

Twenty Years on, Which Theoretical Approach to Security Is Most Suited to an Analysis of 9/11 and Its Aftermath?

Yongda Chen^{1,a,*}

¹Department of Political Science, University College London, London, WC1E 6AE, The United Kingdom

a. ucsay11@ucl.ac.uk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: More than 20 years have passed since the 9/11 attacks, and people from all walks of life have conducted extensive discussions and research on the event. These discussions involve multiple fields, especially analyzing this historical event within the framework of international relations theory. Therefore, this paper will analyze the three major international relations theories of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, and determine which theory is most suitable for explaining the background, impact, and subsequent development of the 9/11 attacks. Specifically, this paper will argue that realism is the most appropriate theory as it emphasizes the role of national security and power, and can explain the tough military response taken by the United States after the 9/11 attacks. Meanwhile, this paper will also briefly explain why liberalism and constructivism are not suitable for analyzing the 9/11 attacks. Through this comparative analysis, this paper aims to reveal the unique advantages of realism in understanding and interpreting the 9/11 attacks.

Keywords: Realism, liberalism, constructivism.

1. Introduction

On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked two airliners and crashed them into two buildings in New York. Soon after, another hijacked plane crashed into the Pentagon of the U.S. Department of Defense. The event was dubbed "9/11" and was defined as the worst terrorist attack on the territory of the United States. It caused a large number of casualties and economic losses, left a psychological trauma to the American people, and put people around the world under the shadow of terrorism. For more than 20 years after 9/11, scholars have conducted various discussions on the causes and consequences of 9/11, which are mainly based on the three classic theories of international relations, namely realism, liberalism, and constructivism. As a prominent representative of the aftermath of 9/11, the strategic adjustment of national security policy in the United States and its launching of wars against terrorism have attracted researchers' close attention. Among three theoretical schools, the realism international security theory with security, power, interest and their mutual relations as the core concepts can accurately capture the characteristics of the above impacts. And this paper demonstrated such an argument with several cases, such as specific wars against terrorism and the Patriot Act. In addition, to further discuss that realism security theory is the most reliable way to analyze 9/11, this paper will also introduce liberalism security theory and constructivism security theory for comparison. By

revealing the limitations of these two approaches in analyzing the events of 9/11, the advantage of offensive realism in interpreting the United States' action is highlighted.

2. Concept

This paragraph will provide a simple conceptual definition of the three security theories of international relations to help the establishment of this paper's point of view. First mentioned is the most important theoretical approach of this paper, Realism Security Theory — more specifically, offensive realism. Continuing Morgenthau's claim of a never-ending struggle for power among states, Mearsheimer asserted that great powers seek to maximize their relative power own security under the anarchic structure of the international system, whose ultimate goal is to be the hegemon in the system [1]. Offensive realists believe that under anarchy, the intentions of states are often uncertain, and it is difficult to guarantee that one state will not invade another as its strength grows. In that way, gaining power is the only way to ensure national security and achieve ends for rational states and leaders, which means security becomes a vital factor that affects and even determines a country's behavior. This approach of maximizing power will lead to the expansion behavior of major powers in the international society. As a rational actor, the state and its leaders need to carefully measure the costs and benefits while expanding. When the cost of expansion exceeds the benefits that can be obtained, the expansion may stop.

Compared with realist theories, which focus on the role of state actors and the struggle for power, neoliberal scholars offer different theoretical angles such as democratic peace, pluralistic security communities, complex interdependence, and the trading state. Taking Keohane and Eye's complex interdependence concept as an example, they argue that the international security situation after hegemony presents a new trend of multi-subject, complex interdependence and cooperation [2]. Under the conditions of complex interdependence, military security is no longer the primary national goal. States can negotiate and cooperate through international organizations and institutions to reduce conflicts. Further, they may establish collective security systems to overcome security dilemmas, for instance, NATO, the most important co-binding institution in the West [3]. In the field of security, constructivism offers a different perspective, whose core concepts include the formation of national identity, human consciousness, and collective interests [4]. Compared to exact matter, constructivism highlights the role of thoughts, which holds the view that culture, customs, and norms can all shape a nation's interests and behaviors. Further, interactions between nations may also generate interests and identities.

