

A REALIST PERSPECTIVE OF PRESIDENT TRUMPS FIRST UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY SPEECH

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1. INTRODUCTION

On 19 September 2017, president of the United States of America (USA), Donald Trump, took the podium at the New York-based institution of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). In his speech, Trump provided global leaders and diplomats with a radically different angle to view world politics, creating a divide between the “righteous many” and “wicked few.” He detours away from the mainstream issues of climate change to more realistically humanitarian concerns, where nation-states are currently being impacted and threatened by international or domestic terror.

Throughout his speech; Trump reiterates that global peace is built on three principles - “sovereignty, security, and prosperity,” all of which are core to guide state-to-state relations in international systems. These principles serve as a platform for Trump to encourage states to co-operate independently and, collectively combat against entrenched totalitarian regimes that are disorientating democratic peace, freedom and rights of its people.

The stance taken by Trump at the UNGA clinches to a Realist perspective, labelling his three principles as the “principled realism.” By definition, realism takes a rather pessimistic view of international systems. Realists believe that “states are the principal actors in world politics, and no higher authority sits above them.” Anarchy is thus associated with realism since it suggests a non-existence of hierarchy. In this instance, anarchy does not necessarily refer to chaos and disorder but instead that states are independent sovereign political entities.

In his speech, Trump confirms the extreme totalitarian regimes exist. He blatantly refers to North Korea, Islamic Republic of Iran, and Venezuela, as those amongst the “wicked few” disguising as UN “rogue-states.” These rogues display little to no concern for his principled realism thought. In response, Trump inclined towards a Realist application that would accumulate and wield state power; for the use of military or aggressive action against regimes that impede human welfare. In the context of this paper, state power refers to a state’s ability to reform other states’ behaviour by force (economic sanctions or military interventions) for the greater good of humanity.

This paper explores President Trump’s first UNGA speech and how he, as a ‘political watchdog’ with indispensable state power, has taken a Realist approach to international relations by – pinpointing and responding to “rogue-states” that challenge his principles.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: REALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

This section presents the theory of realism. The theory is deep-rooted in the contemporary, serving this paper as underlying factors that regulate national state interests in the international system.

Realists believe that anarchy runs through the very fabric of the international system. The principle that states take advantage of each other for self-gain suggests a constant battle for individual power; one where states are not only striving for total power, but also to prevent other states from achieving this power.

Realism, according to John Mearsheimer, centres around five assumptions about the international system. Firstly, Anarchy is an ordering principle, which implies that states have no central authority above them and that sovereignty prevails. The second assumption assumes that states possess an ability to harm or outplay each other. The third assumption speaks to the fact that states can never be sure of other state's intentions or distrust, and therefore states can never be certain that offensive intentions will not impact them. The fourth assumption is that survival is the most basic motive driving states to maintain sovereignty. And lastly, the fifth assumes that states think strategically about survival in the international system.

Given that these assumptions mainly contribute to a sceptical view of other states, fear of retaliation and invasion (offensive and defensive motives) becomes a threat. According to the Realists, co-operation could be used as an increasingly important tool to manage state-to-state relations. In a highly competitive world, states are competing for power, and such competition causes a centralization of state power because states are acting in their self-interest, thereby consolidating sovereignty.

Realists believe that co-operation is possible but difficult to achieve and sustain, thus claiming that co-operation is hindered by two concepts: "relative gains and cheating." In the context of relative gains, states consider the distribution of benefits. Absolute gains suggest the maximization of states' profits, and relative gains suggest that each state cares about co-operation only to the extent that their profits are not harmed by other states' behaviour.

Relative gains consider how well a state does versus other states in the international system. In the real world, states are concerned with the 'balance of power' and are therefore motivated by relative gains. In this case, it is more important to do relatively better than other

states, rather than to achieve maximum profit and suffer impacts to state power. For example, states will cooperate less if they know other states may gain more relative to them in agreement. States can be seen from the viewpoint of defending capabilities rather than rational egoists, seeking absolute gains without regard for the position of power of other states. In such a scenario, states will be inclined to defect to a cooperative agreement rather than suffer an undermining of its sovereignty. They value relative gains over absolute gains for lack of wanting to cede some state power. Despite being confident about their partner's co-operation, states are still likely to defect in this scenario; where if they cooperate, they suffer a power shift to other states. Therefore, although states gain on an absolute basis, they "forgo in prevention of reduced relative power." This, in turn, reduces the value and function placed on international institutions, suggesting that states value sovereignty over institutions, where institutions undermine state sovereignty.

When states are reluctant to co-operate out of fear that the other state will gain relative advantage, cheating can occur. A common example to depict this is state power and the use of military machines. These can shift the balance of power as they threaten state security.

