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Piercing the Curtain: Exploring U.S.-Iran Relations and Realism Through the Qasem Soleimani Assassination

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Abstract

In the domain of global politics, the validation of realist theory would occur if a majority of states held substantial power. However, the current international system features states with varying degrees of capability, leading to divergent objectives. This divergence contradicts realist assertions, prompting a critical examination in this article. By practically evaluating the international system, the article recognizes the diverse capabilities and objectives of states influenced by dominant states, especially in the case of postcolonial states, often overlooked by realism. Utilizing defensive and offensive theories within classical (neo) realism, the article analyzes the Qasem Soleimani case to demonstrate the importance of diverse theoretical perspectives in broadening analysis. The case study underscores the ongoing relevance of realism in understanding the self-help and anarchic nature of the international system.

Keywords: Realism, Iran, U.S., Qasem Soleimani, State

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1. Introduction

Within the field of international relations theories, realism serves as a framework for explaining state interactions based on observations of reality rather than ideals. Its roots can be traced back to Thucydides, an ancient Greek historian who documented the Peloponnesian War in 404 B.C. Thucydides observed Athens' dominance leading to the subjugation of the weaker state of Melos, encapsulating this dynamic with the famous quote, "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Thucydides, 1963, p. 360). These observations underscore the absence of universal moral constraints in international politics, where states prioritize their interests over moral considerations.

Key figures such as Niccolò Machiavelli (1981) and Thomas Hobbes (1968) demonstrated realist thinking in their works. H. E. Carr and Hans J. Morgenthau significantly influenced classical realism through *Twenty Years of Crisis* (1946) and *Politics Among Nations* (1948). Neo-realist ideas, introduced by Kenneth Waltz (1979) in *Theories of International Politics*, include defensive realism and structural realism. John Mearsheimer (2014) expanded the theory with offensive realism in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Together, these theories offer essential insights into international politics, illuminating how states navigate risks to protect their interests.

This study examines classical and neo-realist perspectives, emphasizing their divergent focuses. Classical realism highlights the role of human nature, asserting that "all politics is an expression of human drives" (Lebow, 2007, p. 61). In contrast, neo-realism concentrates on the international political system as a "brutal arena where states seek opportunities to exploit each other" (Mearsheimer, 1994, p. 9). While classical realism takes a philosophical approach to understanding the causes and consequences of state behavior, both domestically and internationally, neo-realist theories lean towards a more scientific explanation of state behavior and the global political system. Although there is a tendency to perceive these two branches of realist thought as fundamentally different, it is essential to view them within the broader framework of realism, recognizing their shared similarities and assumptions. This article has dual aims: first, to delineate the foundational assumptions of realism and track its historical development in theoretical analysis; and second, to critically assess these assumptions (or axioms) in the context of realist theoretical analysis. These assumptions form the basis for realist analyses of the international political system, frequently accepted unquestioningly by policymakers as inherent truths. Utilizing the intensified U.S.-Iran conflict surrounding the 2020 assassination of Qasem Soleimani, this paper explores the potential for integrating diverse theories to elucidate international political events—an analytical approach less commonly employed.

2. Classical Realism and Its Evolution into Neo-Realism: Historical Development and Foundational Assumptions

Realism traces its historical roots to classical literature, notably evident in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, a significant conflict among ancient Greek city-states. Within the realist framework, emphasis is placed on acknowledging the constraints posed by human self-

interest (egoism) and the lack of a supranational governing body (anarchy). As a result, realism highlights the pivotal roles of power and security in shaping various facets of political life (Gilpin, 1986, p. 305). At its core, realism embraces the notions of anarchy, egoism, rationality, and state centrism (Donnelly, 2005). Although realism as a theory of international relations emerged during the twentieth century, its conceptual framework can be traced back to the classical works of several authors, such as Kautilya, Machiavelli, and Hobbes. These writers are regarded as realist thinkers, despite predating the formalization of realism as an international relations theory. Common to their writings is the assumption that the nation-state is the principal actor in international relations, with an emphasis on the unity of the state as an actor (Antunes & Camisão, 2017). In other words, the state acts and speaks with a unified voice, particularly in critical situations like times of war. Furthermore, realist thought assumes that decision-makers are rational individuals who possess a clear understanding of their objectives, albeit often operating with limited information. This limited information frequently contributes to the tragic outcome of their actions. The rationality of decision-makers is observed in how states define and pursue their national interests, which are primarily aligned with notions of power, skillfully leveraging their strengths and weaknesses to achieve their objectives.

