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Game of Thrones and International Politics in Realism Perspective

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Abstract

Since the Second World War realism paradigm has been most prominent and successful in the discipline of international relations. Realist theory interprets the role of the state in world politics in which the state's national interest is the primary variable. To attain the state's national interest power (in military and economic terms) is a very essential tool. The element of power has shaped the anarchic political system. HBO's Season 'Game of Throne' is most compatible with the approaches of the international political system, especially to understand the realist paradigm. In this season different power centers were playing the game of power politics. Iron Throne had a hegemonic status and was considered as a supreme power in the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, which created the anarchy. Competing for the power, losing the power, and attaining the power was creating the anarchical situation in the whole season in which different actors and kingdoms made their strategies and joined uneven alliances. So Game of Throne is providing a better way to comprehend the international anarchy and political realism.

Heading

Key Words: Idealism, Realism, Power, Politics, Anarchy, Neo-Realism

Introduction

'*A Song of Ice* and Fire' book series by George R. R. Martin has been adapted for television as HBO's *Game of Thrones*. It appeared as one of the most popular television series of the last decade. This season is based on fantasies, portrayed the political system and conflictual relations between the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. These fictional stories construct the picture of the real world and give a new direction to compare reality with fantasy to understand the theories and politics. Manjana Milkoreit has tried to explain the complex relationships between political realities and cultural phenomena (Milkoreit, 2019). His work justified that how to develop the cultural phenomena or popular culture? In this regard, the most prominent approach is 'pedagogical', in which fiction as an educational tool to help the public, policymakers, and students to understand and analyze political phenomena in the real world through analogy, metaphor, and counterfactual analysis (Drezner 2011; Dyson 2015; Ruane and James 2012). The pedagogical approach provides a platform to work directly with specific movies, texts, films,

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shows, or video games, and researchers explore whether and how these cultural objects reflect, critique, analysis, and provide explanations on political realities. Therefore, a fictional storyline can be helpful to understand political events and the theories. Pedagogically oriented work is conceptual, and the researcher explicates the lessons that can be drawn from a work of fiction (Milkoreit, 2019)

The Game of Throne had comprised many political aspects such as war strategies, diplomacy, security alliances, the struggle for survival, etc., but the core theme was about the struggle for power, abusing and using power, desperately trying to keep and bequeath power, in which different claimants want to control the Iron Throne. So the element of the power of this game reflects the power struggle of the real-world. At the start of the 20th century, modern international system had developed (Guruge, 2015), and many IR theories elaborated the international system and its power structure in different ways with different justifications. During the interwar period, idealism was the dominant theory, and right after the end of the Second World War, the realist paradigm took charge. It interpreted the international system in terms of power politics which was completely opposite to its predecessor approach idealism. Therefore the Game of Throne series is the reflection of the realist paradigm in which power is everything. The ideas of Morgenthau, Micaville, and E. H Carr and their implication on the Cold War era and Kenneth N. Waltz explanations of post-Cold War political structure also reflect that power is the only thing for the security and survival of the state.

In-Game of Thrones, many power elements are shown as in the contemporary world, but the three are most prominent, the first one is Starks, the second Lannisters, and the third Targaryen. These three were using different approaches and strategies for their survival and wanted to become powerful. The Stark family from Winter-fell depicted as quite an idealist; Lannister were seemed strong realists and eager for more power. The third group Targaryen, which had a mixed approach, in some aspects, it had been seen as idealistic and in some cases realistic. The common aspect in all these is the realist approach

(use of power) to achieve their particular interests.

Legacy of Political Idealism

After the First World War, horrible effects were fresh in the human mind. States had realized that the power (in terms of military and weapons) is the worst element to establish the peace between states, and war is not the solution to any conflict. So at that time, Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points and the emergence of League of Nations depicted the utopian picture of the world (idealist approach).

"Political idealism in international relations represents a set of ideas which together oppose war and advocate the reform of international community through dependence upon moral values and the development of international institutions and international law." (Dinesh, 2020)

"A world full of human happiness is not beyond human power to achieve." (Russell, 1930)

In Game of Thrones, the ruler of the North, Ned Stark, and his family paid a heavy cost of their morality and loyalty. House of Stark believed that the range of possible action is restricted by rules, norms, and values as they have a strong belief in the notion of honor. Honor requires that law must be upheld at all cost. As it can be observed in the first episode of the first season when a deserter from the night watch was publicly executed. Notable matter in that scene was the presence of all Ned Stark's sons including Snow. That way he passed on his honor code to his sons and forwarded his legacy. "Law is law," said Ned's master-at-arms in explanation (GOT, Season 1, Ep.1).