In international politics, the effective state power centres on relative military power to those of rival states. This means that balance of state power can be achieved through balance of military power. Despite relative power, if a weak state has access to superior military machinery, the state could utilize a window for cheating to take advantage and unfairly defeat the victim state. Cheating hinders co-operation; however, co-operation can still exist in a realist world. An example of this is the balance of power which causes states into forming alliances and cooperation bonds against common enemies. Thus, Realists highlight that: "states sometimes cooperate to [aggressively] gang up on other states" to mainstream rules, norms and guidelines that are assumed part of the real world. Mearsheimer argues that states do co-operate in a realist world for two main reasons: 'balance of power' forces them to cooperate given the defensive nature of state power; and ganging up on other states, where any changes relative to these powers (wealth or military) will affect state behaviour and, consequently, the dynamics of co-operation.

Given the above, states are prepared to meet the costs of co-operation provided that each can expect to gain more than any other participating state. States not motivated to commit to global co-operation for the common good can expect a Realist "gang up" response from

superpowers, for example the USA and its allies, heightening socio-economic and political tension within rogue-states until ideological reform is achieved.

3. CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK: PRESIDENT TRUMPS FIRST UN SPEECH

This section provides the contextual framework of this paper. It assesses existing textual sources from trending media and official transcription of Donald Trump's first U NGA speech.

Donald Trump's first speech at the UNGA took a robust yet shrewd stance. He focuses explicitly on exposing and eradicating totalitarian roguish values, rules, and systems; that undermine righteous state behaviour, power and freedom envisioned by institutions like the UN. In achieving such a stance, Trump deduces his 'principled realism' ("sovereignty, security and prosperity") as a criterion to counteract vile states that impede the core values of global peace. By these ideas, Trump assumes 'righteous' states to be strong, independent and sovereign; with the rational capacity to co-operate with other independent states on areas of mutual interests (i.e., counteracting common threats like extreme totalitarian states). Trump believes states that seek co-operation should yield two sovereign duties – firstly, "to respect interests of their people" and secondly, "to respect interests of other sovereign states" in the international system.

Given the second duty, Trump maintains that he will no longer enter into treaties that provide "one-sided" or asymmetrical advantages to other states, as opposed to the USA. "As long as I hold this office, I will defend America's interest above all else," which must be respected globally, the president declared. Despite Trump's strong nationalist view towards the USA, he identifies that once sovereign duties are fulfilled by other independent states; actors and leading groups within these states should realize the importance of putting their people first; and to attain a harmonized political system. By such realization and thereby revitalization, it enables states to protect their national interests through co-operation with other sovereign nations, collectively aiming to reject threats and external influences on individual state sovereignty.

Trump singly criticized UN member states for their application of 'wicked' regimes, which have led to mass crimes against humanity and Western principles that links to his principled realism thought of contemporary international relations. Trump recognized North Korea's Kim Jong Un as "Rocket-Man," given the threat of his authoritarian nuclear-centric regime.

He further referred to Iran's intended "murderous regime" as co-ordinated by the supreme ruler. Furthermore, Trump had also cautioned Venezuela of its heightened sanctions and corruption instances caused by Nicolás Maduro's socialistic regime.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This paper will now discuss Trump's speech concerning his principled realism. After that, a brief analysis will be made on how Realism has influenced Trump's announcement towards evil regimes of North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela.

Given his address at the UNGA, President Donald Trump has made strikingly rational statements on international relations, reflecting his standpoint on how USA fits within political structures of the real world. His speech concentrates on three principles ("sovereignty, security and prosperity") which explain how he as president, will always pursue the national interests of his people above all else and not second ("America first"). Trump also expects the same from other states when pursuing their national interests, making co-operation possible between states that embrace their independent sovereign right. To add; Trump states that sovereignty could be a "call for action," in which "all people [should] deserve a government that cares for their safety, their interests, and their well-being."

This indicated Trump as an evident Realist character, entrenching his principled realism under the impression that USA is the prime state actor at the UNGA and recognized as a state-leading by example. This is where "national interests act as the moving forces in a competitive international system." Such supremacy, according to Realists, is "measurable, weighable, quantifiable through assets" like military power and wealth. Within the first five minutes of his speech, Trump confirms that the USA will increase the budget of "military and defence" by approximately "\$700 billion." With this increase, it immediately translated into an effective yet 'righteous' USA state pursuing increased wealth and power to retaliate against rival or rogue-states that infringe global peace and sovereignty. "If we desire to lift up our citizens, if we aspire to the approval of history, then we must fulfil our sovereign duties to the people we faithfully represent. We must protect our nations, their interests, and their futures," the president stated.

4.1 President Trump's Speech to North Korea

On the topic of North Korea; Trump draws on Kim Jon Un's authoritarian regime, which has violated human rights by starving and torturing its citizens. Moreover, Trump draws concern

to Kim's regime and its operation (including experimentation) in weapons of mass destruction (nuclear artillery and ballistic missiles).

From a Realist perspective, Trump confirms that his administration's objective to terminate North Korea's nuclear developments could be imminent – or if necessary, proceed to the complete termination of Kim's regime. The presidents need to improve military assets through wealth may serve to facilitate the process of removing North Korea's nuclear program, which has developed into a hazardous situation. In other words, Trumps Realist attention to Kim's regime at the UNGA was necessary. This is given the regimes offensive threats towards world order and peace; and more significantly, to neighbouring states like South Korea and Japan of their sovereign right to security and prosperity.

