded that attempting to precisely articulate the thin divide amongst all the thinkers associated with realism and liberalism – solely based on a paper of such a limited scope – would be intellectually dishonest and could also render my analysis complicated.¹⁰ In the interest of simplicity, I have knowingly bundled the thinkers associated with each of these paradigms as if they ever agreed on everything, including on the ‘levels’ or ‘units of analysis.’

⁹ Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations, 4th Ed.*, p. 73.

¹⁰ This conclusion takes into account evidence that it is not uncommon to distort the labeling of some of the key thinkers. For example, Edward Hallett Carr is particularly cited as having accused J.D.B Miller for believing that Norman Angell was a realist rather than a liberal (see Martin Griffiths, p.55 and also p. ix).

2) Why should we care about theory?

This is an imperative question. Defining IR theory is as controversial as trying to define the IR discipline itself. But, according to Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley;

Theory, at its simplest, is reflective thought. We engage in theorizing when we think in depth and in an abstract way about something...Simply because we sometimes find ourselves asking questions we are not able to answer without reflection, without abstract thought.

Sometimes the question we are posing is about how things work, or *why things happen*.

Sometimes the question is about *what we should do*, either in the sense of what action is morally right. Sometimes the question is about *what something or other means*, how it is to be interpreted. Different theories are engaged ..., but the root idea is the same – we turn to theory when the answer to a question that is, for one reason or another, important to us is not clear.¹¹

However, Brown and Ainley also argue that it is possible that an answer that might be deemed clear at some point could also be wrong! This is especially the case when subsequent events bring to light the likelihood that what was previously taken for granted was in fact a mistake. This observation perhaps offers the best clue why the field of IR is overburdened with so many alternative theories. It is simply because developments over centuries generated different kinds of theoretical analysis in the form of explanatory, normative, formative and interpretative thinking.

Theories are variable and can range from simple to complex questions. One simple theoretical reflection attributable to Susan Strange is on the question of why characteristically certain people tend to run *out* of a burning building while others may chose to run *into* the

¹¹ Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 4th Ed., p.7.

same burning building. If insanity or suicidal intent cannot be ruled out for all other humans, logically those likely to run *into* a blazing building could be rescuers and fire fighters. A much more complex and frequent theoretical debate is on why states go to war with one another.¹² Notably on the latter, it is opined that the dominant theoretical explanation in the nineteenth-century seemed to suggest that:

... there was not a great deal of theorizing on the causes of war in general, because most people thought that the causes of war, at least in the international system of that era, were obvious...It was taken for granted that states went to war for gain, or in self-defence because they were attacked by some other states that hoped to be victors, and hoped to reap benefits in excess of potential losses.¹³

But what had seemed an 'obvious' notion that "states had the right to go to war whenever they wanted"¹⁴ was later challenged in the twentieth-century when deeper thought emerged on the exact causes of the greatest European wars at the time. This question demanded further theoretical reflection. Rather than applying the 'basic force model' that simply blamed Germany as a *unitary* entity for acting irresponsibly, some twentieth century theorists introduced new elements "ranging from the role of special interests to the psychological profile of particular countries or leaders."¹⁵

Contrary to nineteenth-century reasoning, contemporary reasoning is that modern wars are not only costly and a simple rational egoistic affair to be left to the statesmen to

¹² Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, p.8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁵ Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, p. 9.

ponder alone. Through better theoretical reflection, it is now widely believed that contemporary wars are fought for different reasons. Some theorists also argue that, in 'real' liberal democracies, waging a war is no longer a determination of the leadership alone; making that decision requires significant mobilization of domestic support and public opinion as to why war is necessary. For example, putting aside its unpopularity, President Bush's 'War on terror' and the US invasion of Iraq initially had the wider support of many Americans, fuelled largely by anger over the devastating events of 9/11.

Of course, students of IR may wish for a single theory for the discipline. But the above brief account teaches us that "we have many competing theories because none of them is in reality very satisfactory."¹⁶ There is neither a single explanation why things happen in the manner they do, nor is there a unanimity account of all events in the world we live. Any theoretical perspective is as good as any other. The study of IR is no exception. In connection with the above-cited example on the causes of war, Brown and Ainley rightly conclude that: "The various competing theories of the causes of war each has its own account of what a good argument looks like, and the number of perspectives available, although multiple, is not infinite. There are some bad arguments, and plurality of theories does not cover all possibilities, or validate all positions."¹⁷

Another example is the notion of 'balance of power,' as a characteristic of the states-system. How is 'equilibrium' assured in the states-system? The metaphoric depiction of the states-system as a chandelier which, despite the collection of many pieces hanging below it,

¹⁶ Ibid., p.10.

