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## Classical Realism vs. Neorealism: Which One Better Explains United States Involvement in the Korean and Vietnam Proxy Wars?

Historians and political scientists generally agree that realism is the central theory that best explains the Cold War and the many proxy wars that were fought during that time period. This essay will consider United States involvement in two Cold War proxy wars, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. It also will consider whether classical realism or neorealism better explains these proxy wars. Classical realism can explain both the Korean and Vietnam Wars because states are motivated to seek power and these wars were a way to expand their influence. Neorealism provides a better explanation because the actions of the great powers were constrained by the international system, especially in view of the fear of mutually destroyed destruction and pre-existing destabilization of the local actors.

Classical realism is based on a pessimistic view of human nature in which humans are self-interested and seek power. Morgenthau argues “that states and actors seek as much political power as possible because they are social institutions, and therefore follow

the drives of human nature.” (Morgenthau 2017) Classical realism further argues that state actors act out of fear and aggression. Chen states that in classical realism, “it is fundamentally the nature of man that pushes states to act in a way to maximize their power,” (Chen)

According to Morgenthau, the goal of politics is to achieve “the realization of the lesser evil rather than of the absolute good” when states have a conflict of interest in their pursuit of power. (Morgenthau 2017) This “lesser evil” is pursued through a search to find the balance of power, either maintaining an existing equilibrium or creating a new equilibrium. Good foreign policy is rational, with rationality defined as “a process of calculating the costs and benefits of all alternative policies in order to determine their relative utility, *i.e.*, their ability to maximize power.” (Morgenthau 2017)

Rather than focusing on human nature and self-interest, neorealism (structural realism) emphasizes the role of power politics in international relations. Kenneth Waltz, in *Theory of International Politics*, argues that states are elements within an anarchic structure or international system. (Waltz 1979) Chen argues that neorealists believe that:

“structural (or international system) constraints are more important than agents’ (states) strategies and motivations. Neorealists use structural analysis, which suggests state behavior is a product of the structure of the system itself and the imperatives that flow from it. Neorealism uses structure to explain recurrence in international politics despite different actors. (Chen)

"According to the systematic approach of neorealism, states show similar behaviors within the system." (Güntay, pg. 495)

Neorealists argue that "The great powers determine the system. The character of the system is shaped according to the characteristics of great power that can dominate the whole world." (Waltz 2000, Güntay, pg. 498) The distribution of capabilities among states as the units dictates the polarity of an international system. (Waltz 1979, pg. 176-183) There are three possible systems based on the number of powers within the international system: a unipolar system has only one great power, a bipolar system has two great powers, and a multipolar system has more than two great powers. (Waltz, Chen)

Bipolarism or bipolarity is a system of world order in which the majority of global economic, military, and cultural influence is held between two states. (Seepersad) Neorealists have concluded that a bipolar system is more stable than a multipolar system for one main reason. The main reason according to Chen is that:

“balancing can only occur through internal balancing because there is absolutely no possibility to gain or form alliances with other great powers. Because internal balancing is the only way in a bipolar system, there is no room for external balancing which results in fewer chances for miscalculation which in turn means less chance of a war breaking out between two great powers.” (Chen)

During the Cold War, many proxy wars were fought between countries backed by global powers. A proxy war is an “international conflict that the two external powers carry out by using the armed power and other resources of the third country in line with their interests, goals and strategies.” (Güntay, pg. 449) Güntay also states that "After the Cold War, proxy war became a method of being active in a third country or fighting against the enemy, mostly through local actors. While this struggle is a hot conflict between local actors, its supporters are only involved when it is necessary.” (Güntay, pg. 443)

This essay focuses on the Korean and Vietnam proxy wars which involved pro-communist (Marxist-Leninist) and pro-capitalist powers. The main reason for these conflicts was ideological. The pro-communist powers, the Soviet Union and China, subscribed to an ideology that had a centralized command economy with a one-party state (the dictator’s party). The United States was pro-capitalist, with private actors controlling and owning property that aligned with their interests. One of the main differences between capitalism and communism is that capitalism is based on individuals’ rights whereas communism is based on collective goals.