However, the basic assumption of realist thoughts is that the political system is anarchic. That is to say, no one could be called on for help, as is done in domestic politics. States are left to rely solely on their own resources, harnessing their military prowess, economic strength, geographical advantages, and population size to navigate and address challenges (Antunes & Camisão, 2017). Realism, in both domestic and international politics, underscores human nature as egoistic and power-driven. Grounded in historical relations between states, realism contends that human behavior follows repetitive patterns shaped by innate tendencies (Antunes & Camisão, 2017). The organizational structure of states mirrors human nature, influencing state behavior significantly. This aligns with Machiavelli's (1981) counsel in *The Prince*, advocating rulers embody the lion's toughness and the fox's strategic cunning, essential attributes for navigating politics, particularly in the international arena.

Following World War II, Hans Morgenthau (1948) formulated a comprehensive international theory heavily influenced by the writings of Thucydides and Machiavelli. Morgenthau (1948) posited that, akin to society, politics are rooted in human nature, suggesting that laws similarly stem from it. He distinguished between interests and morality in international politics, prioritizing power over morality, as he argued that adherence to idealism weakens states—“realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states” (p. 9). Morgenthau (1970) contended that states' actions are “determined not by moral principles and legal commitments but by considerations of interest and power” (p. 382). Additionally, he argued that “the social world is but a projection of human nature onto the collective plane” (Morgenthau, 1962, p. 7), suggesting that conflict and war are inherent in human nature (Waltz, 1991). Morgenthau laid the groundwork for what is now recognized as classical realist theory.

In *Theories of International Politics*, Kenneth N. Waltz (1979) presented a version of the theory originated by Morgenthau, commonly known as structural realism. This perspective asserts that states are constrained by the international political system and their actions are influenced by relative power compared to other states. This version, also termed defensive

realism or neorealism, emphasizes examining the international system's characteristics rather than focusing on flaws in human nature (Antunes & Camisão, 2017, p. 17). Departing from a philosophical approach, structural realism adopts a scientific method to comprehend, describe, and explain how states impact the international political system (Mearsheimer, 2007). Key contributions include distinguishing balancing strategies such as between alliances and bandwagoning, as well as highlighting variations in international systems based on the number of great powers, whether bipolar, unipolar, or multipolar (Mearsheimer, 2007).¹

John Mearsheimer developed a variant of neorealism known as offensive realism. Mearsheimer (2007, p. 78) notes that while both defensive and offensive realists adhere to the fundamental premises of realism, they diverge on the optimal amount of power a state should seek. Defensive realists caution against seeking too much power, warning of the system's backlash, particularly against attempts at hegemony. Offensive realists, conversely, argue for maximizing power and pursuing hegemony under favorable conditions, not for the inherent value of dominance but for survival assurance. Despite its insights, realism struggled to predict or account for significant changes in the international system, such as the Cold War's end in 1991, which marked a shift towards lower state rivalry and increased cooperation potential (Antunes & Camisão, 2017, p. 17). This paper collectively refers to both defensive and offensive realists' theories as neorealism.

3. A Critical Look into Realist Axioms From a Practical Perspective

3.1 On the Goal of States

Most realist assertions hold true only if the international political system is predominantly composed of states with significant influence. However, the reality is that the system comprises both influential and less influential states with varying capabilities and objectives. Waltz (1979, p. 93) distinguishes between hierarchy and anarchy in domestic and international politics. In domestic politics, hierarchy is characterized by super-subordination relationships, while international politics involves similar units (nation-states) duplicating each other's activities (Waltz, 1979, p. 97). In the anarchic international system, differences between states lie primarily in capabilities rather than functions (Waltz, 1979, p. 96; Donnelly, 2005, p. 35). Realist claims often overlook the diversity of state interests, suggesting that power is universally sought, although this may not hold true for all states. While power is a goal in classical realism, it serves as a means to an end in structural or neo-realism (Mearsheimer, 2007, p. 78). According to George Modelski's (1987) World Cycle Model, great powers, after emerging from global chaos in the cycle's initial phase, become agenda-setters and strive to gain favor from other states. These superpowers introduce significant changes through financial, economic, technological, and political innovations, solidifying their dominance on the global stage. Modelski (1987) illustrates this pattern with examples like Portugal's sea power in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century and Great Britain's dominance during industrial revolutions. The United States, post-world wars, reshaped the international system by initiating institutions