¹⁷ Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, p.11.

stays stable because of the equal distribution of weights or downwards gravity offers a theoretical answer to this question.¹⁸ This metaphor must be of particular interest to students of IR. It offers a hint to answering the question of stability in world politics. We can better determine whether stability in the states-system is achievable through ‘unipolarity,’ ‘bipolarity,’ ‘tripolarity’ or ‘multipolarity.’ Through such a metaphor, we have a better chance to explain states or other actors’ behavior.

Joseph S. Nye, Jr. regards theories as a roadmap without which we would be lost and unable to make sense of an ‘unfamiliar terrain.’ He asserts that “Theories are the indispensable tools we use to organize facts ...Even when we think we are just using common sense, there is usually an implicit theory guiding our actions.”¹⁹ Therefore, by turning to theories diplomats and other practitioners can come closer to addressing the many real questions that often need critical thinking and analysis.²⁰

3) Salient tenets of realism and liberalism

a) Realism

The main thrust of realist thinking is best captured in the following statement:

The state-centric view of the world, especially in its realist variant, paints a picture of great insecurity and fear. Concerned for their own security, possibly desiring to dominate others, states are obliged to keep a watchful eye open for ways of enhancing their own power, and

¹⁸ Ibid., p.109.

¹⁹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Understanding International Conflicts*, 6th Ed., pp. 8 & 12.

²⁰ A fair point for diplomats to bear in mind is made by a liberal thinker Charles Beitz (Griffiths, p.61) that: ‘It is not a fault of theory that such a gap exists between its injunctions and contemporary practice...’

reducing that of others. Unrestrained and unprotected by any international government, states must look after their own security, even though they cannot but be aware that their attempts to do so may induce insecurity in others. Thus the scene seems set for a wretched world, in which the idea of an international 'order' would be preposterous.²¹

As indicated earlier, realist thought is traced as far back as Ancient Greece, particularly in the works of Thucydides.²² He made one of the first attempts to explain IR in terms of *power politics*²³ based on the premise that, despite the presumed 'legal equality' of states, the distribution of power in the states-system is uneven. Other pioneers included Thomas Hobbes and Niccolo Machiavelli who also elaborated vital realist accounts of IR. Machiavelli is particularly remembered for his emphasis on 'necessity' and cruelty at the expense of moral considerations. For instance, he incited princes to think, not only just about 'how not to be good,' but also rely on brute force if it secured liberty. Other influential realists include Edward Hallett Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, former US President Richard Nixon and former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. With little variation, all these and other realist thinkers adopted the *power politics* approach coined by the pioneers of classical political realism. Overall, the state remained the main actor and dominant feature in realist analysis of IR.

²¹ Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations, 4th Ed.*, p.107.

²² See also Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Understanding International Conflicts, 6th Ed.*, p.12, categorically confirming that Thucydides is regarded as the father of realism.

²³ Graham Evans and Geoffrey Newnham, *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, p. 465.

In summary, realist account of IR is anchored on a *state-centric* view of the world. States are considered the main actors.²⁴ Realists see states as rational *egoists*, operating under conditions of *anarchy* – this is akin to the Hobbesian notion of *state of nature* where life is ‘nasty, brutish and short.’ According to realists, the states-system environment is characterized by hostility. Acquisition of *power* is a rational and inevitable goal. In the struggle to maximize power, of paramount consideration to the individual states is to influence others’ behavior while averting being influenced. This in turn triggers a chain reaction of enhanced capabilities by all states, when each state feels threatened. All states then act on the caution that ‘better safe than sorry.’ State behavior is therefore considered as a ‘plagiaristic’ of anarchy, where the ability to influence others is dependent on the power possessed. The end result is a *security dilemma*²⁵ punctuated by emphasis on ‘capabilities.’

In the end, *national survival* and *national interests* are defined in terms of power. For states, ethics, morality and values are secondary. The ‘classical’ realist explanation of why states behave this way is simply that human beings are naturally aggressive. The state-system is seen as a logical consequence and a reflection of human nature. That being the case, humans need the restraint of *coercive force* of government. Realists also see a clear *distinction between domestic and international affairs*. Accordingly, relations among states take place in the *absence of a world government*. *Sovereignty*, which is defined in the sense that states answer to no higher authority, dictates that states must look to themselves to survive. There is no central authority in the states-system as they are autonomous and responsible for their own fate,

²⁴ Graham Evans and Geoffrey Newnham, *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, p. 465.