In the first season of the GOT, Ned Stark is brought to the King's Landing to serve as the Hand of the King Robert Baratheon. King Robert allied with the Lannisters (most wealthiest and powerful family), cemented by marrying Cersei Lannister. Robert did not know about the incestuous truth about his wife that she had a long-running affair with her brother Jaime Lannister. Cersei Lannister had three children by her brother Jaime Lannister, but King Robert believed them to be his. When Ned Stark came

to know about the truth, Cersei had murdered her husband, and Ned was arrested. King Joffrey beheaded Ned for treason, for denying his legitimacy (GOT, Season 1, Ep. 9).

Robb Stark, the oldest son of Ned Stark, after the murder of his father, declared the North to be a "free and independent kingdom" and northerners crowned him as a King in the North. He decided to attack Kings Landing to avenge his father's beheading and free his sisters Sansa and Arya. The engagement was ferocious, and the King in the North won a few battles and managed to apprehend Jamie Lannister. Lady Catelyn Stark, despite Rob's refusal, let Jamie free for the exchange of her daughters (GOT, Season 2, Ep. 7), but Lannisters were too eager to sabotage the resistance, and before Jamie could reach back and present lady's goodwill, plotted the grave Red Wedding and murdered the whole family (GOT, Season 3, Ep. 9).

So Stark's idealist approach was not successful in Game of Throne. Same as in the interwar period, only powerful states had played a dominant role according to their interests, and obligations of law was only for weak states. Austin defines that international law is not a real law but just morality, and the realist paradigm doesn't consider morality. He explains "law as the command of a determinate superior authority, which is obeyed by the subordinate individuals and which is enforced by the sanction of the physical force of such authority" (Jurist, 1967; Pattaro, 2005). To some extent, indeed, international law is just morality because the absence of superior determinate authority and it only depends on states that how much they follow it or not, as the House of Stark considered itself under the jurisdictions of law.

Same as the League of Nations was made for preventing wars. It did not succeed to attain its aim due to the irresponsible behavior of the big powers, and smaller nations felt insecure under the umbrella of the League of Nations. Japan was the first which disobeyed the League of Nations. It committed aggression on Manchuria in 1931. After that in 1935, the Italian dictator Mussolini followed in the footsteps of Japan and committed aggression on Ethiopia. Hitler from Germany did the same. In 1933, he left the membership of the League of Nations and acted against the Treaties of Versailles and Locarno (Arjun, 2020). As a result of this, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Belgium paid a heavy cost.

Realism and Political Realm of Westeros

Therefore the idealistic approach had failed to stop the Second World War. WWII transformed the international system from multi-polarity to bi-polarity, and the realist paradigm replaced liberal idealism and proves more successful up till now. It demonstrates the power of might over right (Carpenter, 2012), and most of the political scientists defined the international system in terms of 'Power Politics'. This approach has changed the political system of the world in which all states are the principal actors, and state security is the primary national interest. As Morgenthau defines, that states national interest in terms of power and states should gain more and more power. Power is the only element that secures the state from internal and external threats. He also defines that universal moral principles are inapplicable to state actions. Most realist writers have developed their understandings about human nature as selfish, brutish, and greedy, and this type of nature is also reflected in the state's international behavior (Ghosh, 2013, pp. 27-28). So during the inter-war period, states were struggling to get enough power for national security as well as to become powerful from one another, and their acts were apart from international law. During the Cold War era, the US and USSR were also trying to compete the power of each other, and they fought many proxy wars. Even in the post-Cold War period, the US became a hegemonic power and considered its-self as a liberal state through introducing the liberal world order and liberal democratic values. Behind its claim, the basic key factor is its massive power which supports it to rule the world and secure its national interests. In the start of 21 century, the US waged war on Afghanistan and Iraq to make stronger its position on international fronts without considering it that its action was a violation of international law. Even it is also trying to contain re-emerging power centers like Russia, China, and North Korea, etc.

