

# It is kind to be cruel: the humanity of American Realism

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## Introduction

‘No one loves a political realist’, Robert Gilpin once lamented.<sup>1</sup> A major reason for this hostility towards realism is its sceptical view of the role of ethical norms (principled beliefs about state action) in international relations. Some critics dislike realism because they think it leads to an immoral international order.<sup>2</sup> Thucydides’ famous adage that the ‘strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must’ is widely interpreted as evidence that one of realism’s founding fathers was an advocate of an immoral approach to statecraft.<sup>3</sup> Niccoló Machiavelli’s well-known advice to his Prince that it is politics that determines ethics, not *vice versa*, reinforces these widely-held views of realism’s amorality.<sup>4</sup> The fact that modern realism has been influenced by unsavoury individuals like the German theorist Carl Schmitt, whose indisputable intellectual brilliance was tainted by his overly close association with the Third Reich, leads many to see a continuing link between *realpolitik* and evil in the international system.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Richard Ashley spoke for many when he concluded that

[Realism] is a tragic tradition. It is a tradition whose silences, omissions, and failures of self-critical nerve join it in secret complicity with an order of domination that reproduces the expectation of inequality as a motivating force and insecurity as an integrating principle.<sup>6</sup>

\* For helpful suggestions I thank Theo Farrell, John Mearsheimer, Marc Trachtenberg, and Stephen Walt.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Gilpin, ‘No One Loves a Political Realist’, *Security Studies* 5:3 (1996), pp. 3–28. For a classic indictment of realism as a general philosophical position see Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘To The Realists’, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Lake and Roger Morris, ‘The Human Reality of Realpolitik’, *Foreign Policy*, 4 (1971), pp. 157–62; Robert O. Keohane, ‘Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond’, in Ada W. Finifter (ed.), *Political Science: The State of Discipline* (Washington, DC: APSA, 1983), pp. 519 and 532; and Richard K. Ashley, ‘Political Realism and Human Interests’, *International Studies Quarterly* 25:2 (June 1981), p. 234.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Strasser (ed.), *The Landmark Thucydides* (New York: Free Press, 1996), p. 5.89. For a view that Thucydides is not a proponent of this view, see David Bolotin, ‘Thucydides’ in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (eds.), *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd edn. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 13–14.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Hallet Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Wolin, ‘Reasons of State, States of Reason’, *The New Republic*, 4 June, 2001, p. 55. Schmitt’s most relevant work was his *Concept of the Political*, trans., George Schwab (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> Richard K. Ashley, ‘The Poverty of Neorealism’, *International Organization*, 38:2 (1984), pp. 281.

Many of realism's critics feel a moral imperative to transform the conflict-ridden international system of *realpolitik* and replace it with a more cooperative order based on shared ethical norms.<sup>7</sup>

Other critics do not impugn the morality of realism but still find it wanting as a description of, and explanation for, international politics because it slights the important role norms play in guiding state behaviour.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars even argue that norms trump power and interests in determining a state's foreign policy; thus they maintain that a good theory of international relations must give the former pride of place.<sup>9</sup>

Proponents of the English School, in particular, believe that their approach is superior to realism because it combines realism's appreciation of the role of power with a sensitivity to the importance of norms in international affairs.<sup>10</sup> Not only does the English School purport to offer a better approach to studying world politics; some of its adherents also believe that it provides a means for improving relations among states by holding out the possibility that common ethical norms can foster an 'anarchical society' which will operate differently from the *realpolitik* world.<sup>11</sup>

Since many scholars agree that realism is both immoral and wrong, it is useful to clarify realism's view of the role of norms in international affairs. While no realist denies that norms sometimes matter in relations among states, most believe that state behaviour is largely shaped by power and material interests.<sup>12</sup> States may behave altruistically when doing so does not affect their security, but realism holds that states rarely sacrifice power to norms.

Though realists minimise the role of norms in international politics, there is no basis for the charge that realism is immoral because its adherents have little interest

<sup>7</sup> Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', p. 229.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Little, 'The English School's Contribution to the Study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 6:3 (September 2000), pp. 395–423 [electronic version], pp. 6–7; Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', p. 257, n. 71; John Gerard Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis', *World Politics*, 35:2 (January 1983), pp. 273–85. On English School and Neorealism in general, see Richard Little, 'Neorealism and the English School: A Methodological, Ontological and Theoretical Reassessment', *European Journal of International Relations*, 1:1 (1995), pp. 9–34.