3. Dilemma of protecting safety in the democratic regime

The security dilemma is the most serious and immediate problem for the United States after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Terrorist attacks resulted in massive casualties and urban devastation. The World Trade Center and the Pentagon, symbolic of the U.S. economy and military, collapsed on the same day. In addition to these losses, other soft fields, such as citizens' psychology, were also affected directly or indirectly. The panic situation left people living in the shadow of this man-made disaster, surrounded by fear. No one knew whether this kind of terrorist attack would happen again and whether the security of the country and individuals could be guaranteed, which was the most concerned issue of the people at that time. After the terrorist attack, domestic anxiety continued to rise, and the government needed to implement strong security measures to deal with the crisis and stabilize the public's panic, which led to the contradiction between people's freedom and security. In fact, the balance of safety and liberty is gradually shifting to safety amid the national emergency. According to a poll by Davis et al, people are more willing to trade the power of freedom for safety [5]. According to realism security theory, the greatest challenge for national leaders is to ensure the

nation's security and survival in a dangerous environment [6], in the same way, it is the primary task and basic responsibility of national leaders. To protect the safety of people and the country and prevent similar terrorist attacks from happening again, the United States and its allies adopted a series of strict review and supervision measures. Despite public calls for freedom and democracy, Congress still increased the powers of law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and also monitored and collected information from the public through new security clearances, e-mail, and more [7]. The passage of the Patriot Act and other counterterrorism-related legislation in Congress allowed the government and president to legally violate the human rights of American citizens on a large scale for the first time. Although the measures and actions taken by the U.S. government were regarded as overbearing, autocratic, undermining liberal democracy, and violating human rights, these actions were still approved by Congress and implemented in legal ways.

Under the state of international anarchy, the state's pursuit of security maximization is the advocacy and proposition of realism security theory. With national security above all else, the U.S. government will do anything to achieve its goals. In national decision-making in the United States, Congress usually makes laws, and executive agencies are responsible for implementing them, while the judiciary authorities supervise the actions of the above two. However, in the field of national security after 9/11, this separation of powers supervision system failed. The executive branch often operated outside the law, but Congress failed to curb these illegal practices and even granted more authority and immunity, and the judiciary ignored statutes [8]. Such behavior that violates liberal democracy and ignores relevant systems and rules to ensure security is not in line with liberalism security theory. On the other hand, although some people are willing to trade the power of freedom for security, there is no national agreement in public opinion. Without collective interests in safety interiorly, constructivism security theory fails to capture the reason for shifting domestic policy orientation. To sum up, only the "safety maximization" of the realism safety theory can reasonably explain why the United States authority system infringed upon liberty to protect citizens' safety through the bureaucratic procedure.

4. Fights for regaining hegemony

John Mearsheimer's offensive realism argues that the pursuit of global hegemony by great powers is the way to guarantee their security and freedom of action [9]. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States, the sole global superpower, was in a unipolar moment in the early 21st century, enjoying unprecedented material resource dominance [10]. But after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, people began to question whether the United States could continue to maintain its hegemony. Based on the above situation, even in the face of public criticism and accusations from all sides, the US government must take a series of relevant military actions. Only in this way can the world see America's strength, helping the United States regain and stabilize its hegemony in the world, and even further expand the influence and dominance of hegemony through war. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States responded quickly by waging a war against terrorist organizations and countries that the United States believed were harboring terrorists. Although some ordinary people and senior officials believed that it was too extreme and radical to launch wars against these regions or countries and questioned the rationality and legitimacy of these wars, President Bush was very tough, claiming that all regions and all countries need to express their positions by saying "either you are with us, or you are with the terrorist" at the UN meeting [11]. It was not the priority for the Bush administration to eliminate terrorists, but to regain American hegemony under the pretext of eliminating terrorists mattered. It is believed that the Iraq war was not so much an operation to eliminate terrorists as an exercise by the United States to "re-establish American military superiority" under the banner of counterterrorism [12]. In addition, the United States has used the opportunity of war to project military power abroad, intervene and control other

regions under the banner of anti-terrorism, and continue to subtly promote and export its own values. This approach is to further expand and promote its hegemonic strategy and unilateralism in terms of military power, political system, ideology, and other aspects.

