Realism in the Global South:
A new perspective of the tools Realists have to analyze developing countries' foreign policy

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Abstract

For a long time Realism has been seen as a Eurocentric theory, focused on and only viable in explaining the behaviors of super and great powers. Since the end of the Cold War, Realism has been losing its dominance in the field of International Relations to new theories which are said to be more appropriate to describe the 21st century dynamics. These theories include Constructivism, Liberalism, and the English School, among others. Mainstream literature on the debate over whether Realists are still able to analyze and predict the multipolar world, where the considerations of medium and small powers' foreign policy matter, ends with a negative conclusion. Many authors, like the Argentinian political scientist Carlos Escude, argue that a new branch of the classical theory must be constructed to clarify the behavior of Third World countries; they call it "Peripheral Realism". This theory gives a Latin American perspective of a hierarchy where peripheral countries are not rule-makers, and for that reason the principles of Realism could not be applied to them. In this paper I disagree with the last statement and argue that developing countries are still affected by the anarchical system; in a lesser scale, they are power maximizers; and in a pragmatic way they act under the principle of Self-Help; all points made by Realists. I also argue that a second way to apply Realism, more specifically Kenneth Waltz's Structural Realism, to the Global South is considering regionalism as a micro-universe, in which states will still try to maximize their power in order to compete with their neighbors for the region's leadership and for reasons of survival.
Introduction

When studying international relations the thing a student notes is the focus on Great Power interaction. The International relations (IR) as an academic field was created after WWI with the sole purpose of avoiding another bloody war that had its roots in Europe (Buzan and Little, 2001). After the failure of stopping the Second World War and Realists winning the Great Debate, the discussion turned its head to the Cold War. The great divide between the West and the East, United States vs Soviet Union, the battle of titans, was a perfect stage for theories to flourish. But again, all eyes were on the Superpowers and whether or not the doomsday clock would reach midnight (?). If you look hard enough, you could find a thing or two about the Third World, as it was denominated the non-aligned countries, but nothing substantial.

When the Cold War ended, the international relations scenario changed. Suddenly we were living a “new world order” and some have even argued that the world has become multipolar, although that is argueable, but the important part is that Europe was not the centre of all academic research and the peripheral countries were recognized by many theorists as important players, not without certain limitations, in the international arena. Mainstream realist is understood to not being able to explain the behaviour of peripheral states. Carlos Escude and the Peripheral Realism tries to bring Realism to the Global South with three conclusions: (1) States are divided into three hierarchical types; (2) this hierarchy makes the world less anarchic and therefore more stable; and (3) what differentiate developing countries from the developed ones
is their foreign policy priority in economic development and not security (Schenoni and Escude, 2016). Another prominent author on the subject is Mohammed Ayoob. Ayoob’s Subaltern Realism has a different approach than Escude’s. In his paper *Inequality and Theorizing in International Relations: The case for Subaltern Realism*, Ayoob explains his “theory” is not a theory per se, but an attempt to fill some “gaps in the theoretical literature” (Ayoob, 2002).

Both theories have their merits, but just like many other theories that surged in the end of the 20th century, they have misconceptions about realism. They underestimate the pragmatism of Classical Realism and they take for granted Kenneth Waltz’s Structural Realism (Neorealism) by not being able to see it from a different angle and applying it to regionalism. In this paper, I try giving a new perspective of what the realist theory can do and using empirical evidence to prove that the global south is just like the north when it comes to foreign policy, but like every other state, must adapt its strategy according to its reality.
Peripheral Realism

(1) States are divided in three hierarchical types

Escude divides the states in three categories: rule-makers, rebel states and rule-takers. He classifies the rule-makers as the Great Five (UNSC) plus Germany. Germany has earned a spot since it almost is a de facto ruler of the European Union, but I would hesitate putting Britain and France in the same division. If they are there because of their permanent seat, a discussion must follow about the efficiency of the Security Council. If they are there because of their nuclear weapons, then India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel should also be on the list. The rebel states assimilate to realism’s definition of revisionist states and the rule-takers are all the rest. The idea of Peripheral Realism is to be able to predict and council foreign policies of the latter. He suggests that this last type could even be divided into three subcategories. I will focus my analysis on two of them: the regional powers and the second tier regional powers.

According to Schenoni and Escude, the second tiers that have no chance of becoming a regional power, like Argentina, tend to bandwagon. By doing so, they can protect themselves from a possible threat, the regional power, and still focus on economic development. One can find empirical evidence of this tendency when taking in consideration Argentina in recent years and, perhaps, Germany right after the end of
the Second World War. What seems to contradict history is when Escude argues that this behaviour is to maintain the status quo. Bandwagoning, in this case with the United States, is a rational choice for weak states and so the tendency shows, but not necessary to maintain the status quo. It is a tool that can be used by the state to balance itself with a potential threat or even surpass it, which was the case of Germany in the last decade becoming the greatest European power. Throughout history Argentina has been in clear competition with Brazil for South American primacy. Brazil is living through its worst economic crisis since the 1930s, maybe it is now time for Argentina to follow Germany’s example and take advantage of its neighbours’ weakness to take control of the region. If Argentina was not feeling the crisis as well, that would be the perfect realist scenario.