<sup>9</sup> Rodney Bruce Hall, 'Moral Authority as a Power Resource', *International Organization*, 51:4 (1997), p. 591.

<sup>10</sup> Barry Buzan, 'From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and Regime Theory Meet the English School', *International Organization*, 47:3 (1993), pp. 329–30; Roy E. Jones, 'The English School of International Relations: A Case for Closure', *Review of International Studies* 7:1 (January 1981), p. 3; Barry Buzan, 'The English School: An Underexploited Resource in IR', *Review of International Studies*, 27:3 (July 2001), p. 476. For a classic work in the English School, see Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), ch. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Little, 'Neorealism and the English School', p. 27; and Andrew Hurrell, 'Norms and Ethics in International Relations' in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2001), pp. 139–49, 141.

<sup>12</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'Liberal Talk, Realist Thinking', *University of Chicago Magazine*, February 2002 [<http://wwwwww.alumni.uchicago.edu/magazine/0202/features/index.html>], p. 7; Chaim D. Kaufmann and Robert A. Pape, 'Explaining Costly Moral Action: Britain's Sixty-year Campaign Against the Atlantic Slave Trade', *International Organization*, 53:4 (Autumn 1999), pp. 631–68; Richard G. Gilpin, 'The Richness of the Traditional of Political Realism', *International Organization*, 38:2 (1984), p. 290; and Robert O. Keohane, 'Realism, Neorealism and the Study of World Politics', in Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics*, pp. 8–9.

in making the international system more just and humane. Realists, it is true, are sceptical about the possibility of radically transforming the international system given its enduring anarchical nature.<sup>13</sup> But despite their pessimism, many realists are nevertheless animated by a clear desire to improve the human condition within the constraints of the world the way it is.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, their scepticism about the influence of norms on state behaviour often leads realists to advocate policies that produce a more just and humane world than the policies of realism's critics.

To make the case that realism's scepticism about the role of norms in international relations is both analytically and ethically defensible, I begin by arguing that realism is correct in that when norms and power conflict, the latter regularly prevails. Next, I show that despite their scepticism about the importance of norms in relations between states, it is clear that many realists are nevertheless deeply concerned about alleviating unnecessary human suffering and promoting a more just international order. Finally, I suggest that in a number of cases, realists offer policy recommendations that, while they may not transform the way international politics has been practiced for millennia, nevertheless make the world a somewhat better place than it otherwise might be.

### Why norms are at best marginal in relations among states

While few realists would suggest that norms never matter in international relations, most accord pride of place in their theories to power and material interests.<sup>15</sup> John Mearsheimer, one of realism's most forceful and articulate proponents, conceded that:

there is not much place for human rights and values in the Realist story. Realists basically believe that states are interested in gaining power, either because they're hardwired that way or because it's the best way to survive, and they don't pay much attention to values.<sup>16</sup>

While statesmen pay lip-service to norms when they speak publicly about foreign policy, in reality what motivates them is power.<sup>17</sup> 'Behind closed doors', Mearsheimer argued, 'the elites who make national security policy speak mostly the language of power, not that of principle, and the United States acts in the international system according to the dictates of realist logic'.<sup>18</sup>

The dominant role of power in world politics makes realists sceptical about how much shared norms can change the fundamental nature of international affairs.

<sup>13</sup> Gilpin, 'The Richness of the Traditional of Political Realism', p. 299.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Schwarz and Christopher Layne, 'A New Grand Strategy', *Atlantic Monthly*, January 2002, p. 42, quoting Michael Oakshott.

<sup>15</sup> Harry Kriesler, 'Through the Realist Lens: Conversation With John Mearsheimer', *Conversations With History* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of International studies, 8 April 2002) [<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people2/Mearsheimer/mearsheimer-con1.html>], 4/7.

<sup>16</sup> Kriesler, 'Through the Realist Lens', 7/7.

<sup>17</sup> Schwarz and Layne, 'A New Grand Strategy', p. 39. A standard realist discussion of 'interests' is Stephen D. Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Material Investments and US Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Mearsheimer, 'Liberal Talk, Realist Thinking', p. 7. For a somewhat different take, see Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, p. 92.