In both the Korean War and the Vietnam War, the northern parts of these countries favored communism and the southern parts favored capitalism. In both wars, the northern parts of the country were geographically closer to China and the Soviet Union. This meant that military success in the southern parts posed a large physical threat to backers of the northern parts. In particular, the advance of pro-capitalist forces toward the

Chinese border with North Korea during the Korean War strongly motivated China to participate by sending military aid and even ground troops. Both Korea and Vietnam had been destabilized by artificial division by third parties following World War II.

A key difference between the Korean War and the Vietnam War was duration. The Korean War was a relatively short but bloody war, lasting only three years. The Vietnam War, in contrast, was a prolonged struggle that lasted ten years.. Another difference is that United States involvement in the Vietnam War followed military involvement by France in the First Indochina War. After France lost and pulled out of Vietnam, the country was divided into two parts. The northern part was occupied by the Communist party backed by the Soviet Union and China whereas the southern part was backed by the United States and its allies. The Korean War ended with an armistice between the People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and South Korea. The outcome of the Vietnam War was that North and South Vietnam were united under the communist banner of the north in 1975 despite the many American lives lost. There are many similarities of these proxy wars, the main one being that lots of money was spent, vast destruction, loss of life, and a very similar political climate to the one after World War II.

The Détente (French word meaning tension release) beginning in 1971, was a period of time in which the relationship between the United States and Soviet Union. This Détente took form when President Nixon visited Moscow and met with Leonid I. Brezhnev who was the secretary-general of the Soviet Communist party. This meeting was important because both countries had a chance to gain if trade among them could be

increased and the danger of nuclear warfare reduced. (History) A few months earlier, President Nixon took a trip to China which in turn heightened Soviet interest in achieving a Détente. This heightened interest was due to the growing antagonism between China and the Soviet Union. Brezhnev did not want to see his most powerful rivals come together against him. (History)

The Cold War finally ended in the late 1980s when the Berlin Wall came down, which opened up Eastern Europe up and allowed for free elections. In 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved and very soon after the Cold War or Iron Curtain was lifted. It is argued that the Cold War ended because the Soviet Union had a weak economy and United States-Soviet diplomacy led to treaties.

When the Cold War began to become more evident in the late 1950s, China and the Soviet Union on one hand and the United States on the other each believed in the superiority of their own political systems. None of these powers wanted to engage in a direct war with one another, especially on home territory. The United States feared the potential rise of communism and Marxism-Leninism that was occurring around the world. This fear became known as the Red Scare, which historians argue lasted from 1917 throughout the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 (Red Scare). The United States could not let the Soviet Union and China, who were influential on the world stage, spread their “radical” political ideologies to other countries. The United States believed and argued internally that if the Soviet Union and China were allowed to spread their leftist ideologies without military pushback, a domino effect would occur as satellite nations

one by one succumbed to communist rule. This domino effect theory was prominent in the United States from the early 1950's through the 1980's and influenced many foreign policy decisions including military involvement in the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

(Domino Theory)

The Red Scare led to the establishment of the Truman Doctrine in 1947. The Truman doctrine pledged United States support to contain the communist uprisings in Turkey and Greece. Direct American military forces were not usually involved but Congress gave financial aid to the militaries as well as the domestic economies of countries fighting the communist uprisings. (The Truman Doctrine, 1947) The Truman Doctrine contributed to the friction between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union, which eventually resulted in the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

Classical realism explains the United States involvement in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Political competition with the Soviet motivated the United States to engage in proxy wars and to maintain this engagement for years. Their powers were so similar that global powerhouses feared losing face on the international stage.

Using the classical realism theory, Guntay states that in proxy wars (indirect interventions), "states discover different factors affecting their power potential. Geography, demography, resources and geopolitical elements are among them." (Guntay pg. 509) Neither Korea nor Vietnam were geographically vital to the United States. Neither country provided a location that the United States particularly coveted for a military base, refueling station, or missile site. Neither country provided a protective

buffer that was adjacent to the United States. If the United States-backed local actor successfully took over the northern part of Korea or Vietnam, that local actor would lose its buffer with China. It could be very expensive and troublesome to maintain a border with China over the long term although that might be better than maintaining a border with North Korea. Neither Vietnam or Korea offered significant resources to the United States such as oil, minerals, or a source of needed labor. Neither was an essential United States economic partner, unlike Japan during the Vietnam era.

