

## **Theory of Complex Interdependence: A Comparative Analysis of Realist and Neoliberal Thoughts**

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### **Abstract**

*The post-Cold War era witnessed a realization among the nation-states that the criteria for achieving real power was something beyond hard power, rather it required a secure economic and technological advancement. This led to an interesting debate between realists and liberals, each trying to convince that their arguments were more valid and relevant to prevailing global trends. In the context of this debate, this paper seeks to critically analyze the theory of 'Complex Interdependence' which challenged the fundamental assumptions of traditional and structural realism. Complex Interdependence became a central component of the neoliberal perspective. It highlighted the emergence of transnational actors vis-à-vis the state. Complex Interdependence model tried to synthesize the realist and liberal perspectives. Thus the main aim of this paper is to carry out a comparative analysis of realist and neoliberal schools of thought and to explore the prevalence of these approaches in the contemporary world politics. The major conclusion of this paper is that following the rise of international regimes and institutions, the traditional military capabilities have been compensated with the importance of welfare and trade in foreign policy matters. It concludes that the neoliberal perspective has attained much importance and there is an obvious willingness among the states to enter into cooperative alliances with one another under conditions of anarchy and dependence even.*

**Keywords:** Neoliberalism, Realism, Interdependence, Transnational, International Regimes

### **1. Introduction**

The post-Cold War world underwent great transformation. The political agendas of traditional military power and national security were now dominated by the actors' "quest for a stable and peaceful global order conducive to their economic development" (Bhatty, 1996: 4). There was realization among the developed countries that the criteria for achieving real power is no more the sophisticated weapons and large military establishments alone, rather it required a secure foundation through economic efficiency and technological advancement. Following these developments, an interesting debate started between realists and liberals, each trying to convince that their arguments were more valid and relevant to prevailing global trends.

The model of 'Complex Interdependence' was developed by Robert O Keohane and Joseph S. Nye in the late 1970s. It was a major challenge to fundamental assumptions of traditional and structural realism which focused on military and economic capabilities to explain state behavior. Complex Interdependence on the contrary highlighted the emergence of transnational actors vis-à-vis the state. Focus was the rise of international regimes and institutions that compensated traditional military capabilities and the new importance of welfare and trade in foreign policy matters compared to status and security issues. Complex Interdependence actually became a central component of the neoliberal perspective and has been widely used in the analyses of international politics making an attempt to understand willingness of states to enter into cooperative alliances with one another under conditions of anarchy and dependence.

While emphasizing the growing importance of International Organizations (IOs) and Multinational Corporations (MNCs), this theory is said to have anticipated what is now known as Globalization. Keohane and Nye argued that in the era of interdependence, the very nature of international relations has been changed and world has become more interdependent in all respects especially economics. This theory tried to synthesize the realist and liberal perspectives. It did not altogether reject realism rather it raised the concern that at times there emerged certain situations where realists' assumptions/explanations were not sufficient.

In this paper while focusing on theory of Complex interdependence, a comparative analysis of realist and neoliberal schools of thought would be carried out in order to explore the prevalence of these approaches in contemporary world politics.

## **2. Theory of Complex Interdependence**

In the contemporary globalized world, the term ‘interdependence’ is frequently used. It is a situation in the world politics where all the actors including states as well as non-state actors, are dependent upon one another. In general terms,

“Dependence means a state of being determined or significantly affected by external forces. Interdependence, most simply defined, means mutual dependence. Interdependence in world politics refers to situations characterized by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries.”(Keohane & Nye, 1977: 8)

Under this mutual dependence, the relationship between the actors involved, including states as well as other transnational actors, is characterized by both cooperation and competition. In interdependence there are costly reciprocal effects of transaction among the actors. The policies and actions of one actor have profound impact on the policies and actions of the other actors and vice versa. Interdependence does not only mean peace and cooperation among actors, but a relationship between actors characterized by cooperation, dependence, and interaction in a number of different areas, and conflict as well.

Complex Interdependence is a theory which stresses the complex ways in which as a result of growing ties, the transnational actors become mutually dependent, vulnerable to each other’s actions and sensitive to each other’s needs. Complex Interdependence is defined as:

“An economic transnationalist concept that assumes that states are not the only important actors, social welfare issues share center stage with security issues on the global agenda, and cooperation is as dominant a characteristic of international politics as conflict.” (Genest, 1996: 140)

In this system of ‘Interdependence’, states cooperate because it is in their own common interest and direct result of this cooperation is prosperity and stability in the international system. The transnationalists/neoliberals believe that “states are not motivated solely by national interest defined in terms of power.”(Genest, 1996: 133). Unlike realism, neoliberals’ contention is that international politics can no longer be divided simply into ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics. While the high politics of national security and military power still remain important and relevant, they argue that economic, social and environmental issues - low politics – are high priorities on the international agenda.