²⁵ For detailed discussion, refer to the Graham Evans and Geoffrey Newnham, *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, pp. 494 & 495.

even though they do not control their destiny. States possess the sole judgment on when to resort to violence and make peace.

According to realists, the international system is anarchical and the primary focus is the *distribution of power* amongst states. Anarchy necessitates the acquisition of military capability to deter attack and guarantee self-preservation. The *balance of power* is a favored technique to managing power, since all states seek it. For realists, what constantly alters in the states-system is the balance of power, not the dynamics of the system itself. Stability is seen as not the result of authoritative force of international law or the work of international organizations. It is rather attained through the aptitude to manipulate flexible alliances. A realist world is one where there prevails *persistent conflict and competition*. Realists see little chance for cooperation, unless it serves national interests. Ultimately, the contention by realists is that the international states-system gravitates towards a hierarchy, based on power capabilities. Legally and in a formal sense, realists recognize *equality* of all states, albeit at a discount, irrespective of the power and commensurate capability possessed by the individual states.

The balance of power is perhaps one of the most crucial innovations of realism. In fact, it is to date widely referenced, especially in the analysis of political dynamics in the states-system. It has also developed into an important term of art in the diplomatic profession. At the same time, by providing a set of nine divergent meanings of the term, Martin Wright²⁶ proves that the notion of balance of power is by no means simple to explain. Realists apply the term not to describe a deliberate and consensual arrangement by states. It comes

²⁶Graham Evans and Geoffrey Newnham, *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, pp. 41 – 43.

naturally or by ‘necessity,’ not that states *want* it, but as an intuitive reaction for self-preservation. It is an unintended consequence of states’ action for achieving the power equilibrium in international politics. The so-called *bandwagoning* has also been invoked as an explanation for the concept of balance of power.

Balance of power entails a dynamic process in which, regularly, states adjust their levels of power to curb the *hegemonic dominance* of others. Realists crudely see hegemony as leadership based primarily on economic and military capability. As Martin Griffiths²⁷ explains, the balance of power is variable in form. It can be *unipolar*, *bipolar*, or *multipolar*. Some have also talked about a *tripolar* balance of power. According to realists, it is the power equilibrium that changes over time, but not the system itself.

Realism treats the state as a *unitary* entity and places *national survival* at the centre of its explanation of the state’s endless obsession with acquisition of power. Power is seen as both a means and an end in itself; a shield for survival in a states-system environment governed by hostility and in which every state continuously seeks dominance. For realists, IR primarily revolve around the *struggle for power* amongst states jockeying to influence the behavior of others, while at the same time averting being influenced themselves. Richard Ashley’s anglicized phrase of *anarchy problematic* is another key concept in realism. This is the notion of the states-system as *self-help* and anarchic. Thomas Hobbes, who is recognized as the first modern philosopher to apply the concept of anarchy, argued that “the state of nature is one of misery and hardship in which individuals continually struggle for survival”²⁸It is however

²⁷ Martin Griffiths, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*, 1999, p.1

²⁸ Martin Griffiths, et al. *International Relations: Key Concepts, 2nd Ed.*, New York: Routledge, 2008, p.7

clarified that by anarchy, realists do not necessarily imply absolute chaos.²⁹ It rather connotes the sense that no single state or a group of them have unmovable command of the states-system.

b) Liberalism

By holding a philosophical view contrary to that held by Hobbes, John Locke features prominently as an early pioneer of liberal thought. Rather than seeing humanity as constantly an endless state of war, Locke saw anarchy as less of a threat and that there was great potential for humans to cooperate. Other cited³⁰ early contributors to liberal tradition include Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill. Norman Angell, Francis Fukuyama, Alfred Zimmern and Woodrow Wilson also hold high ranks in liberalism.

The *Dictionary of International Relations*³¹ outlines four crucial propositions of liberalism. First, is that “peace can best be secured through the spread of democratic institutions on a world-wide basis.”³² Part of the reasoning here is that *people do not want war but law*. People principally crave for *national self-determination*, anchored on strong *constitutional regimes*. According to liberalists, wars are not caused by the people. It is governments, especially militarists, autocracies and monarchies that cause wars. Some liberalists (such as Michael Doyle) have in fact argued that liberal democracies rarely go to war with each other; the inclination is for them to fight non-democracies. Moreover, a heinous tendency is that non-

²⁹ For further elaboration, refer to Martin Griffiths et al (*ibid.*, pp. 7 & 8).

