

## **Approaches to International Relations: An Appraisal**

***Rajesh Kumar***

*The author is a faculty in the Department of Political Science, Delhi College of Arts and Commerce, New Delhi.*

### **ABSTRACT**

*There are various approaches to International Relations, but each of them provides us with only a partial cognitive access to the contemporary world. This short essay analyses the reasons for this and argues that the approaches prove inadequate because they make simplistic assumptions about the state, the main actor in International Relations.*

**Keywords:** *International Relations, State, Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism*

### **I**

When Max Weber defined the state as an entity which has the sole authority to legitimate use of force over a territory, he made it clear that he meant to understand the state sociologically (Weber 1946). In a society, many groups exist but only the state can legitimately exercise force. There are several such entities spaced out over the earth's surface, in Kant's words, 'side by side' (Kant 1996). What, then, is the nature of the relationship among the states? How do the states behave? The discipline of International Relations attempts to understand the political dimension of questions such as these. The various approaches such as, Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism enlighten us in different ways. However, in my view, none of them succeed in providing us an adequate understanding of the contemporary world. I attempt to show why.

### **II**

The international system is anarchical, which means that no single authority exists to regulate the behavior of the states. All mainstream approaches, such as Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism take this as the starting point. Realism has been the most dominant approach in the twentieth century, due to the cold war which determined largely how the states, including the non-aligned ones, behaved.

The main assumption of the realist school of thought is that war among the states is a constant possibility. The school draws on the thinkers like Machiavelli and Hobbes, arguing that power and the struggle for power mattered more than anything else in politics. International politics is the arena where the states, as rational actors, pursue aims and goals that would maximize their power. Since every state attempt for the same objective (to maximize power and security), it is clear that they will always be at war or in a war-like situation. Conflict, not cooperation, is the nature of the relationship among the states. Each state will rely on own

resources, economic or military, for its own survival. The state security, therefore, assumes greater importance. In a situation of anarchy, each state will have a powerful motivation, since it cannot predict the intention of the other states, to enhance its own capability. This often results in arms race. For the realists, the states would cooperate and form alliances against a common enemy if it exists. Kenneth Waltz and Hans Morgenthau are the exponents of this school.

The liberal approach rejects the idea that states cannot cooperate. They analyze the anarchical international system in terms of the incentives which are there for the states. If cooperation yields economic prosperity and development, the states would cooperate in trade and commerce irrespective of the fact whether mutual security concerns are present or not. If state security is the main theme within the realist paradigm, the liberal school expands it to include economic concerns. The gains of economic cooperation outweighs the considerations of going to war which would disrupt such relationships. The United Nations (UN), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO) may be understood as agents which proceed on the assumptions of the liberal school.

If anarchy is the feature of the international system, does it impact every state similarly, and equally? The realists and the liberals assume that each state is equally affected by the system. Constructivists like Wendt (1999), however, argue that how a state will behave depends on how it perceives the situation or the context. The meaning that the state attaches to the social and global circumstances will determine whether the states under study will cooperate or not. The motives of cooperation are therefore constructed and reconstructed; there is nothing objective about national interest which the states pursue rationally. This suggests that if the states consider it appropriate, they may get rid of anarchy. There is nothing fundamental about anarchy, as the realists and liberals assume.

### III

The three approaches I have discussed assume in a foundational way that the motives of the states are mono-directional or that the states cannot have mixed motives. In reality, the states rarely behave as the theory predicts. We witness the instances of conflict and cooperation among the same set of actors. Take the regional area of South Asia, for example. India and Pakistan have fought wars in the past, yet they declare to work on the areas of mutual economic interests. However, over the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) they have divergent approaches depending on how they perceive it. The contemporary international world, in the era of globalization, is marked by 'syncretism' or 'eclecticism'. Non-state actors like global civil society also vie for attention. The doctrine of 'strategic partnership' has empowered the states to look beyond narrow prism of security. The conception of security has itself been redefined to include energy, food, and environmental concerns. Moreover, the contemporary world is believed to be more multipolar than ever before. If we take the theories to be paradigms that help us make sense of politics in the international arena, the theoretical assumptions informed by mono foundational values, such as security threat, make it difficult for one theory to account for the phenomenon in its entirety. In contrast, an integrative approach which respects pluralism of approaches could be more helpful for a holistic appraisal of the contemporary international world (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013, 407).

**Bibliography**

- Dunne, Tim, Hansen, and Lene, Wight, Colin. 2013. "The end of International Relations theory?" *European Journal of International Relations* 19(3): 405- 425.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1996. *Toward Perpetual Peace*. In *Practical Philosophy*, translated by Mary J. Gregor, 317-351, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2003. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. New York: McGraw Hills.
- Weber, Max. 1946. "Politics as a vocation." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated and edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, 77-128, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.