E.H. Carr, for example, noted that ‘realism tends to emphasise the irresistible strength of existing forces and the inevitable character of existing tendencies, and to insist that the highest wisdom lies in accepting, and adapting oneself to these forces and tendencies’.<sup>19</sup> Gilpin added that:

What Morgenthau and many other realists have in common is a belief that ethical and political behavior will fail unless it takes into account the actual practice of states and the teachings of sound theory. It is this dual commitment, to practice and to theory, that sets realism apart from both idealism and abstract theorizing that characterizes so much of the contemporary study of international relations.<sup>20</sup>

Contemporary realists remain quite pessimistic about the potential for transcending *realpolitik* and changing the nature of international politics.<sup>21</sup> The most they aspire to, as some of their critics strongly deplore, is to make realism a ‘value neutral’ science of state behaviour.<sup>22</sup>

Based on this sceptical view of the potential of shared ethical norms to transform interstate relations, realists regularly advise policymakers to operate on the basis of power and interests. ‘International politics is not a morality play’, noted Christopher Layne, and ‘as such, US foreign policy must be driven by considerations of interest and security, not idealism and sentimentality’.<sup>23</sup> Sound statecraft and concern for norms and ethics are often incompatible, in the realists’ view, because the condition of international anarchy makes altruistic behaviour dangerous. Reinhold Niebuhr explained that:

It is obvious that fewer risks can be taken with community interests. The inability to take risks naturally results in a benevolence in which selfish advantages must be quite apparent, and in which therefore the moral and redemptive quality is lost.<sup>24</sup>

Power, rather than norms, is the predominant concerns of states because, unlike civil society, international relations remains like Hobbes’ state of nature where life is ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short’.<sup>25</sup>

Given the anarchic nature of international relations, critics of realism can point to very few cases where, when push comes to shove, power and interests have not trumped norms in shaping state behaviour.<sup>26</sup> Martha Finnemore, for example, posited that global cultural norms, rather than domestic state interests, determine patterns of great power humanitarian intervention.<sup>27</sup> But as she conceded in her historical

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Mearsheimer, ‘Liberal Talk, Realist Thinking’, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Gilpin, ‘The Richness of the Traditional of Political Realism’, p. 303.

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, ‘Reflections on *Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics*’ in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 338.

<sup>22</sup> Little, ‘The English School’s Contribution to the Study of International Relations’, p. 5; Ashley, ‘The Poverty of Neorealism’, pp. 230–33; and Ashley, ‘Political Realism and Human Interests’, p. 225.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Layne, ‘A Tragedy, But Not Worth a War for Europe or the United States’, *Toronto Star*, 9 August, 1992, p. A12; and Christopher Layne, ‘If People Are Going to Die, They Should Not Be Americans’, *Los Angeles Times*, 2 June 1995, p. B7.

<sup>24</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1932), pp. 267–68.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. MacPherson (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1971), p. 186.

<sup>26</sup> Michael C. Desch, ‘Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies’, *International Security*, 23:1 (Summer 1998), pp. 141–70.

<sup>27</sup> Martha Finnemore, ‘Constructing Norms of Humanitarian Intervention’, in Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 156.

cases, 'Humanitarian action was rarely taken when it jeopardized other stated goals or interests of a state'.<sup>28</sup> Whether it involves humanitarian intervention, adhering to a ban on land-mines, or accepting the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, great powers rarely adhere to norms that are not ultimately compatible with their interests.

### **Why ethics matter a lot to many American realists**

Despite their pessimism about the salience of norms in international relations, most realists have a clear ethical agenda, which often leads them to advocate policies that they believe will improve life in the international system, at least on the margins.<sup>29</sup> 'Desire to cure the sicknesses of the body politic has given its impulse and its inspiration to political science', E.H. Carr once observed, a remark which is particularly applicable to realists.<sup>30</sup> Most realists are not satisfied merely to understand the world as it is; they also study world politics in order to make it more humane and just within the limits of what international anarchy allows.

It might seem that the view that norms do not matter much in world politics is inconsistent with realist efforts to advance policies that seem driven by an ethical agenda. Carr himself conceded that 'the impossibility of being a consistent and thorough-going realist is one of the most certain and most curious lessons of political science'.<sup>31</sup> While there is no inconsistency between the view that the world is a nasty place and the desire of many realists to try to mitigate human suffering, there is an interesting tension that in many ways reflects Reinhold Niebuhr's distinction between individual and group morality and Max Weber's argument about the complex relationship between 'facts' and 'values' in the social sciences.