¹ Alliance refers to states banding together to protect their interests against rising or revisionist states, while bandwagoning involves states aligning with rising states.

like the United Nations, World Trade Organization, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the Bretton Woods financial system (Abubakar Siddique, 2022). These initiatives not only bring substantial changes but also consolidate the leading power's dominance, influencing other states' desires and pursuits. It is imprudent to assume that the goals of the United States align with those of Ghana or Germany coincide with Somalia's. As Spykman (1942, p. 18) noted, "The struggle for power is not synonymous with the struggle for survival," suggesting that while both groups prioritize national survival, it does not necessarily imply a pursuit of power.

Realism oversimplifies and neglects crucial state concerns and objectives. Structural realists, while asserting that the international system influences state behavior, fail to consider the impact of a world leader's agenda-setting, particularly in implementing projects to solidify dominance, on weaker or newly independent states. If states act rationally, as realists claim, it would be imprudent for weaker states emerging from colonialism to compete with their former colonizers for power in the international system. Weaker states often find themselves constrained by their former colonizers, which is evident in voting rights within financial organizations and the United Nations Security Council.

3.2 On the Capabilities of States

In international relations, the question arises regarding whether states with differing objectives possess equivalent capabilities. Realists primarily assess state capabilities, or power, considering factors such as military resources, economic influence, population size, and technological advancements (Mearsheimer, 2007). However, consolidating these diverse sources of capabilities into a unified measure of power poses a challenge. Realists also face difficulties in categorizing states with economic strength but limited military prowess. Additionally, realists often overlook the notion of soft power introduced by Joseph Nye, which refers to the attractiveness of a state's principles and development level to other states, influencing their behavior (Nye, 2004). Nye suggests that a combination of soft power and hard power, termed smart power, is the most effective strategy for states seeking to exert influence (Viotti & Kauppi, 1993).

Public shame, often overlooked in political discourse, represents an additional state influence, shaping attitudes and actions in the international realm. The capability "public shame," emphasizes states' ability to influence citizens and policymakers in other states, prompting shifts in foreign policy. While commonly referred to as "public opinion," this label is chosen because leaders invoking this strategy often appeal to the moral dimensions of a situation, exposing the shameful nature of actions by states that uphold high standards in human dignity, civilization, and morality.

Historically, this phenomenon is evident in the struggle against imperialism or colonialism. The United Kingdom initially opposed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, fearing implications for its colonies (Howard, 1986). Leaders like Dr Kwame Nkrumah utilized this tactic during Ghana's independence movement, emphasizing the shameful nature of double standards in human rights implementation (Bing, 1968). In the U.S., during the Civil Rights movement, figures like Malcolm X leveraged instances of denial of entry to foreign countries and U.N. blockades to expose the U.S. government's hypocrisy. Contrary to realist assertions focusing

on military and economic capabilities, states, regardless of strength, employ the strategy of appealing to public shame to influence the behavior of others. This approach is not exclusive to weaker states but is also wielded by stronger ones.

3.3 On the Oversimplification and the Goal of Theories

Examining the meaning of terms like “revisionist” and “status quo” in realism emerges as crucial. According to Mearsheimer (2007), revisionist states are those inclined to use force to alter the balance of power, while status quo states are content with the existing political system and have no interest in changing it. However, this definition oversimplifies the complex nature of state behavior, which evolves based on political regimes, leadership, and international circumstances. Realists’ oversimplification overlooks this dynamic aspect.

The question arises: should labels of being revisionist or status quo be time-bound, considering that states’ behavior can change over time? The impact of these labels on states is significant, as they tend to persist throughout a state’s political life until a global reset occurs, as seen in Germany before and after World War II. The timeline associated with these labels is crucial, as states are profoundly affected by the attached designations.

Examining Iran as a commonly labeled revisionist state raises questions about when it acquired this title. Did it happen before the U.S.-supported coup in 1953, during the era of the U.S.-backed Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, or after the Islamic Revolution? Defining what qualifies as revisionism is also ambiguous—does it only involve altering the balance of power, or does questioning the actions of a great power also constitute revisionism? Considering Cox’s notion that “theory is always for someone and some purpose,” the labels of revisionism and status quo appear akin to reward-and-punishment tactics (Cox, 1981, p. 128). In essence, labeling states as revisionist or status quo is not neutral but rather serves specific interests and agendas. Characterizing a state as revisionist can be a means of criticizing its actions, while labeling it as status quo may imply endorsement. This strategic use of labels resembles a dual approach of rewarding allies (status quo) and punishing challengers (revisionist). Acknowledging the subjectivity of these labels prompts a deeper examination of the underlying motivations and power dynamics in international relations.