One very significant aspect of the ‘Complex Interdependence’ is that it is a combination of two opposite views, i.e. it integrates both the elements of power politics and economic liberalism. It takes into consideration both the costs and benefits of interdependence relationship. In the world of ‘Complex Interdependence’, despite the increasing economic cooperation and ecological interdependence, the possibility of international military conflicts cannot be ignored. However, unlike the traditional power politics, in ‘Complex Interdependence’ this may not be the zero-sum game. “The politics of economic and ecological interdependence involve competition even when large net benefits can be expected from cooperation.”(Keohane & Nye, 1977:10)

According to Robert O Keohane and Joseph Nye, interdependence should not be defined entirely as situations of ‘evenly balanced mutual dependence’. They contend:

“It is asymmetries in dependence that are most likely to provide sources of influence for actors in their dealings with one another. Less dependent actors can often use the interdependence relationship as a source of power in bargaining over an issue and perhaps to affect other issues.”(Keohane & Nye, 1977:10-11)

## **3. The Key Characteristics of Complex Interdependence**

Robert O Keohane and Joseph S. Nye in their book ‘Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition’, described three main characteristics of Complex Interdependence: -

### **3.1 Multiple Channels**

In international politics there are multiple channels connecting the societies, including all the interstate, transgovernmental, and transnational transactions. This is opposed to the unitary state assumption of realism.

In this complex world of interdependence not only formal and informal interaction between governmental elites are a source of connecting societies but informal ties among non-governmental elites and transnational organizations are gaining more and more importance. Multinational firms and banks have a great impact on the domestic as well as interstate relations. These actors, besides pursuing their own interests, also “act as transmission belts, making government policies in various countries more sensitive to one another.”(Keohane& Nye, 1977:26)

### **3.2 Absence of Hierarchy among Issues**

In the world of Complex interdependence, there is no hierarchy among the issues. The dividing line between domestic and foreign policy becomes blurred and there is no clear agenda in interstate relations. There are multiple issues which are not arranged in a clear or consistent hierarchy. Among other things, “military security does not consistently dominate the agenda.”(Keohane& Nye, 1977:25)The foreign affairs agendas have become more and more diverse now. As opposed to the realists’ assumption where security is always the most important issue between the states, in complex interdependence, any issue-area might be at the top of the international agenda at any particular time.

### **3.3 Minor Role of Military Force**

As opposed to the central role that force is given in realist’s world, i.e. an ultimate necessity to guarantee survival, Complex Interdependence assumes that in international relations force is of low salience. When Complex Interdependence prevails, military force could be irrelevant in resolving disagreements on economic issues among members of an alliance, however simultaneously be very important for the alliance’s political and military relations with its rival bloc. According to Keohane and Nye, intense relationships of mutual influence may exist but force is no more considered an appropriate way of achieving other goals such as economic and ecological welfare which are becoming more important, because mostly the effects of military force are very costly and uncertain. (Keohane & Nye, 1977:28) In fact due to modern nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, all the actors are aware of the maximized costs of war.

Thus, the significance of military force as key policy tool for resolving disputes has declined in the globalized world. However, its role as bargaining tool is still important and may vary from issue to issue. Its role cannot be completely ignored. In an asymmetric relationship, the less dependent actor may use it as a bargaining tool. Infact the changing role of force has made the situation more complex.

## **4. The Realist vs. Neoliberal Debate**

There are many points of convergence as well as divergence, on the basis of which a comparison between realist and neoliberal schools of thought can be carried out. In the following part, picking out some of the main assumptions of both approaches, a comparative analysis would be made in order to explore the prevalence of these approaches in the contemporary world order. The main notions under discussion would be statism, power, balance of power, relative vs. absolute gains and international institutions and regimes.

Realism is regarded as the most influential and dominant theory in International Relations since Second World War. Realists believe that states are chiefly motivated by the desire for military and economic power or security, rather than ideals or ethics. Classical realists emphasize on actor’s innate drive for domination and power which leads to conflicts. States seek to maintain a balance of power among the states that helps preserving peace and helps to ensure their survival. The main advocates of this paradigm included E. H. Carr, George F. Kennan, Hans J. Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Kenneth W. Thompson. On the other hand, structural realists, also called neorealists, contend that actors seek power not driven by their innate drive for power, but due to the structure of the system. They emphasize the anarchic nature of international system, where states have to rely on self-help to ensure their survival.