Pakistan joined the US block to strengthen its security condition from its rival neighbor India and get a high amount of economic and military assistance. In return, Pakistan played a key role for the US interests and fought the US wars in Afghanistan. Even China has captured the attention of small states through launching mega projects CPEC, OBOR i.e. and made a heavy investment to boost up the economy and compete for the US power. Saudi Arabia is also aligned with the US for economic and political interests. Israel plays violently (even violating international law and humanitarian law) in the Arab region and also getting military and financial support from France and the US (Wood, 1993; Desai, 2021; Robinson, 2021)

Contemporary world structure compels the state to involve in a contest of power politics and play authoritatively as Game of Thrones session was also about power in which seven kingdoms of Westeros were struggling to become powerful with using all means. Queen Cersei said, "When you play the game of thrones, you win, or you die. There is no middle ground" (GOT, Season 1, Ep.7). In this power sense, all kingdoms rule absolutely, as King Robert said, "I'm the king. I get what I want" (GOT Season 1, Ep. 6). In this regard, all kingdoms of Westeros used their power, often horribly, to protect or boost their power. When Joffrey got the power of the Iron Throne, he murdered his half-siblings to eradicate possible rivals (GOT Season 2, Ep. 1). King Stannis sacrificed his own daughter because he had believed that the sacrifice would bring him more power (GOT Season 5, Ep. 9). Ramsay Bolton murdered his father, Roose Bolton when he came to know that Roose's wife Walda gave birth to a boy. Ramsay also promptly murdered Walda and his newborn half-brother for securing his position as Lord Bolton and the official ruler of Winterfell (GOT Season 6, Ep. 2)

The character of the Littlefinger (Petyr Baelish) reflects the greediness of power. The presence of Ned in Kings Lending went very badly, as Littlefinger was more concerned with his own business, political and financial stability than advancing Stark's career. Ultimately, he assisted the rival Lannister faction in arresting and eventually killing Ned Stark. Moreover, he betrayed Lady Catlin's Sister Lady Lysa Arryn and pushed her through the Moon Door, and sold Sansa Stark to Roose Bolton (GOT, Season 4, Ep. 7 & Season 5, Ep. 3).

In the way of power struggle, states are transforming their behavior and strategies according to the situation. For example, during the Cold War period, India announced Non-alignment policy (not joining any power block of Cold War) but on many issues, such as Suez Canal Crises, Hungarian Issue and Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, it was supporting Soviets stance (Rao, 1985) but right after the end of Cold War, had tilted towards the US. It was understood that Russia would not be in a position to support India as it was during the Cold War scenario. Iran and Iraq were the US allies during Cold War, but after the Iranian revolution in 1979, and Iraq after 1992 was considered as US enemies. Even Taliban force was established by the support of the US against the USSR in Afghanistan, but after the withdrawal of the USSR, the US was against it. Same in the case of Pakistan US relations, during the Cold War, Pakistan fought for US interests (contain the Soviet Union), but right after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan, the US changed its tone towards Pakistan. So after the 9/11 event, Pakistan once again became an apple of US eyes, but US did not ever appreciate the Pakistan's services and made allegations on Pakistan to support Taliban against NATO forces in Afghanistan, involvement in Haqqani Network etc.

Alignment and de-alignment according to the interests also can be observed in The Game of Thrones. The Iron Island in the Game of Thrones was ruled by the House of Greyjoy and King Balon Greyjoy allied with the House of Starks. Balon was assassinated by his brother Euron Greyjoy, and took the control of Iron Island and offered his services to Lannisters (GOT Season 6, Ep. 2). In the session eight Euron left the Kings Landing even Lannisters when all the houses were finding truce to make joint force against Night King (white walkers, army of the dead) (GOT Season 7, Ep. 7).

Jon Snow and Daenerys came to Kings Landing with prove of one dead-alive person,

captured by Jon Snow and his team beyond the wall (GOT Season 7, Ep. 7). They negotiated with Cresci, to join the North for handling the alarming danger of Night King. She gave her word to send her army to Winterfell for fighting against the army of dead, but later she changed her mind and withdrew from her commitment (GOT Season 7, Ep. 7).

Iron Throne and Neo-Realism

Kenneth Waltz's book 'Theory of International Politics (1979) spreads the international anarchy from a cause of war into a systemic standard of the international system (Waltz, 1979). This idea gives birth to the tradition of neo-realism. International politics seems very different through the lens of neo-realism. Waltz's ideas are described the anarchic structure of world politics, which is the basic cause of conflict and war between states. It is easy to understand that the world political system is composed of sovereign nation-states which are obligated to no higher power (Weber, 2014, p. 16). The reason is that state membership in international organizations such as United Nations, NATO, EU, and SAARC, etc. is voluntary. A state can quit an organization if it wants to, for example, UK exit from the EU (Mueller and Robins, 22.07. 2021). The absence of higher authority and universal law in Game of Thrones has created the anarchy. North and Riverlands declared their independence (Rob Stark had been proclaimed 'King in the North) after the death of Ned Stark and other kingdoms also considering them-self free from any higher authority. Renly Baratheon and Stannis Baratheon claimed to Iron Throne on the basis that Joffery was not a real child of Robert Baratheon. Balon Greyjoy was declaring himself the Iron King and led an independence movement for Iron Island. So the international anarchical environment compels the states to take any steps according to their interests and increase or maximize their power for survival and security.