³⁰ For more details, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Understanding International Conflicts*, 6th Ed., pp.4 & 5.

³¹ Graham Evans and Geoffrey Newnham, *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, pp. 304 – 306.

³² *Ibid.*, p.305.

liberal states can even wage war against their own populations. It is partly for this reason that Norman Angell held the view that *war was futile and irrational*. For that reason, he predicted its obsolescence in as far as it was incompatible with the pursuit of economic interests.³³ Immanuel Kant also shared this view when he predicted a *zone of peace*³⁴ made up solely of liberal democracies.

According to liberalists, a firm foundation for democratic states could be facilitated through *respect for the will of the people*. If this condition is satisfied, there would be *perpetual peace*, especially given that democracies are inherently peaceful. In the minds of liberalists, *citizens' consent* and the *primacy of public opinion* are a critical foundation for any legitimate government. In this context, liberal tradition can be said to be solidly grounded on strong *ethics, moral values* and the *rule of law*. This is so because, unlike realists, liberalists accord higher *priority to individual rights than the state*.³⁵

Secondly, liberalism has at the core of its propositions some strong believers (such as Angell) on the possibility of a *harmony of interests* in the states-system, both nationally and internationally. *Cooperation* and *interdependence*³⁶ are deemed feasible in IR. Liberalists in fact contend that what unites people overrides that which divides them. In this context, some

³³ See Martin Griffiths, *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations*, pp. 53 – 57 for Angell's background and views.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³⁵ Building upon the notion of 'social contract' to which philosophers such as Hobbes, Rousseau and Kant subscribed, Charles Beitz developed upon Rawls's work (1971) to elaborate on the 'principles of justice' to protect individual rights, which he expands further to 'global distributive justice' (Martin Griffiths, pp.58-62).

³⁶ This notion is best illustrated by Norman Angell's metaphor of the 'leaky boat', the 'rower' and the 'baler.'

liberalists have vigorously promoted the value of *proper education*³⁷ as a major contributor to combating the ‘veil of ignorance’ that sometimes breeds misunderstanding.

A third tenet of liberal theory (also often referred to as neo-liberalism) has a strong link to the founding of international organizations, such as the United Nations. This is their belief in *inevitability of progress*, based on the proposition of elimination of anarchy and its replacement with the rule of law. This point is articulated in the statement that:

If disputes continue to occur, these would be settled by established judicial procedures, since the rule of law is just as applicable to states as it is to individuals. An international legal regime based on common voluntary membership of international organizations would begin to fulfil the functions of a legislature, executive and judiciary, while still preserving the freedom and independence of the states.³⁸

A fourth key proposition which is an extension of the above-cited progressive view is *collective security*. This contrasts with the self-help realist doctrine. For liberalists, coalitions of law-abiding democracies can be easily organized to root out trouble-maker states that undermine collective security. It is argued that, through the ingenuity of liberalists (such as Woodrow Wilson) the founding of international organizations arose out of the idea of collective security. This is “public assurances of security backed by the collective will of all

³⁷ Martin Griffiths *Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations* (pp.53 and 56) observes that Norman Angell and John Hobson believed that ‘war often occurred because of jingoism, distorted nationalism and the ability of military elites to distort their citizen’s views of other state’. Having been a journalist himself, Angell ‘was accurately aware of the way in which the press could shape and distort public opinion and he was committed to using his position to change public opinion through the press.’ Griffiths (ibid, p. 103) also cites Alfred Zimmern as having suggested in the late 1920s the establishment of an ‘international lending library ‘to facilitate access of the poor to expensive books for the purpose of developing a ‘international public opinion’ on behalf of peace.

³⁸ Graham Evans and Geoffrey Newnham, *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, p. 305.

nations”³⁹ and “security being conceived of as a collective, communal responsibility rather than an individual one.”⁴⁰ Liberalists argue that collective security offers a more permanent solution to the security dilemma.

