Main content

Article Preview :

Realism is usually regarded as a dominant - and monolithic - approach in the study of international relations. In the past few years, however, some of the most vigorous and interesting debates in international relations theory have emerged among different types of realism. It has become clear that realism is not a single theory, but a family of theories. One of the most significant divides within realism is between offensive realism and defensive realism.(1) Offensive realists generally argue that the international system fosters conflict and aggression. Security is scarce, making international competition and war likely. Rational states often are compelled to adopt offensive strategies in their search for security.(2) Defensive realists, on the other hand, argue that the international system does not necessarily generate intense conflict and war, and that defensive strategies are often the best route to security.(3)

Another debate pits classical realists against structural realists, who are also known as neorealists.(4) Classical realists generally argue that power is the most important factor in international politics. States attempt to maximize their power, at least partly because the desire for increased power is rooted in human nature. Structural realists, on the other hand, do not build their theories on the assumption that human nature contains an innate drive for power. Instead, they posit that international politics is shaped by states' desire to survive in the anarchic international system.(5) Offensive realism shares classical realism's emphasis on power and pessimism, but follows neorealism's structural logic.(6)

These debates deserve attention for two reasons. First, the prominence of realist theories in the study of international politics makes it important to determine which realist theory is the most powerful. Second, the debate between offensive and defensive realism has implications for foreign policy. If the offensive realists are correct, the prospects for constructing policies to avoid war are limited. On the other hand, defensive realism offers somewhat more optimistic conclusions about the ability of states to remain secure without threatening others.(7)

Fareed Zakaria's From Wealth to Power(8) attempts to contribute to these debates in contemporary realist theory in three ways. First, it presents one of the most detailed critiques of defensive realism to date. Second, it argues that a modified version of offensive realism, which Zakaria labels "state-centered realism," can persuasively explain why states expand their territory and their interests. Third, it makes an interesting case for why realist theories should incorporate internal state strength - the capability of a government vis-a-vis society - as a component of national power. Zakaria develops these arguments by examining U.S. attempts to expand between 1865 and 1908 and offers a fascinating interpretation of how the United States emerged as a world power. Despite these contributions, several of the book's arguments are not convincing. Zakaria neither refutes defensive realism nor advances a compelling alternative.

In this essay, I argue that the overriding weakness of From Wealth to Power is its failure to offer a persuasive critique of defensive realism. There are three...

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Fareed Zakaria, an editor for years with FOREIGN AFFAIRS, addresses the issue with exceptional skill in FROM WEALTH TO POWER: THE UNUSUAL ORIGINS OF AMERICA’S WORLD ROLE, a case study of the United States’ emergence as the dominant world power by 1910. Zakaria argues that neither of the most popular current theories of foreign policy are adequate to the task. In From Wealth to Power, he takes as his starting point the fact that the United States rose dramatically from a minor trading partner with Europe and Latin America to a world power—perhaps the predominant world power—in less than half a century. He then looks to both political theory and history to (The entire section is 2,272 words.)

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