How Can a Pandemic Interrupt Realism in International Diplomacy?

In this paper, I will be executing a literary review on Francis Beer and Robert Hariman's *Nature Plays Last: Realism, Post-Realism, Post Pandemic.* The primary argument associated with the literary review asks: How Can a Pandemic Interrupt Realism/ Post-Realism in International Diplomacy?

In this literary review, I will be taking on Beer and Hariman's approach on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected diplomatic relations and how it caused states to act under a realist theory viewpoint. In this piece, Beer and Hariman collaborate to take on the oldest international relations theory, which is realism, formulates a model, and shows how realist theory has been altered with the induction of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beer and Hariman's academic collaboration brings into perspective that not only do state and non-state actors play roles, but how external factors, such as natural occurrences or medical conditions, such as a virus, can off-center what we know today as realism theory and how it can be altered by non-human elements.

Initially, to set off this literary review, the reader must understand Beer and Hariman's post-realist model, which consists of the elements of competition, control, and critique. This model suggests how COVID-19 has temporarily altered the way in which states behave on the international stage in reference to diplomacy and the way in which they react domestically. This model further exposes the disruption to the oldest international relations theory applied to present-day disturbances, specifically applying COVID-19 as an undeniable variable. While the realist theory stands and maintains its relevance in diplomacy today, COVID-19, according to Beer and Hariman, can be applied as a background element that is so strong, it simply cannot be ignored, due to the way in which states have been forced to react to it.

Dr. Beer and Dr. Hariman present an argument in this academic work, suggesting that non-human factors can and rightfully should be identified as actors and should be treated with the same level of respect as state and non-state actors. With this level of respect applied, one should with the sustained understanding, remember that these non-human elements are incapable of intent or rational thought, yet are in such a key position that they cannot be ignored when referencing the changes in international diplomacy of today. These "non-human" elements are unpredictable, pose a reevaluation of the way in which states engage and determine diplomatic matters, and how something that has no particular objective can disrupt a state both internationally and domestically.

The authors' overall argument seeks to frame and present their concept of a Post-Realism Model broken into three categories: Competition, Control and Critique. In their argument, the authors address COVID-19 as a "force of nature" and that like Thucydides, the pandemic "today appears as a bio-storm, an unexpected natural disaster that will have to be factored into subsequent planning. Theoretically non-human actors are merely the material background to calculations of interest and power; they are not what realist theory is about" but are rather considered more to be a "blind spot". (Beer and Hariman, 2020).

In the Competitive element of the Post-Realist Model, the authors explain that this element is rather stream-lined and somewhat universal, referencing the strain and harshness of diplomatic interaction prior to the introduction of a non-human element. This can also be identified as normal multilateral and bilateral relations among countries. In the Control portion of the model, the author addresses it as encompassing the control, specifying an interest of control on itself, as a state. This reflects on the state's, as the authors reference *fortuna* and *virtu*, which in simpler terms, in reference to politics, is the state's virtue and standards of value. When Beer and Hariman referenced Machiavelli in these terms, *The Prince* came to mind, by which elements can easily be interchangeable from the Prince to the state, being that both are of purpose, rationale, and thought. In Machiavelli's *The Prince* (English Version) translated by W.K. Marriott, he writes that:

> And you have to understand this, that a prince, especially a new one, cannot observe all those things for which men are esteemed, being often forced, in order to maintain the state, to act contrary to fidelity, friendship, humanity, and religion.

Therefore, it is necessary for him to have a mind ready to turn itself accordingly as the winds and variations of fortune force it, yet, as I have said above, not to diverge from the good if he can avoid doing so, but, if compelled, then to know how to set about it. (Machiavelli, N., genius.com, n.d.).

In these terms, one can understand that the prince (the state) under such circumstances, should act in a virtuous manner, gaining the trust of the people, with the ability to turn aggressive, if need be, to defend its state (borders, national interest, economic structure, diplomatic reputation, etc.). In political realism, we understand that international relations theory is a rationally based theory, drawing on the need to secure national interests, diplomatic rapport, and military might. It is also understood that the state or leader must be willing and able to use its military might or diplomatic rapport, if need be, for the sake of the state and its national interests.