In anarchy, there is no automatic harmony….. A state will use force to attain its goals if, after assessing the prospects for success, it values those goals more than it values the pleasures of peace. Because each state is the final judge of its own cause, any state may at any time use force to implement its policies. Because any state may at any time use force, all states must constantly be ready either to counter force with force or to pay the cost of weakness. The requirements of state action are, in this view, imposed by the circumstances in which all states exist. (Waltz, 1959, p. 160)

In this situation, the element of insecurity between states is high because they feel fear from one another. Therefore international anarchical system prioritizes the state's survival and self-help over cooperation and conflict resolution mechanisms. In the present international scenario, anarchy also exists because big states are considering themselves superior to others, and these are in the competition to maximize their power, and others states are following their practices. For example, five permanent member states of the United Nations Security Council consider themselves as supreme powers, excluded from international law, and other states may consider doing the same.

On the matter of nuclear weapons, most states want to accrue nuclear technology for their security, balancing the others, or to use civil purposes. NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty 1968) signatory states have a right to deal the matters related to nuclear technology, and others have some reservations on it. So, for security purposes, weaker states also have a very keen interest to get such kind of power because it is necessary for their survival. Only the state's self-help makes guaranty of its survival, and it will possible when they increase their power, such as Iran and North Korea are facing high external pressure related to their nuclear programs, but they are continuously working on it. It does not only matter with Iran or North Korea, but South Asia is also facing the same circumstances. India and Pakistan have a reliance on nuclear weapons because of the international nuclear power structure and rivalry between both countries. This condition may create a worse condition for international peace.

Survival and self-help can be observed in the competing powers of Westeros. Each kingdom was trying to compete with the other and capture resources to get authority and assurance for its

survival. The death of Robert Baratheon generated an anarchical environment, and all centers wanted to acquire the power of the Iron Throne. In season two, Renly Baratheon used his new wife Margaery Tyrell's vast fortune to fund a campaign to get him on the throne. King Stannis could not stand the fact that his brother Renly has gathered a large army than his own and sent the red priestess Melisandre to kill Renly through a magical smoke monster (GOT Season 2, Ep. 5). This action was ended Renly's proposal for the throne, and considered Stannis as the superior Baratheon contender.

In the Battle of the Blackwater, Stannis attacked Kings Landing. He was near to success, but suddenly Tyrwin Lannister reached the King's Landing with his army and defeated Stannis (GOT Season 2, Ep. 9). Erwin knew that it was the only way for Lannisters to survive, and he wanted to rule on Westeros through his grandson. During the 'Battle of the Bastards,' Jon Snow attacked Winterfell with the support of Wildlings for take back the control of Winterfell. Jon was nearly defeated by the Boltons, but suddenly Sansa Stark and Petyr Baelish arrived with the Knights of the Vale, and the battle was culminated in the defeat of Ramsay Bolton (GOT Season 6, Ep. 9). To restore the trust was the main reason behind the involvement of Baelish in the battle because he knew that was the only way to survive and rule on Winterfell through Sansa.

Cerny and Prichard's research article "the new anarchy" described that "a complex set of relations between individuals, and social groups, from classes to vested interests, tribes to religious that relate across state and regional boundaries" (Cerny, and Prichard, 2017). Alliances, beliefs, and ideas were in constant flux in the anarchical society of Westeros, as in the contemporary world. It was a fragmented political realm, defined by competing claims to power that confine functional differentiation. So, anarchy here means minute more than an impetus for violence. In Lannister's family, Tyrion Lannister (dwarf youngest son of Tywin Lannister) had very weak position. He was resented by Tywin since birth because his mother was died during childbirth. Tyrion became a scapegoat for the murder of Joffrey which he did