(2) this hierarchy makes the world less anarchic and therefore more stable

In this point, Escude reaches the same conclusion as Hegemonic Stability theorists. By dividing the states in categories and subcategories of power, he argues that they form a hierarchy and as the hierarchical pyramid goes down, so does the level of autonomy of the states. Therefore, the international system is less anarchical than mainstream realism suggests it to be. This statement is can only be accurate if Escude’s assessment that the rule-followers’ national interest is to maintain the status quo in order to reach economic development is also true. But this may not the case. States do not lose their autonomy. Based on the pragmatism and rationality of the realist theory, weaker states only have fewer options to try to reach their goal. As circumstances change and
opportunity appears, so are their strategies bound to adapt while their sovereignty remains intact, regardless of power distinctions. And that is the sole definition of an anarchic international system. And the same argument goes for stability. The unipolar world will only be stable until it is not. When a Hegemon goes rogue or it does not do enough to keep peace, as a natural condition for its position, there is no more stability. This is the case with the United States for the past few years. It has lost its credibility to deal with the situation in Ukraine and in the Syria. The consequences of this lack of action was the reason for a revisionist Russia getting politically stronger and discussions if we have entered a new Cold War. Russia or any other state alone are far from reaching the US capabilities, but recent events have brought uncertainty to what was supposed to be peaceful and stable times, according to Hegemonic Stability Theory.

(3) What differentiate developing countries from the developed ones is their foreign policy priority in economic development and not security

Neorealism believe the structure of the international system has a direct influence on the behaviour of states. In an anarchic world, lacking a global governance, states are prompt to protect themselves from external threats, in other words, states base their foreign policy in security. Escude argues that, although that may be true for developed countries, when the subject of discussion is developing countries this chain of thought does not work. The national interest of these states is better understood to be the
improvement of citizen welfare and economic development (Schenoni and Escude, 2016). What PR fails to grasp at this point is that economic development is directed related to power and security. The greater economic potential a state have, the great its capabilities and consequently power and security. A good example, and one well set in Escude’s field of expertise, is Brazil. Brazil was an aspiring great power during its years of significant economic growth. During the latest period of economic stability, Brazil has been more than ever claiming a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council, joined other great economies in forming the BRICS, expanded its diplomatic reach and has been the reference and point man in all environmental conferences. All of that to secure its place in shaping the international system to its interests. Security does not always have to be territorial or geopolitical, it can also be measured economically, by making sure institutions works to its favour; or environmentally, by not letting newly industrialized countries suffer with the actions of industrialized ones.
Subaltern Realism

Mohammed Ayoob’s Subaltern Realism, as stated before, tries to fill the gaps of the realist theory. It concentrates on Third World countries, but mostly African and South Asian, which have only recently become independent states. Given their recent statehood and western domination history, he argues that internal problems and civil wars become a priority before foreign policy and often both intertwine.

Ayoob states that Third World countries’ interactions are limited to their imminent neighbour in matters of security (Ayoob, 2002). But because of his focus on the internal factor of these states, he fails to point out that by limiting the world to two neighbour states all rules of realism apply. States will still work on a zero-sum game and gather a greater amount of resources to undermine its neighbour for reasons of security, especially, but not only when, the respective neighbour is seen as a potential threat. That includes bandwagoning with a greater outside power.
Conclusion

The Global South was never a matter of concern to International Relations. Great Powers interactions seemed to be more dangerous to the maintenance of peace in the world and so it requested more research to avoid another catastrophe like the World Wars and nuclear holocaust. Globalization has changed that a bit. The massive increase of member states in the UN since 1945 has made scholar rethink on their focus of analysis. Carlos Escude was one of the pioneers to look deep down into the behaviour of peripheral states and he came out with a theory accepted worldwide by prominent academics. Mohammed Ayoob also tried to explain the new world, but with study directed to a specific group.

In this paper, I tried going point by point from both of these authors and explaining that Realism already have the tools to explain developing countries’ politics.

Ayoob points out that the mainstream theories are not timeless. They depend on which era we are living in. For example, the foreign policy analysis of 19th century Europe could not be applied to the 21st century after the “expansion of the international society” (Ayoob, 2002). The purpose of this paper was to show the exact opposite. Realism still remains timeless and it only takes a couple of different perspectives to make it universal.
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