Thus, the realists emphasize the conflictual aspects of international transactions, that is they focus on the causes of war rather than international cooperation (McMillan, 1997: 40). These states exist in an anarchic international system, characterized by the absence of an authoritative hierarchy. In this anarchical system, states can rely only on themselves. Their most important concern is their security. These states rely primarily on balancing the power of other states and deterrence to keep the international system intact and non-threatening as possible (Mingst, 2004:65-66).In short, three ‘Ss’ constitute the corners of the realist triangle: statism, Survival and Self-help.

Hence, the centerpiece of realist framework is 'state'. The struggle for power in an anarchic world system urges the need for security policies based on the self-help principle. 'Power' is the determining factor in deciding that which country will prevail in a conflict. Peace is most likely to result from a distribution of power among states. (McMillan, 1997: 40) Thus, other than state and national security, all other issues are ignored. The game of international politics revolves around the pursuit of power: acquiring it, increasing it, projecting it, and using it to bend others to one's will.

Neorealism, a variant of realism, emphasizes the anarchic structure of world politics rather than human nature. It emphasizes the significance of international system's structure in the behavior of its units. i.e. states. The most significant neorealist work is Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979).

Waltz believed that international system has a precisely defined structure with three important characteristics: a) The ordering principle of the system, b) the character of the units in the system, and c) the distribution of the capabilities of the units in the system. (Burchill, 1996: 86).

Unlike domestic political systems where ordering principle is hierarchical, the ordering principle of the international system is anarchic with the absence of any overarching authority regulating the behaviour of nation-states towards each other. In this anarchic system, states depend upon self-help system for their survival, thus seeking power. Under such circumstances, security dilemma is common to all states whether small or big. According to Waltz, as far as the character of the units in the system are concerned, although each state is a separate and autonomous unit, all states perform the same functions forced by the constraints of the system. All of them are concerned about their security and their survival which in turn affects their behavior. Although they are functionally similar, states differ immensely in their capabilities.

In international system, there is an unequal and constantly shifting distribution of power among states. The capacity of each state to pursue and achieve their common objectives varies according to their placement in the international system, and specifically their relative power (Burchill, 1996: 86-87).

Waltz believes that this anarchy is likely to continue because each state is concerned about the perseverance of its autonomy (Jackson & Sorensen, 1999:51). Neorealists do not deny cooperation among states altogether, rather they contend that cooperating states will always be aiming at maximizing their relative power and preserve their autonomy.

As in classical realism, balance of power is a core principle of neorealism. But unlike traditional realists, neorealists believe that the balance of power among states is largely determined by the structure of the system. Neorealists contend that it is anarchical structure of international system that makes states apprehensive of their relative position in the distribution of power. Resultantly, states remain wary of each other and thus compete with each other. In such a system, the possibilities for international cooperation are logically slim. According to Waltz:

“When faced with possibility of cooperating for mutual gain, states that feel insecure must ask how the gain will be divided. They are compelled to ask not ‘Will both of us gain?’ but ‘Who will gain more?’ if an expected gain is to be divided, say, in the ratio of two to one, one state may use its disproportionate gain to implement a policy intended to damage or destroy the other. Even the prospect of large absolute gains for both parties does not elicit their cooperation so long as each fears how the other will use its increased capabilities.” (Waltz, 1979:105)

Thus, Waltz argues that in this anarchic world, it is sense of insecurity, and uncertainty about the intentions and actions, the other player may pursue in future, that inhibits cooperation.

Power is an indispensable part of politics. Power might be defined as the ability of an actor to persuade other actors to do something which they would not do otherwise. It may also be defined as control over outcomes. For traditionalists, the main signpost of international politics is the concept of “interest defined in terms of power” (Morgenthau, 1978:4-15). The realism assumes that world politics is essentially and unchangeably an endless struggle among self-interested states for power and no means is more important than acquiring the power. They believe that military power dominates the other forms, and that states with more military power control the world affairs. Thus “the game of international politics revolves around the pursuit of power: acquiring it, increasing it, projecting it, and using it to bend others to one's will.” (Kegley & Wittkopf, 2004: 37).

Liberal and Neoliberals however, in a moderate way try to integrate both the elements of power politics as well as economic liberalism. In Complex Interdependence, the power and interdependence are closely interlinked and it involves both the costs and benefits in an interdependent relationship.

In order to understand the role of power in interdependence, Keohane and Nye distinguished between the two dimensions of interdependence; a) sensitivity and b) vulnerability.