Like Niebuhr, most realists feel 'a constant and seemingly irreconcilable conflict between the needs of society and the imperatives of a sensitive conscience'.<sup>32</sup> They also concur with him that 'the best that can be expected of nations is that they should justify their hypocrisies by slight measure of real achievement, and learn how to do justice to wider interests than their own, while they pursue their own'.<sup>33</sup> Most realists reconcile the disjunction between their private moral and ethical codes, and the harsh reality of international politics, by embracing Weber's notion of value-free social science in their approach to studying international relations.

Like Weber, most realists are not really value-free; in fact, they often have an explicit ethical agenda. Unlike most critics of realism, however, their ethical agenda is not derived from their theory of international politics. This does not mean, however, that ethics play no role whatsoever for them. Rather, most realists believe, with Weber, that it is possible to separate 'scientific analysis' from one's particular values. And like Weber, realists' ethical concerns frequently guide what issues they

<sup>28</sup> Finnemore, 'Constructing Norms', in Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, p. 168.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought From Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), pp. 143 and 232.

<sup>30</sup> Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>32</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 257.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108. Also see p. 85.

study, even as they try to do so using the tools of a value-free social science.<sup>34</sup> This is a reasonable and consistent approach for reconciling realism's analytical pessimism about the role of norms in guiding state behaviour with the ethically driven desire of most realists to make the world a better place.

One key piece of evidence that realists are often driven by strong ethical or normative concerns is that they devote so much effort to grappling with policy problems, including many issues that have only tangential connection with the balance of power or other vital national interests.<sup>35</sup> Even realists like Waltz, who think that the structure of the international system constrains and shapes state behaviour in powerful ways, nevertheless believe that there often remains room for statesmen to choose what to do.<sup>36</sup> For example, Mearsheimer, the proponent of a particularly pessimistic and structurally determinative brand of realism, is nevertheless deeply engaged in foreign policy debates. Moreover, his commitment to using realist theory to shape concrete policies seems clearly to be the result of strongly-held ethical concerns. In a recent interview he confided that:

One thing that bothers me greatly about most political scientists today is that they have hardly any sense of social responsibility. They have hardly any sense that they're part of the body politic and that the ideas that they are developing should be articulated to the body politic for the purpose of influencing the public debate in important ways. They believe that they're doing 'science', and science is sort of an abstract phenomenon that has little to do with politics. In fact, I think that exactly the opposite should be the case. We should study the problems that are of great public importance, and when we come to our conclusions regarding those problems, we should go to considerable lengths to communicate our findings to the broader population, so that we can help to influence the debate in positive ways.<sup>37</sup>

Despite their pessimism about how much the world can be changed, it is striking how committed many realists are to trying to make it a better place.

Evidence that many realists are committed to improving the human condition is that they have played a prominent role in a large number of post-Cold War policy debates, even when the issues at hand had little connection with the high politics of power and interests. Mearsheimer, Layne, Stephen Van Evera, Stephen Krasner, and Barry Posen weighed in the public discussion about how the United States and the rest of the international community should respond to instances of serious ethnic conflict.<sup>38</sup> Mearsheimer and Waltz also contributed much to the discussion of the

<sup>34</sup> Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Free Press, 1949), pp. 1–112. Also see Weber's famous essay 'Politics and a Vocation' and 'Science as a Vocation', in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 77–158.

<sup>35</sup> Marc Trachtenberg, 'Realism as a Theory of Peace' (Unpublished paper, Political Science Department, UCLA, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Krasner, *Defending the National Interest*, p. 74.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Kriesler, 'Through the Realist Lens', 4/7. For additional evidence of Mearsheimer's concerns about ethics see his John J. Mearsheimer, 'The Aims of Education', and 'Teaching Morality at the Margins', *Philosophy and Literature*, 22:1 (April 1998), pp. 137–55, 193–8.