In sum, contrary to pessimist realists, liberalists hold a rather more *optimistic* view that progress is achievable at both national and international levels, provided that all states abide by the *settled norms*. Accordingly, collective security is a permanent solution to the security dilemma; national self-determination, non-aggression, respect for international law, support for sovereignty; compatibility between nationalism and democracy, are paramount. Non-interventionist liberalists particularly hold the view that “a liberal world order is implicit in history and that the virtues of liberalism itself would spread without any active prodding by its adherents.”⁴¹ It is this same thought that partly informed US approach of ‘isolationism,’ until in the 19th Century when the advent of fascism and communism called this approach into question and resulted in a shift to a policy of ‘containment.’

4) Pros and cons of realism and idealism

Other thinkers, such as transnational, globalists and complex dependency theorists, do agree that realism remains an important theoretical perspective. They also accept that for generations of scholars and practitioners, realism best captures the essence of international politics. The realist notion that the states-system is mainly anarchic remains valid in the analysis of IR. Despite the emergence of a new caliber of non-state actors, states

³⁹ Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations, 4th Ed.*, p. 21.

⁴⁰ Graham Evans and Geoffrey Newnham, *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, p. 305.

⁴¹ Graham Evans and Geoffrey Newnham, *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, p. 306.

undoubtedly continue to be the central actors, especially in norm-setting and designing regimes crucial in regulating global transactions. Not many would question the view that great powers still dominate others.⁴² As Waltz also acknowledges, international politics remains anchored on distribution of power, with the states-system having the leverage of imposing the form of behavior required of many states.

But despite its significant contribution, realism is criticized for methodological inconsistency and imprecision in definition of the key terminologies it employs. This includes the fluidity of the distinction between the notions of power, control and authority.⁴³ Most importantly, realist thinking has been disparaged for its ethical implications, especially its too much emphasis on power and hegemonic dominance based solely on economic and military capability. Such an approach is seen as underestimating the possibility of the ‘standards bearer’ hegemony, based on the states’ demonstrable track record for respect for the values and moral principles, such as human rights and democracy. Realism has also been critiqued for its failure to acknowledge that hegemonies may not necessarily need to be single state entities; they can also be integrative and cooperative, as the example of the European Union has demonstrated.

Furthermore, others (such as Robert Jervis) have argued that realism promoted an overall costly policy and ignored the fact that, since war was costly and cooperation beneficial, there was a strong incentive to overcome the security dilemma by adopting policies that improve rather than exacerbate relations between putative adversaries. Realism’s

⁴² Ibid., p. 466.

⁴³ Refer to Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations, 4th Ed.*, Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion.

obsession with the so-called 'high politics' and too much emphasis on states as main actors commits an error of excluding the emergence of other influential non-state actors. Realism has further been exposed for its failure to explain clearly major post-Second World War developments, including the growing move towards integrative and cooperative approaches which renders the disutility of military force.

While not disagreeing with realists on the importance of anarchy as an important unit of analysis for states behavior, liberalists have nonetheless also expressed the view that the issue should not be overly exaggerated to the extent that realists did. As Martin Griffiths, Terry O'Callaghan and Steven C. Roach point out, constructivists are correct that in itself anarchy was meaningless, because "an anarchy of friends is quite different from an anarchy of enemies, but both are possible."⁴⁴

Similarly, liberalism has been applauded, including that "it honestly and self-consciously intends to work for a brave new world where human rights and the well being of individuals are given a higher priority than state's rights and narrower conceptions of national interests which characterize the more traditional approaches."⁴⁵ The liberalists are seen as strong champions of human dignity and individual freedoms, which they argue should not, under any pretence, be usurped by the state. By also placing emphasis on *constitutionalism, democracy, rule of law and accountability* of the state to its citizens, liberalism has made a great contribution to the debate of whether it is the interests of the state or the individual that should come first.

⁴⁴ Martin Griffiths et al, *International Relations: Key Concepts, 2nd Ed.*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Refer to the *Dictionary of International Relations*, p.306, for complete discussion.

Some liberalists hold a plausible interventionist position that liberal ideals can be 'helped along' and that "war on behalf of liberal ideals may occasionally be required to rid the world of illiberal and persistent opponents."⁴⁶ But, just like their realist opponents, they have not been spared of criticism. They are largely chastised for inability to come to terms with the use of force for particular and specific ends – the so-called "defensible reasons for going to war despite its economic costs."⁴⁷ In the 1920s and 1930s realists particularly attacked liberal thinking as being utopian and idealistic.

5) What is diplomacy and its primary objective?