Sensitivity means degree to which actors are sensitive to changes in a given issue area. "Sensitivity involves degree of responsiveness within a policy framework – how quickly do changes in one country bring costly changes in another country, and how great are the costly effects?" (Keohane & Nye, 1977: 12). Sensitivity interdependence may become the basis for significant political influence only when existing rules and norms can be taken for granted (by stronger actor), or when it would be extremely costly for dissatisfied states to change their policies immediately (Keohane & Nye, 1977: 18).

By vulnerability is meant the extent to which actors are able to control their responses to the sensitivity. Vulnerability can be defined as an actor's liability to suffer costs imposed by external events even after policies have been altered. It is the cost of escaping from the prevailing system or of changing the existing rules of the game. The less vulnerable of the two actors is not necessarily the less sensitive, but the one that would incur lower costs from altering the situation. In an asymmetrical interdependence the weaker states are more vulnerable to the external changes because of the costliness to adjust to the new changes.

The term balance of power, used as a symbol of realism, is based on the view that the policies based on balance of power explicitly imply the existence of power factor in international politics. According to Hans. J. Morgenthau, "The balance of power and policies aiming at its preservation are not only inevitable but are an essential stabilizing factor in a society of sovereign nations; and the instability of international Balance of Power is due not to the faultiness of the principle but to the particular conditions under which the principle must operate in a society of sovereign nations." (Morgenthau, 1978: 187)

Given the significance of 'state' and 'national security' issues, maintaining the balance of power among states or alliances of states is a crucial concept in the realist paradigm. States, in order to ensure their security, engage in both internal and external balancing in order to deter and defeat the aggressors, in case deterrence fails. Thus, where one state strives to acquire more and more power relative to their rivals to increase its security, the insecurity of the other states gets fuelled which leads to a situation of 'security dilemma'. This security dilemma can be mitigated through the mechanism of 'balance of power'. The security is, thus, a zero-sum game where only relative gains can be made. There can be two ways in which states balance power: internal balancing and external balancing. Internal balancing occurs when states increase their own capabilities by increasing economic growth and/or increasing military spending. External balancing takes place when states make alliances to check the power of stronger states or alliances.

Waltz's BoP theory says that smaller and weaker states will balance the power of more powerful ones to ensure that latter do not becomes too powerful and becomes dominant over others. Within a balance of power system, a state may choose to engage in either balancing or band wagoning behavior. In a time of conflict or war, the decision to balance or to bandwagon may decide the survival of the state. Weak states align with the strong ones if they have no other option. The two other options can be that they either distance themselves from the strong states or they make alliances with other states. Thus, external threats act as a cause for alliances. States use these as foreign policy means to increase their security, because by balancing against threats in this way, aggressor will face combined opposition.

A problem arises when states have concerns about their relative gains as all the states are always trying to maximize their relative power in order to increase the chances of their survival. The importance of the relative power means that states are hesitant to cooperate if the expected gains may be distributed unevenly among participating states. Even if cooperation could produce absolute gains for any one state, these gains will be discounted by that state should cooperation produce greater gains for other states. Thus, in a neorealist's balance of power world, a state's survival depends on having more power than other states, i.e. all power is viewed in relative terms (Mingst, 2004: 69). Waltz argued that great powers will always tend to balance each other and smaller and weaker states, on the other hand will have a tendency to align themselves with great powers in order to preserve their maximum autonomy.

Another very important concept is international institutions and international regimes. "Regimes are institutionalized patterns of cooperation in a given issue area, as reflected by the established rules" (Kegley & Wittkopf, 2004:33-34).

There is variety of regimes in the world like Non-Proliferation (NPT) regime, International Monetary Fund (IMF) regime, General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT) regime, etc. They create norms that become binding on all members and that in turn transform the nature of international politics.

As opposed to neorealists, who believed in minor role of international institutions limited by states larger interests of national security and military, complex interdependence the potential role of international institutions in political bargaining is greatly increased. They help setting international agenda, and act as catalysts for political actions and linkage of weak states.

John Mearsheimer criticized liberal's contending that there were some inherent weaknesses in the Institutionalism theories, particularly liberal institutionalism and these were constrained by states' powers. He criticized the inability of liberal institutionalism to promote peace and cooperation in the post Cold War era. According to realists' view institutions as catalysts of international cooperation and stability take a back seat in realists' assessment. For realists, the anarchic world inhibits cooperation among states as they are more concerned about balance of power in their favour. Thus, balance of power is independent variable while institutions are intervening variable with limited capacity to promote cooperation, peace and security (Nuruzzaman, 2006).

Responding to Mearsheimer critique, Robert O. Keohane and Lisa L. Martin argued that institutions did matter in the conduct of state behavior however it was important to discover how and under what conditions (Keohane & Martin, 1995:34-35). According to liberals and neoliberals, institutions are means through which cooperation among states can be achieved however, these are only mutual interests which would motivate states to cooperate with each other. Once they are sure about their gains, they would not be reluctant to cooperate.