The final stage of the model, Critique, the authors draw from critical analysis of the states' first two portions of the model, which are Competition and Control. "Critique challenges transparency assumptions of conventional knowledge, the idea that the world is there simply to be seen through the analytical lens of currently accepted realism or any other single doctrine, and embraces multiple sources of information, interests, and perspectives." (Beer, 1993). While Beer continues to reference vigilance, perspectives, deliberations, and imaginations, these are all elements of, unlike COVID-19, are of a human nature. Humans are capable of rational thinking, deception, feelings, and intent, making them an important element of a realist theory.

The authors go on to suggest that Realist look at COVID-19 as a non-human element with no intention, but provide states with more relevance, just as much as a human being, having rational choice, but not able to think or feel, becoming more a of metaphorical vehicle to an actors' intentions or rationale to eventually control. While Beer and Hariman reference philosophers such as Hobbes, Clausewitz, and Machiavelli with realism-dominated concepts to international diplomacy, they point out that their own realist approach is framed with discord.

Outside of this piece, another author referenced Hobbes's *Leviathan* as "the law of nature, it is here argued that Hobbes gives us a perception of international relations which is not

always conflictual and comprises the adjustments of conflicting interests, leading to the possibility of alliances and cooperation in international relations." (Nuri Yurdusev, A., 2006).

While Nuri Yurdusev points out the conflicting interests and cooperation in international relations, he does not mention, in this piece referenced, that a review of outside factors may affect the way in which states adapt to nature and how it may affect their overall objective for dominance, power, or even to survive diplomatically. The very concept of a natural or non-human element changing the way states behave on diplomatic matters seems almost somewhat of a new element. But is this phenomenon known as COVID-19 a new concept of incorporating a natural element which can alter diplomatic relations?

In the past, natural disasters have been a factor into the way in which states have conducted diplomatic relations with each other, just as humanitarian crises in countries have formulated ways for countries, despite diplomatic instabilities, to seek and offer assistance.

With strained relations between the United States and Cuba since Fidel Castro became Prime Minister in 1959 and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Diplomatic instability was further exacerbated with the United States Carter Administration neglecting to renew travel restrictions from Cuba, only for the Reagan Administration to reinstate the trade embargo in 1982. In 2004, the Bush Administration modified restrictions, allowing for classified research and film making under the Cuban Assets Control Regulations in 2004.

By the following year, the United States had to endure the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, in which over 90 countries offered assistance, including Cuba, despite strained diplomacy. According to a news article, "Both the White House and State Department spokesman this week downplayed the Cuban government's offer to send some 1,600 medics, field hospitals and 83 tons of medical supplies to ease the humanitarian disaster". (Murray, M., 2005).

In this situation, while the United States and Cuba have well-known historical disruptions in relations, the non-human element of a natural disaster brought forth Cuba's ability to look beyond diplomatic tensions and offer humanitarian assistance. Regardless, the United States refused, suggesting that the country was more than capable of handling its own domestic response to national disasters, despite accepting Germany's high-speed pumps to distribute flood

waters out of the New Orleans, Louisiana area, the Dutch providing construction experts to assist the Army Corps of Engineers with levee reconstruction, and Mexico's naval ships, amphibious vehicles, and mobile hospital, to name a few. (AP, 2005).

We can take from the United States' reaction to Cuba offering aid that while it seemed to be a true humanitarian effort on the part of Cuba, past conflicts between the two countries had a lingering effect on the United States' reaction to Cuba. With a sense of nationalistic principles and patriotic pride, the United States felt the need reinforce that it is the world's superpower by not accepting offers from Cuba, which is still considered to be a developing country. Another issue that likely played a factor to the lingering U.S.-Cuban relations was Cuba's bilateral relations with the Soviet Union, offering them into Cuban waters, which would have been a direct threat to the United States' interest and national security.

Ironically, within two months of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Cuba accepted United States disaster aid for their own natural disaster with Hurricane Wilma. U.S. State Department spokesperson Sean McCormack stated that "Doing a survey around the building here, I think in everybody's memory, this is the first time that they have accepted an offer of assistance," McCormack said. (McCormack, S., NYTimes, 2005).