<sup>38</sup> In addition to pieces cited below see Barry R. Posen, 'Military Responses to Refugee Disasters', *International Security*, 21:1 (Summer, 1996), pp. 72–111, and John J. Mearsheimer and Robert A. Pape, 'The Answer: A Three-Way Partition Plan for Bosnia And How the US Can Enforce It', *The New Republic*, 14 June 1993, pp. 22–28.

causes and consequences of nuclear proliferation. Mearsheimer, Waltz, Layne, Posen, and Stephen Walt offered important perspectives in the discussion of post-Cold War US grand strategy.<sup>39</sup> Robert Pape explored whether non-traditional instruments of statecraft like economic sanctions are effective or not. Finally, Marc Trachtenberg examined the foundations of durable and lasting postwar settlements. While some of these policy concerns (for example, nuclear proliferation, grand strategy, and postwar settlements) are clearly connected with the international balance of power, others (ethnic conflict and sanctions) are not. In both cases, this concern with these policy questions belies the caricature of realism as being amoral or immoral because it is in thrall to a structurally determinative and value-free social science.

### **Why realpolitik often leads to a better world**

It is surprising how often realists' pragmatic and apparently cold-blooded policies can and do improve the quality of human life around the world. Consider, for example, a hard case: how the international community should have dealt with the ethnic conflicts of the Balkans in the 1990s. Animated by the best of intentions, and guided by shared norms of justice and humanity, the international community sought to protect human rights while simultaneously preserving multi-ethnic states in Bosnia and Kosovo. Moreover, motivated by deeply held norms of international cooperation, the international community sought to accomplish these ends through international institutions.

It is debatable whether these policies advanced justice and human rights all that effectively. For instance, in the interest of thwarting the Bosnian Serbs' despicable policy of ethnic cleansing and preserving a viable multi-ethnic state in Bosnia, the international community encouraged Bosnian Muslims to remain in 'safe areas' in Bosnian Serb territory under United Nations protection, rather than flee to safety in the Muslim areas. No doubt, the international community was motivated by the laudable goal of encouraging Bosnian Muslims not to give in to Serb ethnic cleansing, but one can question the results of this effort to transcend, rather than just manage, ethnic conflict. Outside observers estimate that between seven and eight thousand Bosnian boys and men alone were killed when the Serbs overran the UN-protected safe area of Srebrenica in 1995. Despite NATO's intervention that summer to keep Bosnia from falling apart, there are reasons to question whether that intervention has really produced a stable outcome given that multi-ethnic Bosnia is only held together by NATO occupation.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, 'Competing Visions for US Grand Strategy', *International Security*, 21:3 (1996), pp. 5–53; Barry R. Posen, 'The Struggle against Terrorism: Grand Strategy, Strategy, and Tactics', *International Security*, 26:3 (Fall 2001), pp. 39–55; Stephen M. Walt, 'Beyond bin Laden: Reshaping US Foreign Policy', *International Security*, 26:3 (2001), pp. 56–78; and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'The Only Exit From Bosnia', *New York Times*, 7 October, 1997, p. A27; Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz, 'Reply', *National Interest*, 58 (Winter 1999/2000), pp. 116–17; and William Pfaff, 'Time to Concede Defeat in Bosnia-Herzegovina', *International Herald Tribune*, 10 October 2002.

One could offer a similar assessment of the international community's policies in Kosovo a few years later. NATO's well-intentioned effort to protect the Kosovar Albanians from Serb persecution had the unintended consequence of emboldening the undemocratic and brutal Kosovo Liberation Army to exacerbate the conflict in 1998 and 1999.<sup>41</sup> There is also reason to think that NATO's air campaign against Serbia in the spring of 1999 may have been the spark that lit the fuse, or at least provided the pretext, for Serbia's campaign of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.<sup>42</sup> Finally, as in Bosnia, it seems unlikely that the international community's commendable but unrealistic desire to preserve a multi-ethnic Kosovo will survive the departure of NATO troops. Given the mixed record of the international community's efforts to date, it is fair to ask whether other policies would have produced a better outcome?

In debates about how the international community should respond to the Balkans' ethnic conflicts, realists advocated positions that seemed to some cruel, heartless, and down-right immoral. True, many realists recommended that the international community stay out of these conflicts in the first place because they believed that the conflicts were insoluble and there were no important strategic interests at stake. But realists like Stephen Krasner also made principled arguments against external intervention on the grounds that it created a 'moral hazard' problem which intensified the conflict by convincing the various sides that they did not need to resolve their conflict themselves because they could rely upon the international community to intervene and settle the crisis.<sup>43</sup>

Once the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo began to take a significant toll in human life, rather than relying on international institutions, many realists advocated providing arms, training, and air support for beleaguered Muslim forces in Bosnia.<sup>44</sup> The lives of many innocent persons were lost as they waited in vain for effective action from the United Nations or European Union to save them from Serb depredations. Realists' scepticism about the ability of international institutions to manage ethnic conflicts was sadly vindicated as it was clear that a settlement in the Balkans came mostly through the covert arming of the Bosnian and Croat forces.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, realists such as Mearsheimer and Van Evera argued that the prospects for long-term stability and protection of human rights would be better served through partition of those areas into ethnically homogeneous states rather than by trying to hold together multi-ethnic states.<sup>46</sup> Bosnia and Kosovo's continuing fragility and dependence upon outside military occupation lends credence to their view.