“The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to destroy North Korea totally,” the president added. Despite his warning to North Korea in his speech, Trump was more reluctant to mention about recent violating roles played out by China in the South Chinese Sea dispute; and Russia in the Crimea disagreement with Ukraine. Instead, Trump - as a Realist, sought to prudently thank China and Russia for supporting him in the recent UN Security Council resolutions; to implement stricter sanctions and restrictions on North Korea's ongoing nuclear operations. Such prudence is significant to Realists, where China and Russia could be in a position that wields power over at least some USA national interests in the contemporary or future international system; hence Trump's hesitancy to draw on disorientated matters concerning them.

According to the Realists view, it could deduce that USA's national self-interests might have been at risk in such an instance.

4.2 President Trump's Speech to Iran

After discomfoting the North Korean diplomats present at the UNGA, Trump took a stance to reveal the Iranian government as: “a corrupt dictatorship behind the false guise of democracy.” The USA president further elaborated that Iran has disintegrated from a “wealthy [nation], with a rich history and culture into an economically depleted rogue state whose chief exports are [weapons of mass destruction,] violence, bloodshed, and chaos.” Trump from the Realist point, highlighted the importance of revealing the Iranian “rogue” government as the essence encouraging radical Islamic terrorism; funding “Hezbollah and other terrorists that [massacre] Muslims and attack their peaceful Arab and Israeli

neighbours.” According to Trump from a Realist angle; supporting terrorism or terrorist groups thereof reduces a state’s (Iran’s) national independent sovereignty through affiliation with external, corrupt regime values and systems.

However, later that month, Trump's statements were refuted by President Hassan Rouhani in his speech at the UNGA, responding that the Realist “allegations were baseless and unnecessary.”

Trump further raised awareness about the Iranian government cheating (or shirking on) the ‘righteously’ imposed sanctions to halt Iran’s use of military machines. This machinery was unofficially operated to produce nuclear weapons of mass destruction; possibly supplying terrorist groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. With the continued violation of human rights by the Iran government, Trump proceeded to carry out a ‘humanitarian calling’ on UN ‘righteous’ states to join forces and diminish the ‘wicked,’ reinforcing his view on global co-operation.

In summary, Trump’s denounced the deal as “one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into.” By this statement, Trump focused on how the USA had previously entered into agreements, where they have disproportionately received little to no socio-economic or political benefits (i.e., like in the Iran Nuclear Deal). This interferes with Trumps Realist stance at the UNGA, especially in regards to equality and mutual gains envisioned through principled co-operation. With the USA signing into treaties and laws which were not in their national self-interest, but rather that of other states’ interest to attain an absolute advantage (i.e., like Iran shirking on compliance and confinements to the Deal).

By showing such distraught towards the agreement, Trump’s speech could point towards a likely USA exit, leaving Iran in harsher sanctions with less ‘friends.’

4.3 President Trump’s Speech to Venezuela

Trump ambushed the Venezuelan diplomats present at the UNGA as well. Towards the end of his speech, Trump emphasized that the sanctions currently imposed would not be released on Venezuela, until reform of the regime is enforced. Trump targeted Venezuela for the socialist ideologies executed by Nicolás Maduro and his dictatorial regime. This showcased for the disintegration of democracy, overlooking Trump's principled realism. By this, Trump accused the Venezuelan dictator of stealing constitutional power and sovereign right from its people; which has in turn, “[plunged] the once oil-rich nation into [famine,] poverty and

misery.” Despite the contrary causes and effects of the socialist values implemented in Venezuela; Trump’s realism showed empathy to support the Venezuelan people. “We are prepared to take further action if the government of Venezuela persists on its path to impose authoritarian rule on the Venezuelan people,” he said. This reignited the function of America improving its military assets for the greater good of achieving peace, sovereignty, security and prosperity within states affected by wickedly-formed regimes.

President Trump reinforces this with his statement in his speech: “From the Soviet Union to Cuba to Venezuela, wherever true socialism or communism has been adopted, it has delivered anguish and devastation and failure. Those who preach the tenets of these discredited ideologies only contribute to the continued suffering of the people who live under these cruel systems. America [thus] stands with every person living under a brutal regime.”

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion to this paper, we can deduce that Donald Trump does necessarily take a Realist perspective in his address to the UNGA. His view encouraged righteous states to form bonds of co-operation in the international system. For Trump, these bonds are crucial to reinforce his ‘principled realism’ approach to; prevent and thwart the emergence or continuation of totalitarian wicked-states that disguise themselves as peaceful under institutions like the UN. Thus, Trump recognizes these wicked values as the main threats and reasons why responsibility should be vested in strong nationalized states to deter terrorist, corrupt and civil violent regimes; and thereby collectively reform these systems for the greater good of humanity.

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