Geopolitical factors may have weighed in favor of United States intervention. First, previous destabilization in Southeast Asia (Japanese occupation of Korea, Vietnam's status as a French colony, and the artificial division of both Korea and Vietnam after World War II) increased the likelihood of success; the populations within these countries were accustomed to political or military changes. Second, although Korea and Vietnam were not geographically important, communist occupation or takeovers would increase the danger to Japan. Eisenhower states that "There is no one in this room that needs a blueprint of how important it is to us that Japan stay outside the Iron Curtain. A nation of 90 million industrious and inventive people, tied in with Communist China and with the Soviets, would indeed pose a threat to us that would be very grave indeed." (Eisenhower 1956) The United States was also obligated by treaty to defend Japan and Japan had become an economically important United States ally by the Vietnam era.

This is inconsistent with Morgenthau's analysis of classical realism which is based on a cost and benefit analysis. Morgenthau argues that there wasn't enough



tangible benefit or prestige stating, "And what will our prestige be like if hundreds of thousands of American troops become bogged down in Vietnam, unable to win and unable to retreat?" (Morgenthau 1965, pg. 12) However, the Red Scare within the United States was so pervasive that the United States involvement in the proxy wars was justified. In 1953, the United States believed that the Soviet Union goal was "power superiority at all costs. Security was to be sought by denying it to all others." (Eisenhower 1953) Soviet aggression in Korea and southeast Asia was regarded as a real threat "to the whole free community." (Eisenhower 1953) Preserving United States security required stopping the spread of communism.

"The prospects for peace...would be dimmed or destroyed should freedom be forced into steady retreat. Then the remaining free societies, our own among them, would one day find themselves beleaguered and imperiled...If we are to preserve freedom here--it must likewise thrive in other important areas of the earth." (Eisenhower 1956)

Intervention was necessary in order to keep the dominoes from falling. This would result in a spread of communism which went against the United States push for capitalism. This theory continued into the Vietnam era, with the "overwhelming majority of the political elite supported holding the line on communism. (Garofano, pg. 150) The United States took the risk of military involvement in Vietnam because "the costs of not going to war were unacceptable." (Garofano, pg. 146)

Neorealism also explains the United States involvement in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Neorealism takes the position that similarly situated state actors behave in similar ways. (Güntay, pg. 499). As Güntay states, “With strategic changes and proxy war, neorealism claims that states do not act with a rational decision-making process that they enter on their own. Their decisions are related to the positions of the actors concerned and their competitors in the system.” (Güntay, pg. 499)

The global powerhouses were similarly situated. They occupied large land masses and therefore had no strong motivation to expand their territory, as was the case with Nazi Germany. These powerhouses were geographically distant from their ideological opponents so there was no fear of border intrusions, direct invasion would have been a logistical nightmare.

The international structure at the time of the proxy wars was bipolar, with the two great powers disagreeing on political and economic systems. The balance of power in this bipolar structure increased stability and reduced uncertainty. (Waltz 1988, pg. 624) Both the United States and the Soviet Union had nuclear capability at the time of the proxy wars. Nuclear weapons are a better deterrent to war than conventional weapons. (Waltz 1988, pg. 625-626) The nuclear capability was an important factor in the stability of the bipolar structure during the Cold War. (Levy, pg. 147) “Nuclear weapons are the factors that provide this balance.” (Güntay, pg. 498) The geographical distance between the great powers also made direct conflict highly unlikely. (Buhaug, pg. 107)

In proxy wars, the:

“self-help character can be considered as a formula for keeping the conflict at the local level, primarily because of the danger of nuclear war...The structure of the international system, the geographical distance and the threat of nuclear war were a warning system in the realist perspectives of the US and the Soviet Union. The United States and the Soviet Union’s failure to engage in a nuclear conflict pushed these two forces into reckoning in different regions.” (Güntay, pg. 501-502)

The fear of mutually assured destruction led the United States and Soviet Union to flex their military and political muscles in local actors such as Vietnam and Korea.