4. Realism, the Use of Theory & the Qasem Soleimani Murder as a Case Study

This section utilizes the 2020 killing of Iran’s top military figure by the Trump administration as a case study. Its primary objectives are to substantiate certain assertions within the realist framework and demonstrate the significance of incorporating diverse theories, or engaging in a hybrid theoretical analysis, to enhance practical problem-solving. The political landscape in the Middle East underwent a notable shift in early 2020 when a U.S. airstrike targeted and killed Qasem Soleimani, the leader of the Quds Force, a distinguished unit within the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), at Baghdad International Airport. This targeted killing is likely to have had a profound impact on regional politics.

Widely regarded as the “assassination of the century” (Dareini, 2020) and deemed the U.S.’s “most consequential strike in the century” (Gilsinan & Giglio, 2020), this incident occurred in the context of an already strained relationship between Iran and the U.S. The tensions escalated following the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal negotiated during the Obama administration, with subsequent accusations against Iran by the U.S. Despite claims by the U.S. regarding Iran’s non-compliance with the deal, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) affirmed Iran’s adherence to its nuclear commitments (Davenport, 2019). Post-withdrawal, the U.S. presented twelve demands for Iran to meet for the possibility of a new deal (Gordon, 2018). Against this backdrop of unresolved disputes, the Trump administration’s assassination of Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad significantly heightened tensions between the two states and within the broader international political system.

4.1 Self-Help or the Anarchic Nature of the System

Within the framework of realist thoughts, self-help and the nature of international relations being anarchic is often mentioned. Realists firmly believe in the anarchic nature of the international system. The case of Qasem exemplifies this belief, underscoring the realist notion that there is limited assistance available in the face of aggression or conflict. While idealist or liberal perspectives propose that international law and treaties can reshape state relations and mitigate conflicts, the incident involving Qasem aligns more with realist thinking. Despite the positive impact of international treaties on fostering amicable relations, they have limited efficacy in preventing conflicts. Qasem, a high-ranking member of the IRGC and leader of the Quds Force, can be likened to a combination of the CIA and the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in the American context. In fact, Chris Murphy (2020), the Democratic senator, mentioned that the killing of Qasem was “equivalent to the Iranian assassinating the U.S. Secretary of Defense.” No one would guess what would have happened if it were the other way around, i.e., if Iran were to murder top personnel of the U.S. government, for the war on terror attests to the kind of response that the U.S. gives when it is attacked. International law seems to work effectively when a great power deems it so, but the opposite is true. The international political system is a struggle between states, and as realists describe it, it is anarchic and self-help order.

4.2 Deterrence & Self-Image in the System

Deterrence emerges as a fundamental aspect of realist ideology, encapsulating the essence of realism in acknowledging the strategies of balance of power and deterrence as crucial for managing state insecurities. The Trump administration’s endorsement of “maximum pressure” against Iran aligns with realist principles of deterrence, culminating in the targeted killing of Qasem. Both parties in this incident were driven by concerns about deterrence and the perception of their self-image by other states. Iran’s response, while timely, resulted in the loss of innocent lives and was relatively restrained compared to the harm inflicted by the U.S. The Athenian-Melian debate underscores the significance of self-image in domestic and foreign politics. Athens rejected friendship with the Melians, stating, “It is not your hostility that injures us; it is rather that, if we were on friendly terms with you, our subjects would regard that as a

sign of weakness in us" (Thucydides, 1963, p. 361). Similarly, Iran's response aimed at restoring its damaged image in the Middle East and the global community following Soleimani's assassination (Binkaya, 2020).

4.3 Alliance & the Balancing of Power in the System

One of the foundational principles of realism lies in the concepts of the balance of power, balance of threat, or balance of interest, where states align with others to counteract the threat posed by a more dominant or ascendant state. This dynamic is vividly illustrated by historical precedents, such as the expansion of Nazi Germany prior to World War II. Before the assassination of Qasem, the Gulf States had already aligned with the U.S. as a strategic countermeasure against the perceived dominance and threat of Iran within the region. This strategic equilibrium became a critical concern for the Gulf States, to the extent that Qatar, perceived as having amicable relations with Iran, faced a blockade in 2018.