As Layne and Benjamin Schwarz argued, we ought to make ethical and normative judgements not only on the intentions behind a particular policy but also on its

<sup>41</sup> Kelly M. Greenhill, 'People Pressure: The Use of Refugees as Political and Military Weapons in the Kosovo Conflict', in George C. Thomas (ed.), *Yugoslavia Unraveled: Sovereignty, Self-Determination, and Intervention* (London: Frank Cass, forthcoming); and Christopher Layne, 'Perspective on Kosovo', *Los Angeles Times*, 23 June 1999, p. B7.

<sup>42</sup> Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz, 'For the Record', *National Interest*, 57 (Fall 1999), pp. 9–15, says 1,800 Albanians were killed by Serbs before bombing and 4,600 were killed after.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, 'Europe's History Says Stay Out of the Balkans', *Newsday*, 1 April 1999, p. A55.

<sup>44</sup> Michael C. Desch, 'History Warns That Fighting in Bosnia Would Be "Quagmire"', *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 February 1993, p. 19.

<sup>45</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'The False Promise of International Institutions', *International Security*, 19:3 (Winter 1994/1995), pp. 5–49.

<sup>46</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Van Evera, 'When Peace Means War', *New Republic*, 18 December 1995, pp. 16–21, and John J. Mearsheimer, 'Shrink Bosnia to Save It', *New York Times*, 31 March 1993, p. A23.

results.<sup>47</sup> Whatever their rationale, realist policies might have saved more lives in Bosnia and Kosovo and produced a more stable outcome in these cases than did the international community's actual policies which were based on a more explicitly ethical normative agenda.

Another issue in the international arena that has recently received much attention from scholars and policymakers is the consequences of nuclear proliferation. The prevailing view, based on both pragmatic and moral ground, is that the spread of nuclear weapons is undesirable and should be prevented at all costs.<sup>48</sup> Beginning with Waltz's seminal *Adelphi Paper* on the consequences of nuclear proliferation, realists have taken the contrary view that 'more would be better'.<sup>49</sup> The logic of this provocative argument is that nuclear proliferation can be stabilising since nuclear weapons are the absolute deterrent. Once states have a reliable second strike capability, they are more secure than they were before. As more states get nuclear weapons, the less war-prone the international system becomes, according to this line of reasoning.<sup>50</sup>

Applying this 'more would be better' logic to the Indo-Pakistani conflict, Mearsheimer recommended that the United States accept India and Pakistan as legitimate nuclear powers and work with them to construct survivable systems subject to reliable command and control.<sup>51</sup> His rationale for doing so was that mutual deterrence would make major war on the sub-continent less likely in the future. In the spring of 2002, India and Pakistan seemed close to the brink of war again over the long festering sore of Kashmir. Unlike previous crises which led to war, this time the two new nuclear states stepped back from the brink. Some analysts attribute this caution and restraint to their possession of the ultimate weapon.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the realist argument about the stabilising effects of mutual assured destruction may ironically provide the means for mitigating the conflict-ridden international system that others thought could only happen through the universal adoption of pacifistic norms.

A third area in which realists offer policy prescriptions that are more likely to lead to a more stable world is in the area of grand strategy. The post-Cold War world is

<sup>47</sup> Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz, 'Was It a Mistake?' *Washington Post*, 26 March 2000, p. B1.

<sup>48</sup> For a recent example of this thinking applied to South Asia, see Eric Weiner, 'Trigger Happy: Did Nukes Prevent A War?' *The New Republic*, 24 June 2002, pp. 18–20. The best pragmatic argument against the realist 'proliferation for peace' argument is Scott D. Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organization, Accidents, and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). Sagan catalogues a long list of nuclear 'near-misses' during the Cold War and concludes that we narrowly averted disaster. It is possible, however, to interpret the fact that all of these were still 'misses' as evidence of how robust nuclear deterrence remained.