not commit, but he was sentenced to death by his father Tywin. When Jaime helped him to escape, he killed his father Tywin in the Tower of the Hand and left the Kings Landing (GOT Season, 4, Ep. 10). He lost everything from Lannisters and joined the House of Targaryen in Meereen. On the other side, Theon Greyjoy betrayed Starks and took the control of Winterfell from Bran. Eventually he was betrayed by his own men, which led to his capture by Bolton. When Euron took the charge of Iron Crown, Theon and Yara sought the alliance with Targaryen. In the Game of Throne, religion had also been used to create violence as in the contemporary world. The High Sparrow (the leader of religious sect) had been used for the assassination of Queen Margaery Tyrell (GOT, Season 6, Ep. 10). Margaery was challenging the power of Cersei, and after her death, Cresci took the control of Iron Throne. Therefore, order and peace do not establish through shifting alliances frequently between actors within and across these societal layers, but a violently competing struggle for power.

Daenerys Targaryen was the rightful heir to the Iron Throne. In the whole season, her character was much confused. On one side, she presented herself as moral, honorable, and decent but at the same time seemed harsh, worse, and arrogant. Daenerys was quite idealist when she conquered the cities of Qarth, Yunkai, Astapor, and Meereen, and determined to end injustice, slavery, and tyranny, but in Essos, her violent program of invasive emancipation never stabilizes. In the name of good governance, she claimed power and use massive force as in the contemporary world where states have their great military capabilities under the slogan of democracy (Lundström 2018). She had the unchallengeable and uncontested power of three Dragons (and no one had this type of power), a massive army of Dothraki, and the army of Astapor (warrior-eunuchs, called the Unsullied). In the Battle of Kings Landing, Lannisters led forces of Queen Cersei allied with Golden Company and Euron Greyjoy. Daenerys, with her dragon led the forces composed of Starks, Dothraki, Arryn for the confrontation of Lannisters and control over Kings Landing. Targaryen offensive strike did not give any

chance to Lannisters to retaliate, and the bells soon rang in the city, which was signaling that the battle has culminated in Targaryen victory (GOT, Season 8, Ep. 5). The war turned into chaos when Daenerys rejected the city's surrender and destroyed countless buildings, incinerated thousands of folk, and surrendered soldiers with dragon fire. On the other sides North's army also refused to show mercy because they were consumed by hatred for the actions of Lannister against the North and Stark's family. This terrifying end of the war is very difficult to explain and to justify the use of power because the main purpose of Daenerys was to take back the control of Iron Throne through gather the unchallengeable power, but that power resulted into traumatic human killing and created chaotic situation and the victory of power was distorted. Real-world politics also do not justify the power structure and its usage. In response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US waged war on Afghanistan with the claim to secure world peace and used massive force against the Taliban and Al-Qaida, but after twenty years, the US withdrew from Afghanistan without any final result. It has raised a number of questions and concerns by researches and intelligentsia because the situation of Afghanistan is still chaotic.

Conclusion

Realism and the concept of power politics have a core value to explain and analyze the contemporary world politics. Power is the fundamental element of our national and international political system, which justifies the role of states and their interests. Sometimes power is unjustifiable when it does not require constant because its dynamic condition creates the avaricious and extensive state's interests. The power has successfully established world peace but also has created an anarchic world. In the contemporary world, states which are considered a champion of liberal idealism, want to remove hunger, violence, tyranny, and inequality are also following the realist approach (using power). Power (in military and economic terms) is a key element behind world peace in which states are deterring and balancing the power of each other and creating the anarchic world structure. Game of Thrones provides an excellent lens to examine international theoretical debates and global anarchy. The fictional world of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros portrays political struggle of power centers for control of the Iron Throne. The death of King Robert threw the political structure into chaos and generated anarchy among the realm's noble families. Realism and anarchy structure is easy to understand theoretically but very complex in the fictional as well as in the contemporary world where the family houses, kingdoms, and various alliances create the fragment political landscape, mishandling and abusing their power. War, conflict, crises, political fragmentation, security, and military alliance on regional and international levels also constrain states to become a part of the anarchical structure. Ultimately powerful states have constructed the destructive rampage which resulted in First World War, Second World War, Cold War, War on Terror, and small states have been used for false games. So it is very difficult to identify any standard that how much power states should have and use it; for example, developed states are trying to control the nuclear proliferation and introduced many non-nuclear proliferation treaties (to control the proliferation) and set some standers of the nuclear non-proliferation regime but the working of these agreements are not absolute. The main reason is that the developed states are in the race of power struggle to hold the world hegemony and are continuously increasing their military, nuclear, and technology capabilities and left behind all standards, and developing states are not comfortable with this monopoly.

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