With these two states, one insists on showing state superiority despite domestic natural disasters, which exposed a level of the United States and its vulnerabilities, effectively compromising what would be considered to be national interest and national security. On the other hand, Cuba extended an "olive branch" due to the natural disaster, overlooking previous bilateral disruptions and U.S.-imposed restrictions on its country. Cuba, realizing and acknowledging that it is a country that was in need of help, and would likely continue to need help from outside countries in response to natural disasters, went too far to set off a bank account so that countries could contribute to the case that Cuba faced any natural disasters in the future.

While this is in no way attempting to romanticize the country of Cuba, nor to reflect on the patriotic might of the United States. The overall objective is to reference two countries as an example, with diplomatic bilateral insecurities, and how a single non-human element caused not one of these countries, but both to react in a way that they would have otherwise avoided to do so.

Beer and Hariman point out other factors that could greatly affect a realist approach to international relations and diplomacy, such as economic changes that affect major corporations, and ultimately, the state's population and overall ability to govern successfully. Such situations included the price of crude oil dropping and economic infractions, crippling most economies globally. In the context of economic destabilization, not only the United States, but its competitors, both diplomatically and economically have suffered greatly from COVID-19's effect, such as extended lockdowns and closing of businesses.

There is an example pointed out of China and its militarization in the South China Sea. To support this claim, I was able to find a news article from 2020, that referenced China's aggressive military tactics in the South China Sea, despite being in the midst of applied diplomatic pressure from the United States regarding the spread of COVID-19 from an alleged lab in China. (Starr, B., Browne, R., 2020).

Having such a global upheaval of economic stability caused by China's decision to advance their military presence arguably poses a rational person to question why a state would engage in such behavior. With a deadly and disturbingly unknown pandemic growing, China was one of the first and strictest lockdowns executed in history. In my analysis, it is plausible to conclude that decisions by the Peoples' Republic of China, such as aggressive military maneuvers, were assumed to be in the best interest of the country to either defend itself, it's national interests, or to strategically prepare a military defense while under such tense international diplomatic pressure.

With such economic pressure, medical uncertainty, and death spreading globally due to the pandemic, China nor the rest of the world, were in positions to engage in new potential military engagements during the early stages of COVID-19. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 2020 showed a traditional decline in the price of crude oil in lieu of the upcoming Chinese New Year, in which China's demand continued to decrease ceremoniously. China's oil consumption took a massive dive of nearly 49% by the following month, due to the COVID pandemic and lockdowns, proving less use and need for oil. (BLS.gov, 2020).

While supply and demand were grossly offset due to the pandemic, it is probable for China to make strategic and aggressive moves in the South China Sea as a means of defense

based on diplomatic pressure, to assist in defense of its borders, or possibly to defend its fishing production interest during such a fragile state-mandated lockdown.

Despite international pressure, China maintained near silence on the matter, other than suggesting that the country-imposed lockdowns in the Hubei province, but otherwise, suffered no major issues associated with COVID-19. With this being explained we will have to revert back to the root cause, which was not China's military maneuvers, nor was it international pressure from other countries to conduct an investigation into the origin of the virus. The root cause for such disruption was the COVID-19 virus itself, a non-human element at the core of such disruption and tension between countries, especially in the eyes of the Peoples' Republic of China.

"The virus, like a state, is also a competitive actor. It has disturbed the existing international world order and is establishing a new order—isolation, quarantine, death. The virus has also disrupted epistemic habits, an example of catastrophic epistemology (Beer and Hariman, 2020). In contrast to human and state elements of the realist theory model, non-human elements, such as natural disasters, and diseases such as COVID-19, have had no need to rush for competition and have no purpose of control, other than to control and in some cases, destroy the host in which it is in contact with.

"Realism and its offshoots have been at the hegemonic center of international relations theorizing; post -realism includes what comes next. What comes next is of course, prefigured by what has come before", (pg. 6).

After reading and taking into consideration the realist theory model built by Beer and Hariman's academic contribution to realist theory and COVID-19, Erik Gartzke's piece The Capitalist Peace comes to mind. Gartske stated that, "The discovery that democracies seldom fight each other has led, quite reasonably, to the conclusion that democracy causes peace, at least within the community of liberal policies." (Gartzke, E., 2007).