As far as cooperation among states in international institutions and regimes is concerned, realists do not deny the possibility of cooperation among states but they contend that it is difficult to achieve and maintain. The main problem is the issue of relative gains. States are very apprehensive of the distribution of gains among the cooperating states as it may affect the prevailing balance of power. This problem was raised by Joseph M. Grieco (1988) who argued that most critical question in any scheme of cooperation is how the benefits from cooperation would be distributed among the cooperating states. Thus for states these are not their absolute gains but relative gains vis-à-vis their rivals which are more important.

On the other hand for neoliberals in complex interdependence, all states have absolute gains. But later on after rational criticism they dealt this issue with a flexible approach. Robert Powell argued that relative gains problem depends upon the prevailing situation in the world, i.e., hostile or peaceful (Powell, 1991). When there is peaceful situation and states are relatively secure, liberal institutionalism works better. The idea was further elaborated by John Mearshiemer that liberal institutionalism has less relevance in conflictual situations where chances of gains are less. That is why liberal institutionalism is working more effectively in the area of international political economy and environmental spheres (Nuruzzaman, 2006). Similarly, Duncan Snidal (1991) argues that relative gains problem is more applicable to situation where there are two actors or when there are obvious asymmetries among the large number of states. He was logical in contending that when states have almost equal power, they are not concerned much about relative gains.

## **5. Conclusion**

A comparative analysis demonstrates that in the politics of Complex Interdependence, the role of military power as bargaining chip always remains relevant and significant. It has the ability to affect the outcome of the overall interdependent relations. Generally, military power is used to pressurize the weaker actor to get the political objectives fulfilled. However, manipulating economic or socio-political vulnerabilities is not devoid of risks and may lead to military counterstrategies. It must always be kept in mind that military power dominates economic power in the sense that economic means alone are most likely to be ineffective against the serious use of military force. Thus it shows that in the politics of interdependence the risk of a military confrontation is always there. Since cooperation and competition go side by side, in case of severe exploitation of the vulnerabilities and sensitivities, an economic competition may lead to military confrontation. It is the nature and priority of the national interest at stake which determines, if time comes, whether to go to military option or not. However, in the contemporary interdependent world, military confrontation is not a preferred option and is used as a bargaining tool in the modern politics of Complex Interdependence.

A detailed study of characteristics of both realism and complex interdependence reveals that both theories are altogether contradictory in nature and are prevailing side by side in the contemporary world politics. It can be said that we are living in a hybrid world. In one part of our world prevalent rules are of realist and neorealist paradigm where under anarchic scenario, states/actors are trying to maximize their strengths/benefits. In other part of the world prevailing paradigm is Complex interdependence where nations, keeping aside their conflicts, are cooperating with each other for economic gains.

There is increased role of international institutions and regimes. Simultaneously we see that powerful states like United States have been maneuvering these forums in their favour, like UN,IMF,NPT regime, etc. United States with drawal from Kyoto Protocol, not signing on Criminal Court, bypassing the UN in its decision to invade Iraq, all exhibit ineffectiveness of international institutions in front of powerful and developed countries. The fact is that these are not irrelevant but they are effective only when major powers especially USA decides to use these as tools for cooperation.

Complex Interdependence can be said to have been a breakthrough in the international relations. We can see world has become single global village. Large MNCs like Toyota, IBM, have larger budgets than states. International organizations and transnational movements transcend national borders. But it is also a fact that complex interdependence is not a global theory. It does not fit everywhere all the time. It is more evident in developed world like Western Europe, North America, Japan, Australia, China, New Zealand, etc, i.e., as the industrialized world does not want to go to war at the expense of their development. When it comes to high and low politics, in high politics militarily developed countries have an edge and when it comes to low politics, again these countries benefit who are integrated into capitalist world economy. Military force is not a preferred tool but it is still used by less dependent countries for their gains. Military's significance as deciding tool cannot be denied. States employ military forces against the periphery countries, in regions which are not closely integrated into the world economy, e.g., US bombing of Kosovo, USA war on terror, invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, etc. So the main argument is that despite the changing nature of international relations, power still remains a currency even in interdependent world.

Thus, it can be stated that the contemporary international world order poses a serious challenge to neoliberal/complex interdependence notions. US hegemony in world's affairs especially in the wake of US-led war on terrorism clearly signifies realist assumptions. Since a single theory cannot illustrate all aspects of international relations, so a pragmatic approach to better understand the world politics, would be to synthesize the realist and neoliberal, or any other relevant perspectives.

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