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Neutrality as Realism in the New Global Order: A Treatise

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Abstract

In contemporary foreign policy analysis, with special reference to the study of neutrality, the intellectual polemic between the Hobbesian and Lockean schools of thought has precipitated robust cerebral interchange between realist and liberal paradigms; and these offer different views of the important policy stance of neutrality. While the realist school of thought explains a neutral stance as the rational calculation of a small state's interest in the state-centered, unfriendly, self-help global political environment, the liberal school of thought opines that the norms of international relationship and the internal dynamics of individual nations, especially the small and comparative weak ones, lead nations to seek and maintain neutrality. This paper takes a theoretical look at the concept of neutrality and subjects it to empirical analysis within the context of contemporary global realities where the world

is fraught with perennial international conflict. Drawing from the experiences and positions taken by Switzerland, Sweden, Canada, Ireland and other countries in numerous circumstances of international conflict over a timeframe of more than one-half of a century, the paper argues that demands from the international socioeconomic and political environment, including public opinion, and the output of institutionalism within the domestic political system provide an explanation for the continuing stance of neutrality.

Introduction

The degree of belligerence and the frequency of armed conflict in the contemporary international scene are alarming and the resultant gratuitous destruction of lives and property is as colossal as it is bemusing. In view of the above, especially given the major international conflicts of the 20th century, it is not surprising that both politicians and political scientists have at worst neglected the important policy stance of neutrality and at best relegated it to a secondary or tertiary consideration. Generally, the study of international relations pushes nations that pursue the path of neutrality into residual categories and leaves them unexplained, unexamined, or dismissed as either uninteresting or unimportant.

The paper elects to discuss the foreign policy stance of neutrality with special reference to its essence, origin, history, utility, its modern form and contemporary application in the persistently turbulent international arena of 21st century.

Neutrality: The Concept, History and Utility

Neutrality, in international law, denotes the legal status of a state that asserts a position of nonparticipation in respect of a war existing between other states. It is not merely abstinence from war; rather, it is a relationship that involves rights and duties on the part of neutrals toward belligerents and on the part of belligerents toward neutrals. Encyclopedia Americana offers that:

> The status of neutrality was hardly known in the ancient world. Its first statement as [international] law was…in the *Consolato del mare* (1494), a code for maritime law citing provisions from the previous century. During the following centuries, neutrals made and upheld various claims, and the law was further developed. President George Washington's proclamation of neutrality (1793), which recognized

> neutral duties as well as rights, was widely followed. The Declaration of Paris in 1856, asserting the general principle that free ships make free goods, was accepted by almost every state. A more definite statement of the rules of neutrality is to be found in Conventions 5 and 8, adopted at the Second Hague Conference in 1907.

From the above, it is obvious that, essentially, neutrality, as a concept, is a public policy decision that can only be made by a state—a sovereign state. It presupposes, therefore, that neutrality arose along with the development of the nation-state in the 17th—20th centuries. Given this, it can be safely inferred that neutrality is linked to nationalism and the exercise of the political concept of sovereignty. Graham, (1997) asserts that a sovereign government has the authority to enact laws and public policies that are related to all territories within its jurisdiction. The sovereign has the rightful power of the state to enforce its authority and this includes the decision to remain neutral on international conflicts. Consequently, neutrality is a means by which a state can assert its sovereignty vis-à-vis an international order that is akin to Hobbesian state of nature. Though neutrality, as a foreign policy stance, is a relatively new concept in international affairs, especially in the contemporary global scene where dialogue amongst nations often degenerates to diatribe, and though it is a little understood, if not enigmatic, issue in international relations today, neutrality is a universally accepted variety of foreign policy, especially amongst relatively small and weak nations. Jesse (2006:7) offers that: "neutrality…is only as old as the current international order;" he furthers that:

> The decline of empires in the 18th and 19th centuries ushered in the reign of nation-states and its ideological counterpart—nationalism. The rise of nationalism has led to foreign policy directed by the governments of each nation-state in the name of protecting the security of its sovereignty, primarily by protecting its borders. Security being the main realist aim of sovereign government, each state engages in the international order in an attempt to increase its security.