John J. Mearsheimer's piece *Why We Will Soon Miss The Cold War*, points out that "If you believe (as the Realist school of international relations theory, to which I belong, believes) that the prospects for international peace are not markedly influenced by the domestic political

character of states-that it is the character of the state system, not the character of the individual units composing it, that drives states toward war." (pg. 2).

While Mearsheimer plays into states and the elements of war, based on realist theory, he does not take into consideration that external factors may also not only assist in the pursuit of power and diplomatic actions, but also how unexpected situations such as droughts, disease, and other natural disasters may have an effect to turn the tides to either peace or war for any states associated in these actions.

What may rouse the reader in the text of Gartzke's work, even though he references democracy causes peace, he does not point out how fragile peace is. Secondly, Beer and Hariman reference that realist theory should incorporate and recognize non-human factors, when it is the very element of non-human factors that make Gartzke's democratic peace fragile.

It is also ironic that the very peace that Gartzke references that reframes states from conflict, are the very same elements that are the easiest disrupted with non-human factors, such as COVID-19, the 2003 SARS outbreak, the Ebola outbreak, and the natural disasters of Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma.

There is an unnatural security among states that while there is stability and control within the state, so long as national interest and values are maintained, diplomatic relations shall stay stable. While the realist theory does not directly identify non-human factors into its model, there is a level of room for it to be introduced as not only a simple element, but possibly a determining factor on relations between states.

As suggested by this reading, nature, including natural disasters, pandemics, and other natural assurances in the world are direct elements to realist theory, although not directly recognized as such. If it were not for the 2003 Hurricane Katrina in the United States, there would have been no need for Cuba to offer humanitarian aid to the United States. With the United States ignoring the offer of aid from Cuba, but taking aid from other countries, the action served as an indirect reminder of the unresolved tensions between the two countries.

With the realization that its diplomatic rapport would potentially be at stake, the United States in return, provided aid to Cuba after the damage done by Hurricane Wilma months later. Not only could this gesture be taken as the United States showing its nation's might, but also a

way to remind other countries of its superpower status and how it was still relevant, despite domestic setbacks, such as Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters that have come since.

On the other hand, Cuba showed a willingness to look past decades of diplomatic strain to offer humanitarian aid, which could be categorized as a sense of strength. In the case of the global COVID-19 pandemic, China in the early stages, was faced with numerous factors that may have caused it to react militarily. First there was the actual COVID-19 outbreak and pressure from the international stage to allow elements like the United Nations and the World Health Organization to come in and conduct investigations.

At the same time, coming out of the Chinese New Year, China was also faced with a lack of rebound in the oil industry and growing concerns for its fishing industry at that time. With such economic and diplomatic strain, including the lockdown and eventual protest from its own people, the Peoples' Republic of China decided to use its might through war-like tactics to secure its interests.

While we are not sure which interests were priority, it is plausible to assume that its economic status (oil and fishing industry being threatened) posed more of an immediate threat than a call from the World Health Organization to investigate a research lab.

Beer and Hariman's piece bring forth, not necessarily the unknown elements that can disrupt peace, but the elements that are normally not considered until they actually happen. These elements are usually not taken into consideration because of the lack of predictability and motive. There is no rational assumption that elements such as natural disasters and diseases have actual intent to interfere in diplomatic affairs, disrupt humanitarian efforts, or destroy a country's economic structure. Because the non-human element plays a factor in the background, it is not taken into consideration until it presents itself as an actual threat, such as the Ebola virus did.

Disruption of economic trade, travel, borders, and national interests by either human or non-human factors can cause just as equal the level of strain on diplomacy, potentially straining relations or isolating certain regions from another. These disruptions can eventually lead to a conflict that, otherwise absent of a non-human element, could have been avoided.

While Beer and Hariman's piece is engaging and gives the audience a different perspective of realist theory and how non-human elements are often overlooked, it is hard to

deny how non-human elements have been at the core of some diplomatic strains in the past, specifically with humanitarian aid in lieu of disease, famine, natural disasters, such as drought, hurricanes, and floods.

While the answer to the argument of how a pandemic can disrupt diplomatic relations it, seems that authors Beer and Hariman bring forth a perspective that is likely not referenced until a disaster happens, bringing to the forefront the understanding of how fragile diplomatic relations are and how a minor disruptions can cause military units to activate with one thing in mind, defending itself.

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