Reflecting realist logic, states typically form alliances to counter perceived threats, particularly from those considered potential adversaries. The Gulf States' prioritization of balancing against Iran's perceived threat, facilitated through proxies like Hezbollah, illustrates this principle in action. The persistent relevance and appeal of realist theories among policymakers and students of international relations are highlighted by their alignment with real-world political scenarios, such as the assassination of Qasem Soleimani.

Prince Turki Al-Faisal regarded the assassination as an "important step" and "a sort of wake-up call to the Iranian government ... that they cannot get away with heinous activities committed in the region" (Yahaya, 2020, p.72), which aligns with the realist view of state behavior and deterrence. While realist theories offer substantial insights into international relations, Lebow (2007) advises that realism should be considered one of many analytical tools, highlighting the necessity of a multi-theoretical approach to understand complex global dynamics. Waltz (1986) acknowledges that realism identifies "a small number of big and important things" (p. 329), underscoring the selective focus of realist theory. Policymakers are encouraged to integrate diverse theoretical perspectives for a more comprehensive analysis of international affairs. The case study of Qasem Soleimani's assassination demonstrates the utility of combining different strands of realist theories, such as defensive and offensive realism, to inform decision-making in the realm of international relations.

4.4 The Murder of Qasem Soleimani as a Case Study

Structural realism presents a divergence in perspectives regarding the optimal level of power for states. Defensive realism contends that as long as a state's security is ensured, it should refrain from maximizing its share of world power, as attempts to do so may incur punishment from the international system. Conversely, offensive realism argues that states should actively seek to amass as much power as possible, with the potential pursuit of hegemony under favorable conditions, positing overwhelming power as the key to a state's survival. Both positions hold practical validity, but the applicability of each becomes evident when specific circumstances are examined. If states were on an equal footing in terms of influence, offensive realism would aptly describe the system. Similarly, if states were not characterized by rapacious

and irrational behavior, defensive realism would provide an accurate depiction. However, this is not the case.

In the context of U.S. capabilities, defensive realism inadequately captures its situation, considering the U.S. as a regional hegemon in the western hemisphere. While defensive realism emphasizes security as the ultimate pursuit of power, the U.S.'s actions, particularly in dealings with Iran, are geared toward safeguarding allies and regional interests rather than mere survival. These interests align with solidifying the U.S.'s regional dominance and advancing hegemonic pursuits, leaving little room for the explanatory scope of defensive realism.

Regarding Iran's capabilities, offensive realism encounters limitations as it appears imprudent to pursue hegemony or maximize power when facing a state significantly more powerful. The asymmetry in military capabilities and alliance-forming abilities between Iran and the U.S. presents a challenge to offensive realism's explanatory power. Moreover, the historical context of failed attempts at hegemony by states like Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan suggests that pursuing hegemony may not be a feasible goal. Offensive realism falls short in providing comprehensive explanations for Iran's behavior.

Categorically, the U.S., as a member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and a nuclear state, stands as a developed country and a regional hegemon. Conversely, Iran, categorized as a developing, non-nuclear state, behaves in accordance with its capabilities. The behavior of both states can thus be analyzed within the framework of realism, with either defensive or offensive realism offering insights into their respective actions on the grand scale of realism (Abubakar Siddique, 2022).

4.5 Offensive Realism, the U.S., and the Qasem Soleimani Case

In classical realism, the inherent unpredictability of human nature, described as "brutish and short," leads to a situation where, in the absence of universal laws and a centralized authority, a significant power imbalance prevails in the international community. This imbalance prompts strong states to prioritize their interests over ethical considerations, as moral standards are not uniformly applied globally. Contrarily, offensive realism, a subset of neo-realist theory, offers insights into the behavior of great powers based on five assumptions: that states prioritize their survival, actions are uncertain, states possess offensive capabilities, states are rational actors, and the international community operates in an anarchic manner.

Within the framework of offensive realism, states' primary objective is not security, as no amount of security is deemed sufficient. Instead, states pursue power itself to prevent others from surpassing or challenging them. Regional hegemony becomes the ultimate goal, as it is viewed as the most effective means of securing and consolidating power. According to offensive realism, the U.S. qualifies as a regional hegemon, particularly in the western hemisphere.