Though the contemporary variety of neutrality is, generally, ascribed to the Swiss neutrality in the 16th century, its present manifestation, which is generally loaded with nationalist fervor and vituperations, goes back only as

far as the Concert of Europe (1815), the Hague Agreements (1907), and the Treaty of Versailles (1919). Since then, only a small number of states have pursued neutrality. Most of these states, which are small European states, are, for example, Austria, Finland, Ireland, Sweden, and Switzerland. In view of the major international conflict of the 20th century, it is not surprising that both politicians and political scientists have at worst neglected the important policy stance of neutrality and at best relegated it to a secondary or tertiary consideration. The study of international relations often pushes nations that pursue neutrality into residual categories and leaves them unexplained, unexamined, or dismissed as either uninteresting or unimportant. The realist perspective that so pervades modern understanding of international relations assume a neutral stance to be the product of balanced estimate and reckoning of the interests and capabilities of a small nation-state in the international environment that has virtually reverted to the Hobbesian state of nature.

If it is accepted that neutrality, in its present form, is a modern concept and that it arose along with the development of the nation-state, then it could possibly be surmised that there is a link between neutrality and nationalism. However, before we embark on such large leap of logic, it is worthy of note to state that the development of the nation-state from the 17th to the 20th centuries is a complicated process and many scholars have written on the topic, offering explanation the range of which includes those based on Marxist class struggles, property rights, industrial development, and technological advances. Here, we note that national self-determination contributed rather immensely to the growth of the nation-state.

Jesse (2006:17) informs that "neutrality has been a common course of action since the end of the First Napoleonic Wars (1814)." Irrespective of its constancy on the international scene ever since, not all appreciate neutrality. For instance, Jesse furthers that "Machiavelli advised against it and warned that one should never trust a neutral state." During the Second World War, both the United States and Britain criticized neutrality with special reference to Ireland's neutrality. Pried about the likely British invasion of Scandinavia in Second World War to encircle Germany and further the war effort, Sir Alexander Cadogan, (then head of the British Foreign Office) stated:

> We may have had 100 plans for intervention in Scandinavia. This is that, rightly or wrongly, unlike the Germans, we drop our plans if they are distasteful to the wretched little neutral country concerned. That may be

> foolish and old-fashioned, but it is fairly respectable. (Salmon, 1993:130)

Reacting to neutrality during the Cold War, US Secretary of State, John Dulles, referred to it as "an immoral and short-sighted conception. (Wylie, 2002:1-2)

International forces can constrain a state's foreign policy options. Neutrality is a viable option for a small state that wishes to avoid international conflict involving larger and more militant powers. Resultantly, realist theorists argue that armed neutrality is inevitable in order to secure a nation's sovereignty in the face of international conflict between large belligerent states. Neutrality is therefore foreign policy option that finds utility only during armed conflict; neutral states, according to realist theorists, ought to abandon that policy position at the cessation of hostilities.

Farah and Karls (1999:835) offer that throughout the early phase of what became known as the Battle of Britain,

> The US expressed its determination to remain neutral. Even before the fighting began, the US congress had enacted laws designed to prevent American involvement in the war. The Neutrality Acts, passed in 1937, prohibited arms shipments, loans and credit to belligerent nations. Non involvement in the conflict in Europe was a major factor in the third tern campaign bit of President F.D. Roosevelt.

A point that clearly emerges from the above assertion, added to the fact that the US Congress at a later date also banned the export of arms for the use of either of the belligerent forces in the Spanish Civil War, is the fact that neutrality, as a foreign policy option, cannot be consigned exclusively to small and weak nations.

Neutrality: The Hobbesian Perspective

Thomas Hobbes defines the state of nature as the stare of anarchy in which life was brutish and short and thus a state of war. Juxtaposed within the context of the international scene being akin to the state of nature, then what we are contending with is an international arena perceived from the prism of "domestic analogy" in which each state exists as an individual in an anarchic international amphitheater. Given this scenario, the primary objective of each

state (just as the individual in the Hobbesian state of nature) is its own interest with national security occupying the front burner. Inevitably, the public policy focus of every state must, therefore, be beamed at doing everything necessary within its power to achieve and protect its interest in global affairs. This line of thought, which is essentially Hobbesian, is known as "realism." In this realist frame of mind, moral and ethical contemplations of right or wrong do not exist in the anarchic, self-centered state of nature. Underscoring the above analysis within the context of domestic analogy, it means that if individuals live in a state of war in the state of nature, so do nation-states in the contemporary global community where ideological and territorial expansionism is the ethos.

Conclusion

In succinct conclusion, the realities of internal socioeconomic setting of a nation-state and the wealth and battle-readiness of international forces can constrain a state's foreign policy options. Neutrality is a viable option for a small state that wishes to avoid international conflicts involving larger and more militant powers. Neutrality is a legitimate, apposite and therefore pragmatic foreign policy posture especially for states that are small in size and resources.

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