Güntay argues that "The main factor causing the power struggles to turn into a conflicted proxy war after the Arab revolts are the collapse of political authorities and the opportunities of cooperation of local actors with international powers.” (Güntay, pg. 507) Korea and Vietnam did not undergo a collapse of political authorities. However, the artificial division into separate “North” and “South “countries, particularly with opposing ideologies corresponding to the two global powerhouses, resulted in an international structure ripe for conflict. Proxy wars were almost inevitable. In fact, there were two proxy wars that lasted nearly twenty-five years.

Neorealism sees cooperation as possible but only for a short period of time and is difficult to sustain. The United States saw China and the Soviet Union as competition due to different political ideologies which in turn led to the conflicts explained above. Because the United States and its allies had a pro-capitalist ideology, unlike the Soviet

Union, China, and their allies, there was little room for cooperation. Even if these countries found common ground and were able to cooperate, this cooperation would not last long due to their underlying political differences. This conflict between pro-democratic and pro-communist ideologies lasted for nearly a century.

The Cold War lasted nearly a century, during which the United States, Soviet Union, and China saw little to no potential in cooperating with each other because they had different political ideologies. Neorealism accounts for the duration of the Cold War and the competitive stance of the global powerhouses that saw little to no chance for cooperation between one another until the late 1980s to early 1990s.

The diplomacy between the United States and the Soviet Union does not align with neorealism but rather with classical realism. When discussing the end of the Cold War, realism (classical and neorealism) doesn't explain well why the Cold War was over without a major war between the great powers. Wohlforth poses the question: do the rapid decline and comparatively peaceful collapse of the Soviet state, and with it the entire postwar international order, discredit the realist approach. Wohlforth proceeds to discuss the two main ways scholars have answered this question. Most scholars according to Wohlforth argue that the events of the late 1980s and early 1990s "utterly confound realism's expectations and call into question its relevance for understanding the post-Cold War world." (Wohlforth) Other scholars disagree, maintaining the idea that "the post 1989 transformation of international politics is not an appropriate test for theory." (Wohlforth) These scholars, according to Wohlforth, argued that the end of the Cold War

was “merely a single data point.” (Wohlforth) Wohlforth disagrees with both arguments and instead argues that “realist theories are not invalidated by the post 1989 transformation of world politics.” Wohlforth continues his argument stating that “Realism is rich and varied, and cannot be limited to just structural realism, which deals poorly with change.” (Wohlforth) Wohlforth continues by arguing that many of the criticisms of realism based on the post 1989 system transformation, contrast with the most grasping form of realism, Waltz’s structural realism.

According to Wohlforth, realism is much broader and richer than the narrow version of realism known as realism or structural realism brought to light by Waltz. Most scholars would agree that realism as a whole is the best International Relations theory that describes the Cold War. But, within the overarching theory of realism, there are multiple subbranches such as classical realism, neorealism (structural realism), and neoclassical realism. Realism as a whole describes the Cold War better than other main International Relations theories such as Liberalism and Constructivism, but the subbranches of realism such as neorealism and classical realism don’t describe the 1989 transformation of world politics, or the end of the Cold War.

Neorealism better explains the proxy-wars and why the United States and its rivals fought so hard against one another. The United States, Soviet Union, and China throughout the majority of the Cold War competed with one another in an attempt to gain control, but more importantly implement their own political ideologies or agendas within those proxy countries. Classical realism can explain both the Korean and Vietnam Wars

because states are motivated to seek power and these wars were a way to expand their influence. Factors that support United States involvement under classical realism theory include fear of losing influence, the destabilization in South-East Asia, and the proximity of the local actors to Japan, which was a close ally of the United States. The most important factor was the prevalence of the Red Scare and the need to stop the dominoes from falling, which would result in expansion of communism in Asia and perhaps beyond. Neorealism provides a better explanation because the actions of the great powers were constrained by the international system, especially in view of the bipolar system, fear of mutually assured destruction, and pre-existing destabilization of the local actors by prior countries.

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