Diplomacy has meant many different things to different analysts. Chas W. Freeman's *The Diplomat's Dictionary*⁴⁸ confirms this point. He provides several definitions offered for this activity, from both ancient and modern authors of diverse background and persuasion. Diplomacy occurs for a purpose. Diplomacy is aimed "not at incidental or opportunistic arrangements, but at creating solid and durable relations."⁴⁹ It is "the science or art of negotiation"⁵⁰ and "the management of the relations between independent states by process

⁴⁶ Graham Evans and Geoffrey Newnham, *Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, p. 305.

⁴⁷ Martin Griffiths (p.56) discusses Cornelia Navari's and Colin Gray's critique of Angell on the notion of interdependence.

⁴⁸ For complete details, refer to Chas Freeman Jr., *The Diplomat's Dictionary*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997, pp. 70 – 81.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

of negotiation.”⁵¹ It involves the “skill or address in the conduct of international intercourse and negotiations.”⁵²

Some perceive diplomacy broadly as a process through which states conduct their foreign relations and as a vehicle by which allies cooperate and foes peacefully resolve conflicts. Diplomacy is also seen as a means through which states communicate, bargain, influence one another, and are able to re-adjust their differences. William Macomber once remarked that the profession of diplomacy “adheres to proper objectives and most effective methods, [it] is an honorable profession ... committed to the search for peace...” Because of what diplomats stand for, R.B. Mowat also complements such a view by characterizing diplomats as ‘the most civilized portion of the human race.’⁵³

6) Conclusion

In view of the foregoing, what then is the relevance and practicality of realism and liberalism to an active diplomat? Obviously, there is no easy answer. Certainly, one cannot have reasonable ground to categorically deny that both of these theories have had a profound impact in shaping the discourse of IR. *Continuity* (realism) and *change* (liberalism) remain twin characteristics of our world. For that reason, many propositions made by both realists and liberalists are germane. The question of relevance and practicality of any theory is therefore not an easy one. For any diplomat to claim they have a simple answer is a subjective judgment dependent upon the orientation of the foreign and domestic policies of

⁵¹ Chas Freeman Jr., *The Diplomat's Dictionary*, p. 74.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵³ Refer to Chas Freeman Jr., *The Diplomat's Dictionary*, pp. 237 & 238.

the state they represent. As a matter of fact, diplomats do not necessarily design foreign policy; they are entrusted with its implementation.

However, there should be less doubt that in discharging their day-to-day duties, all diplomats find themselves constantly relying on the many important concepts and referents developed with the input of the realists and liberalists.⁵⁴ Some of the ‘stock-in-trade’ concepts to practitioners of diplomacy include sovereignty, anarchy, national interests, power politics, balance of power,⁵⁵ hegemony, democracy, constitutionalism and rule of law, human rights, and what have you. All these, including the notion of power politics as a *relational* concept, are vital to all practitioners seeking to explain IR. Analysts continue to refer to ‘great powers,’ ‘superpower,’ ‘military power,’ ‘economic power’ and even the rather derisory referent to America’s perceived war-like tendency of ‘hyper-power.’ These are terminologies that diplomats also make frequent use.

At the same time, there are some assumptions and propositions underpinning realism and liberalism which not all diplomats would find relevant and practical in dealing with real-life issues. Consistent with the definition of diplomacy described above, this is precisely because diplomacy is “an institution with a culture of its own oriented towards problem-solving and negotiation rather than violence and coercion.”⁵⁶ Diplomats may not necessarily design of foreign policy; but, as also indicated above, they are entrusted with the daunting

⁵⁴ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Understanding International Conflicts, 6th Ed., p.8*, cites a powerful statement from John Maynard Keynes to the effect that ‘practical men who consider themselves above theory are usually listening to some dead scribbler from the past whose name they have long forgotten.’

⁵⁵ See observation by Brown and Ainley (p.108) that the notion of balance of power is inescapable and appears not only in treaties but also in memoirs of diplomats.

⁵⁶ Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations, 4th Ed., p. 103*.

task of implementing it. Unlike military statecraft, conventional diplomacy relies on negotiation and persuasive influence, not violence. It is my view therefore that diplomacy would thrive better on a liberal platform geared towards *soft power*.