Wars initiated by the United States to regain its hegemony violated the original international rules and international systems, which were full of hegemony and unilateralism. Therefore, the liberalism security theory does not apply here. On the other hand, the liberal democratic political system, modern cultural education, and other values are not universally accepted in the Islamic world. People in the Islamic world even believe that the penetration of Western values will destroy their traditional beliefs and daily life [13]. Therefore, it is unrealistic and unreliable for the United States to achieve security through ideological and cultural recognition. The limitations of constructivism security theory in analyzing 9/11 and its consequences are also reflected. The realism security theory can perfectly explain the behavior of the United States to launch the anti-terrorism war and regain world hegemony after the terrorist attack, as in the view of realism security theory, the state maximizes power to form hegemony is an important method to protect national security.

5. Wars towards emerging interest

In the process of pursuing hegemony to ensure security, countries often have expansion behaviors, and these expansion behaviors' ultimate goal is to bring some emerging benefits to the country. With the duration of the war in Afghanistan, the increase in military and social costs, and the presence of foreign powers, new interests have emerged in the United States in Afghanistan, namely the scramble for Central Asia [14]. The United States is in control of Afghanistan and its periphery, but the risk of a global recession has spurred competition for resources in Afghanistan and Central Asia. To maintain its control of the region and protect its vested interests, the United States can only continue to deploy its forces in the big arena of Afghanistan to contain the rise of neighboring countries such as China. On the other hand, Iraq also has the interests that the United States pursues. Iraq is the fourth-largest oil producer in the world, and the economic growth of the United States has an important relationship with the stable global oil output. In addition, the United States also benefits a lot from Iraqi arms sales and trade [15]. Therefore, the US government has long stationed troops in Iraq under the pretext of eliminating terrorists and maintaining peace. And undoubtedly, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq is also close relative to the fact that it cannot get more interest under costs. According to statistics, since 2003, the two wars have gradually increased the US military expenditure, and by 2007, it has reached 12 billion US dollars per month [16]. The long wars cost the United States huge sums of money, and the number of casualties was increasing. The United States found out that it was paying more than it received, so it chose not to continue the war.

The U.S. government waged two so-called wars on terror against Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 that lasted far longer than one might expect. In the short time after the "9·11" terrorist attack, people were swayed by panic and anxiety, and they maintained an attitude of approval or non-negation of the preemptive strategy implemented by the US government. But over time, the destructiveness and persistence of the wars led ordinary people and the international community to doubt the legitimacy and purpose of both wars. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Annan, once said in an interview that the war launched by the United States against Iraq did not meet the requirements of the United Nations Charter. From the perspective of the United Nations and the United Nations Charter, it was illegal [17]. As the casualties of the war increased, more and more people and organizations began to join the ranks of the anti-war. For example, Cindy Sheehan, a woman with no political experience, has since become an anti-war activist after her son died in the Iraq war [18]. However, the U.S. government did not terminate the war for these reasons but kept violating international law and international order, ignoring common expectations, collective identity, and collective interests, and continued the war for the sake of gaining more benefits in Afghanistan

and Iraq. This approach is contrary to the security theories of liberalism and constructivism, but the realism security theory believes that the state will pursue hegemony for security, expand in the process of pursuing hegemony, and decide whether to continue expansion because of reasonable costs and benefits. Therefore, the use of realist security theory can be consistent with the military decisions of the US government.

6. Conclusion

This paper uses three classic security theories in the field of international relations and combines specific cases to analyze the consequences of the 9/11 terrorist attack. The consequences defined in this paper are a series of security policies adopted by the United States in response to this crisis and the launch of two wars against terrorism. Through the study of specific cases, it is found that liberalism advocates using international order to maintain security and constructivism uses collective interests and collective identities such as ideology and culture to ensure security, which is often too ideal in complex international situations. However, realism can perfectly fill in the gaps with its emphasis on power, interest, and their relationship with national security, and the case analysis demonstrated that the actions taken by the US government are consistent with the realism security theory's main argument. To sum up, the realism approach to security is most suited for analyzing 9/11's aftermath.

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