<sup>49</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better', *Adelphi Paper no. 171* (London: IISS, 1981).

<sup>50</sup> Kenneth Waltz in 'Is Kenneth Waltz Still M.A.D. About Nukes?' *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 1:1 (Winter/Spring 2000); [electronic version <http://cfdev.georgetown.edu/publications/journal/vol1-1/1-6.htm>]; and Avery Goldstein, 'Scared Senseless: The South Asian Nuclear Tests', *Foreign Policy Research Institute, E-Notes* (5 June 1998).

<sup>51</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'Here We Go Again', *New York Times*, 17 May 1998, p. A17; and John J. Mearsheimer, 'India Needs the Bomb', *New York Times*, 24 March 2000, p. A21. For a related argument, see John J. Mearsheimer, 'The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent', *Foreign Affairs*, 72:3 (1993), pp. 50–66.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, George Kerevan, 'MAD Doctrine That Keeps MADness At Bay', *The Scotsman*, 3 June 2002, p. 12.

now characterised by historically unprecedented American dominance. Some liberals and neo-conservatives argue that the United States should seize this unipolar moment and establish a more just international order. Proponents of such a *Pax Americana* believe that the rest of the world will be content to live under its benign hegemony because the United States is a just and democratic society.<sup>53</sup>

Realists like Waltz warned that the end of the Cold War might tempt the United States to overreach. He explained that:

The possibilities of action, by military or other means, are thus made large for any state that disposes of a surplus of power. Under such circumstances, national impulses shape foreign policy with lesser constraint than prevails when power is more evenly balanced.<sup>54</sup>

While non-realists have made principled arguments about why the world would be better off under US domination, it has been realists, arguing largely on pragmatic grounds, who have urged restraint and caution.<sup>55</sup> They fear that if the United States grasps for the mantle of world domination it will generate opposition around the world resulting in greater international tension and conflict.<sup>56</sup> Realists understand that the rest of the world does not see the United States as a benign hegemon despite our good intentions.<sup>57</sup> ‘One reads about the world’s desire for American leadership only in the United States’, observed one British diplomat, but ‘everywhere else one reads about American arrogance and unilateralism’.<sup>58</sup>

There is ample historical precedent for heeding realists’ warnings against American over-expansion. Like those today who urge American hegemony, many proponents of fighting in Vietnam did so on principled grounds, arguing that US intervention would spread democracy, ensure human rights, and check unprovoked aggression. It was realists such as Waltz, Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, and George Kennan who were among the earliest and most cogent critics of US policy in Vietnam.<sup>59</sup> Waltz’s opposition to the war was largely practical but it also led him to advocate the more humane and just policy position in the debate over what to do in Vietnam:

But which is the better basis of policy – to kill people in order to free them, or to undertake war only out of apprehension for one’s own security? The first amounts to deducing necessity from a liberal principle and wrapping the mantle of justice around a national cause in order

<sup>53</sup> For further discussion and citations see Michael C. Desch, ‘Liberals, Neocons, and Realcons’, *Orbis* 45:4 (Fall 2001), pp. 526–31.

<sup>54</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, ‘The Politics of Peace’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 11:3 (September 1967), p. 202. A few realists such as William Wohlforth, ‘The Stability of a Unipolar World’, *International Security* 24:1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5–41, believe that the United States can maintain its hegemonic position by preventing the rise of peer competitors. Most other realists, however, believe that such a strategy is likely to prove futile because no great power can sustain true global hegemony without encouraging a counterbalancing coalition. See, for example, Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 40–2.

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, ‘America as a Model for the World A Foreign Policy Perspective’, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 24:4 (December 1991), pp. 667–70; and Schwarz and Layne, ‘A New Grand Strategy’, pp. 36–42.

<sup>56</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, ‘The Stability of a Bipolar World’, *Daedalus*, 93:3 (1964), pp. 881–909.

<sup>57</sup> Waltz, ‘America as a Model for the World’, pp. 667–70; and Schwarz and Layne, ‘A New Grand Strategy’, pp. 38.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Kenneth Waltz, ‘Globalization and American Power’, *The National Interest*, 59 (Spring 2000), pp. 46–56. Also see Christopher Layne, ‘What’s Built Up Must Come Down’, *Washington Post*, 14 November, 1999, p. B1.