The targeted killing of Qasem Soleimani serves as a strategic measure to curb Iran's potential dominance in the Middle East. Given the significant role played by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), particularly under Qasem's leadership, neutralizing him has far-reaching implications for the IRGC's activities in the region. Beyond tactical considerations, the incident aims to undermine the morale of Iran's military advancements. The anarchic nature

of the international community, lacking a central authority, allows the United States to act with limited concern for repercussions, as evidenced by its justifications for the action (BBC, 2020). While Iran's capability to become a regional hegemon may be uncertain, offensive realism posits that any perceived threat to U.S. interests or regional power dynamics warrants preemptive measures. In essence, the killing of Qasem Soleimani aligns with offensive realism principles, seeking to diminish the IRGC's influence in the region and signal a strategic stance against Iran. If security were the primary goal for the U.S., it is already geographically distant from Iran and its allies, indicating that the action is driven by offensive realism's pursuit of power rather than immediate security concerns.

4.6 Defensive Realism, Iran, and the Qasem Soleimani Case

In analyzing the incident, a defensive realist perspective provides a nuanced explanation, especially considering the pronounced power asymmetry between the involved parties, the U.S. and Iran. Despite both defensive and offensive realism originating from the broader realm of realist theorists, their divergence lies in their conceptualization of state goals, interests, and inter-state interactions.

Defensive realism posits that the foremost goal of states is security, stemming from the anarchic nature of the international community, where each state must independently safeguard its interests. Unlike offensive realism, defensive realism contends that states refrain from seeking excessive power, as expansionist endeavors or their perception heightens the risks associated with such actions. Consequently, states exercise caution, engaging in a balance of power or forming alliances to ensure their security. In contrast to Liberalism's portrayal of states as relatively passive, defensive realism acknowledges states' possession of considerable military might while emphasizing a deliberate approach to international relations to avoid arousing suspicions of expansionist intentions.

States, under the purview of defensive realism, strategically employ their military capabilities as needed. Iran's response to the incident exemplifies this approach, highlighting its commitment to prioritizing security. Iran's decision to respond underscores the imperative for states to counter external threats decisively, as failure to do so may project weakness and vulnerability to other states. This measured response is crucial to avoid being perceived as an expansionist actor, as defensive realism underscores the importance of proportionality in state actions. Additionally, defensive realist principles illuminate the strategic pursuit of alliances by states seeking to balance power against potential threats, as evidenced by Iran's efforts to cultivate relations with the Chinese government.

5. Conclusion

Realism, among various international relations theories, furnishes explanatory frameworks to comprehend the operational dynamics of the world in its present state rather than an idealized one. Despite its substantial contributions in elucidating many phenomena within the international system, realism is inherently flawed as a standalone guiding theory. This article contends that an exclusive reliance on realism is misguided and advocates for a critical examination of the assumptions and axioms upon which the theory is constructed. The study

emphasizes the need for nuanced evaluations of power distribution among states, recognizing the divergent desires and pursuits that may arise as a consequence. While realism has undergone refinement through internal and external critiques, ongoing scrutiny remains essential.

The targeted killing of Qasim Soleimani by the Trump Administration serves as a pertinent case study, highlighting the imperative of integrating diverse theoretical perspectives. It illustrates how both offensive and defensive realist concepts contribute to explaining political phenomena, acknowledging the inherent simplifications that theoretical frameworks employ for coherence and applicability. However, the article underscores the importance of circumscribing such simplifications, as an excessive reduction of theory compromises its fundamental purpose.

Policymakers and students are urged to exercise discernment in recognizing the strengths and limitations of various theories. Utilizing a hybrid theoretical analysis enables a more comprehensive understanding by surpassing the constraints of individual theories and incorporating additional relevant factors. The case study demonstrates that while defensive and offensive realism both address state interests, they may overlook variations in states' capabilities to pursue those interests. The power disparity between the U.S. and Iran influences divergent preferences regarding state interests. While realism alone may not comprehensively explain international political events, the murder case challenges a categorical dismissal of its effectiveness. It illustrates how realism adeptly captures certain aspects of the international system, such as its self-help nature, anarchic structure, and states' inclination to balance against perceived threats. While exclusive reliance on realism is cautioned against, completely disregarding its insights would be a significant oversight.

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The author declares that this article complies with ethical standards and rules.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

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The author has confirmed that there is no other person who meets the authorship condition of this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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