Any diplomat would certainly not disagree that states do not play by the rules at all times. The realists therefore make a valid point that, in a situation where peaceful sovereign states (both liberal and non-liberal) co-exist without a world government, the world should inherently be dangerous. It is also true that certain states have a tendency to project hostile intentions towards others. Nonetheless, the seemingly violent tone that some realists promote by portraying the nation states-system as a full-blown perpetual state of war, may not easily connect with most diplomats. Indeed, war is an important ingredient of statecraft and cannot be avoided. In a world of a plentiful mix of liberal and non-liberal states, instability is most probably. From a diplomat's point of view and as Michael Doyle points out, 'a healthy dose of realist prudence by liberal statesman' is desirable to ensure stability.

The contention by realists that war plays a crucial role in preserving the states-system and that the balance of power is a source of stability does not appear plausible to a sensible diplomat to fully subscribe to. War is simply devoid of morality and ethics. War has proven not only costly; it also catastrophic by all accounts. 'The realists' deliberate projection of violence as a means and an end in itself is therefore devoid of morality and ethical conduct. By extension, such a view runs contrary to the objective of diplomacy as an institution geared towards non-violent means to resolution of conflict and disputes. Might cannot make right, neither should it be a substitute for morality.

The rather restrictive realist conception of 'power' as a function of capacity to use force also seems ignorant to the possibility that the prestige of nation can be a source of power

that other states may want to copycat. 'Attractive' or 'soft power' is an equally important power resource as 'hard power.' For that reason, I believe the liberalists' approach that promotes harmony of interests is more appealing to diplomacy as a profession that cherishes cooperation and peaceful co-existence of states. In any event, from a diplomatic standpoint, power alone can no longer be seen as a preserve of the state; individuals, groups and other actors have also demonstrated increased ability to project power and influence the actions of states on domestic and global issues.

I am also tempted to add that a shrewd diplomat is one who would appreciate the importance of cautious optimism and prepared to reject absolute skepticism. This is compatible with the liberal notion that, even under conditions of anarchy, we must leave the door open to the possibility that progress can still be achievable.⁵⁷ The realists 'kill or be killed' or 'eat or be eaten' approach seem to leave not enough room to possibility that, even amidst chaos, cooperation is workable. This is another area where liberalism offers hope to diplomacy as an institution seeking durable peaceful solutions to problems.

Principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of states are indeed paramount 'state moralist' concepts. But diplomats will agree that their enjoyment cannot be at the expense of the legitimacy of a state. By highlighting individual rights above the narrow state interests, liberalists make a crucial contribution to the profession of diplomacy. State control is not unlimited; it flows from the consent of those on whose behalf authority is discharged. Rulers are not the state. In this area, some realists lacked careful judgment by pretending that what counts is a 'hierarchical' nation states-

⁵⁷ As Joseph S. Nye also confirms, in *Understanding International Conflicts*, 6th Ed., p. 19, 'Cooperation does occur in international affairs, even though the general structure of anarchy tends to discourage it.'

system in which those wielding necessary economic and military power control the 'international environment.' This amounts to arbitrary confiscation of sovereignty of the state and involuntary surrender of nationalism by the governed.

Again, by placing emphasis on potential for international 'settled norms' to regulate state behavior, including through international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), liberalism has contributed to curbing impunity. In today's world, international regimes such as genuine humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect (or R2P), the latter albeit still contentious, are vital concepts. Long gone are days when "most people are more in danger from their own governments than foreigners."⁵⁸ Any state that ignores the international 'settled norms' and with impunity infringes on the freedoms of its citizens and hopes to get away with it is, and must, certainly incur the disciplinary action of those states that subscribe to liberal ideals. This is consistent with interventionist liberalism, also supported by statesmen such as Woodrow Wilson. Certainly, liberal ideals do sometimes need to be 'helped along.' This is an important liberalist contribution to the discourse of IR and the institution of diplomacy.

In as far as morality is concerned, the realist reasoning that domestic policy is different from foreign policy is reasonable. But from a diplomatic point of view foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. Realists are correct that, legally speaking, there is no such thing as a world government. For example, in exercising its duty of the maintenance of peace and security (through the Security Council) the UN can only rely on voluntary contributions of uniformed personnel from the 'sovereign' states that form its membership. The UN is in fact

⁵⁸ Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 4th Ed., p. 132.

forbidden from having a standing army of its own. Neither is the UN permitted to borrow funds from private financial institutions. For example, Article 17 of its Charter provides that the expenses of the UN are a collective responsibility of its members. These examples are clear differences between the UN and what an ideal 'world government' would look like. Is it then a valid point to say we live in an unregulated or 'ungoverned system'? The answer is no. There may not be a 'world government' or a Hobbesian 'superleviathan' in a strict sense; but the existence of institutions such as the UN at least offers chance for order and 'world governance.' In this area, liberalism makes propositions that are helpful to the institution of diplomacy.