<sup>59</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, ‘The Failings of Foreign Policy’, *The New Republic*, 11 October 1975, pp. 16–21. Also see Smith, *Realist Thought From Weber to Kissinger*, pp. 185–8 and 231–2.

to legitimate bloodshed. The second amounts to doing what necessity dictates and eschewing force except where vital interest dictates its use. . . . Statesmen of the nineteenth century, it has been said ‘fought *necessary* wars and killed thousands; the idealists of the twentieth century fight *just* wars and kill millions.’<sup>60</sup>

Had US leaders taken to heart these warnings about intervention in Vietnam, they would have averted both a strategic blunder and a moral calamity. Today, realist reservations about an American empire, though based in part on concerns about its feasibility, are also more likely to lead to policies that the rest of the world will regard as just and equitable.

Many members of the international community prefer to see conflicts settled by means other than military force and they maintain that in the face of opposition the most moral and ethical course of action is to use international sanctions instead. Realists have long been sceptical of the efficacy of economic sanctions. Robert Pape, for example, has documented their poor track record in the past.<sup>61</sup> In addition, Pape has shown that sanctions are not a more humane way of coercing recalcitrant regimes because they often hurt the innocent more than the guilty. Because of that, Pape and other realists have strong moral as well as practical reservations about the international community’s profligate use of sanctions.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, scholars who study postwar settlements are coming to believe that power and interests – the foundation of *realpolitik* – far from being a recipe for perpetual conflict, may actually provide the basis for lasting and durable peace.<sup>63</sup> For example, Marc Trachtenberg observed that the 1815 Congress of Europe worked because it was established upon common interests. In contrast, the Versailles Treaty fashioned in the wake of the First World War failed because the ideals and principles which were its foundation did not provide a sufficient basis for a lasting peace.<sup>64</sup> As Trachtenberg explained:

To understand power – that is, to understand how a system based on power works – is to understand why the most fundamental interests of other major states normally need to be respected, and why it is normally not one’s own interest to allow conflicts to get out of hand. In a Realpolitik world, the great powers relate to each other on a businesslike basis; power realities are accepted for what they are; compromises can normally be worked out relatively easily because statesmen all speak the same language, the language of power and interest.<sup>65</sup>

This led him to conclude that a ‘world in which everyone behaves “realistically”, a world in which everyone adjusts to the realities of power – that is, to the *same* realities of power – is thus a stable world’.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Waltz, ‘The Politics of Peace’, p. 207.

<sup>61</sup> Robert A. Pape, ‘Why Economic Sanctions Do Not Work’, *International Security*, 22:2 (Fall 1997): pp. 90–136.

<sup>62</sup> Robert A. Pape, ‘Lift Sanctions in Return for Concessions on Acquiring Weapons’, *Los Angeles Times*, 18 December 1998, p. B9.

<sup>63</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, ‘Kant, Liberalism, and War’, *American Political Science Review*, 56:2 (1962): pp. 331–40 makes clear defensive realism’s profound debt to Kant’s neglected argument that states competing for advantage in international politics can produce the unintended consequence of producing a stable and peaceful balance of power.

<sup>64</sup> Trachtenberg, ‘Realism as a Theory of Peace’, pp. 9–10.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

**Conclusions**

In sum, realism is widely criticised for its inability to comprehend how important norms are in relations among states. Even worse, critics maintain that realism itself often leads to amoral or even immoral state policies. But realists' scepticism about the role of norms is well-founded. Despite much rhetoric from statesmen about norms, when power is at stake, norms invariably give way. It is true that realists have a very 'tragic' view of international relations, but despite their pessimism, realists often seem to be driven by a clear ethical agenda. Like Thucydides' character Diodotus, who challenged Cleon's principled case for vengeance on the pragmatic grounds that it was in Athens' interest to spare the rebellious Mytilene, many modern realists often advocate policies that make the world a slightly better place.<sup>67</sup> It is sometimes said that 'it is cruel to be kind'. Perhaps we might also say with regard to realism and international relations, sometimes 'it is kind to be cruel'.

<sup>67</sup> Thucydides, 3.42–3.48. Also see Thomas L. Pangle and Peter J. Ahrensdorf, *Justice Among Nations: On the Moral Basis of Power and Peace* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999), pp. 21–3.