Irrefutably, the balance of power is a persuasive unit of analysis to account for states behavior. Realists made a great contribution to the elaboration of this concept. The concept should certainly fascinate every diplomat. However, from a diplomatic point of view, the concept would be pertinent if the 'balance' were not to occur 'fortuitously' or by accident. States must consciously ensure the long-term prevalence of stability in the states-system by tacitly adhering to the 'settled norms.' Indeed, diplomats can agree that: "If a balance of power is to work, states must *want* it to work, and must be committed to the idea that preservation of the system of states is desirable."⁵⁹ Peace and stability are so important to diplomacy and cannot be left to chance, as some realists seem to suggest.

The confirmation by realists that states do have interests is a predictable point that any active diplomat should know and accept. It is also true that on several occasions such interests do not coincide, thus creating a conflict that requires a resolution by any means.

⁵⁹ Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 4th Ed., p. 112.

The mode of reaching a resolution is what matters most to the institution of diplomacy. For a diplomat, negotiation or mediation, rather than violence, would be the preferred option for the settlement of disputes. War or other coercive measures are the last mechanisms that diplomacy would only contemplate if pacific means fail. Any theory of IR that places at the fore-front violence as the primary means to bring about change should necessarily receive apprehensive response from most, if not all, career diplomats.

For a modern diplomat, the reasoning that states have the right to wage so-called legitimate and properly declared wars is not sufficient. A body of governance is now in place, including through the provisions of the Charter of the UN, spelling out the circumstances under which war is permissible, that is, “as an act of self-defence; or as an act of law enforcement to assist others in defending themselves.”⁶⁰ A recent example of the ‘just war doctrine’ is Libya. Realism is just too broad in its implications for the use of violence. It is important to emphasize a point that separates realists and liberalists. That is the latter’s view that a coalition of liberal states can wage lawful wars against aggressors, with which I concur. This is a responsible use of force, and it is diplomatically credible.

A lot more can be said about realism and liberalism – both positive and negative. But for any diplomat to decisively articulate the practicality and relevance of these theories is a matter of degree and subjective judgment. After all, these are not the only theories of IR.⁶¹ Fairness therefore demands that each theorist’s views be situated within the context of the

⁶⁰ Chris Brown and Kirsten Ainley, *Understanding International Relations, 4th Ed.*, p. 117.

⁶¹ Other theories include dependency theory; radical/critical theories (such as Marxism); constructivism (although some believe it is an approach rather than a theory), positivism and many other modern ones.

times they lived and wrote.⁶² Regardless of the limitations in their assumptions, all IR theories must inspire every active and aspiring diplomat. At the same time, in determining which propositions are realistic and practical, diplomats must be guided by the specific problem they are seeking to resolve. Appreciating the strengths of each theory is very much helpful in deciding when to apply the underlying propositions.

In any event, Joseph S. Nye Jr. correctly cautions that explaining human behavior has no ‘determinist theory’ in the same degree as physics, and that “We must learn the traditional theories and then adapt them to current circumstances.”⁶³ He also makes a valid point that context is helpful in gauging the value of any theory. But, as a multilateral diplomat, I also agree with the liberal view that the existence of international organizations, like the United Nations, seem to render most of the realist propositions impractical. It should therefore be no surprise that in this paper I display a strong liberal bias. Liberalism may not be the only IR theory. But by placing emphasis on ‘person-to-person contacts,’ social liberalism in particular offers the most comparative advantages to diplomacy, given that the latter is the best instrument for preventing confrontation through promotion of international goodwill and understanding amongst nations.

⁶² Martin Griffiths’s appraisal (pp. 63-67) of the contribution made by Michael Doyle (a liberal thinker) to international relations and political theory teaches us that we should interpret ‘classical’ or ‘conventional’ theories in the context within which they were written before we unilaterally apply them to contemporary realities. Joseph S. Nye Jr., (p.4) also confirms this point by revealing that, unlike John Locke who wrote in a rather stable England, the reason why Thomas Hobbes over emphasized insecurity, force and survival is because he wrote in the seventeenth century when England was in a civil war.

⁶³ Joseph S. Nye, *Understanding International Conflicts*, 6th Ed., pp. 2 & 6.

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