

A three-pronged approach to deal with the environmental issue in international relations: A theoretical inquiry

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Date of submission: 18/02/2023

Date of acceptance 27/04/2023

Date of publication: 30/06/2023

Abstract :

International relations discipline has been long dominated by traditional concepts of power, military, security and diplomatic, while ignoring other elements of international system that should attract our attention, like the environment and climate issues. Such challenge becomes serious and crucial to deal with as soon as communities, individuals and not only states are heavily affected, not to mention the renewed theoretical research of such topic, for the environment can be approached with international relations theories; realism, liberalism and constructivism.

Keywords: Environment; climate change; realism; liberalism; constructivism.

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1. Introduction

It goes without saying that the field of study called IR “International Relations” has been traditionally debated as purely relevant to questions of power, security, survival, balance, dominance, war, conflict, diplomacy in terms of military might, as realists put it, since they are the earliest founding fathers of a so-called theoretical tower of international relations. Besides, the realist philosophy has been deeply rooted in history, gaining a sound evidence of investigation for centuries, at least after the emergence of modern times, with the ideas of Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes, not to mention, the explanatory power it acquired with its wide scope of explaining the long times of conflicts and wars in Europe since the emergence of the early nation states.

Besides, scholars in this area of studies show that the phenomena in the international life, whether peaceful or conflictual, as evidenced by the ongoing developments in history, especially after the emergence of the nation states in the aftermath of Westphalia treaty 1648, have been influencing the writings of theorists, bearing in mind that states are in constant pursuit for power-security in a highly anarchical system, especially the realists, while ignoring the increasing weight of non-military issues; referred to, epistemologically speaking, low politics circle, long neglected by researchers, due to the predominance of nuclear war and bipolar balance of power concerns during the cold war era.

Certainly, other questions relating to economy, trade, human rights and environment are increasingly gaining importance in this field of knowledge. While some attention has focused on other manifestations of power that are serious and relevant to the international system beyond military aspects. For example, Europe was moving towards integration and common policies in a bid to make a break with the traditional power. In this regard, both realists and liberals are divided on this focus of interest in international life, the first ones keep a watching eye on military dimensions of power and influence in a very competitive system, in which might is right, while liberals ascertain that states and other actors, military power and other non-military sources of power can shape the behavior of states and individuals alike, which sparked a heated debate on which issues can be of priority nowadays!

Additionally, constructivists, as post-positivist theorists, gave another image to the world challenges based on how it is seen and interpreted judging by the power of ideas and identity, more particularly towards the non-military issues,

like the environment and its relevant topics; the climate and resources, which is the topic of our research paper. As known in any academic analysis, we cannot afford to overlook the theories support to a scholar or a college researcher in such topics; since they are englobing guiding principles to rely on in studying many problematic topics in international relations. Meanwhile, some phenomena become interdisciplinary and multilevel in analysis, so we have a mutual interest in debating the environment and its growing concerns, for a good sustainable and prosperous future, as outlined by the United Nations in its different sessions.

In order to have a close examination, conceptual and theoretical, of this significant topic of renewed academic importance in the IR scholarship, a research question is posed as follows:

How do theories of International Relations; Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism, being selected among different theories in this field, explain the environmental issue, pursuant to their assumptions and core tenets?

Our research paper boils down to three parts, as follows:

- 1-Environment and IR: a conceptual review.
- 2-Realism, liberalism and constructivism: three images of interpretation of the environmental issue.
- 3-Lessons learned and recommendations.

2. Environment and IR: A conceptual review

It is commonly known in the literature of international relations, as a long scholarly tradition, that **High Politics** issues; preferred by realists, like military power, strategic balance and other concomitant concepts dominated, and still now, the analyses of scholars in the field, partly due to the predominant state of affairs in the world today, which is still challenged by traditional conflicts and wars, especially after the international system has been witnessing several events during and after the cold war era, in which states and the logic of power first and security/ survival by force keep intact. However, with the rise of new phenomena of cooperation, integration, coordination, within **the linkage politics** line of thinking, preached by liberals¹, it appears that a new map of theorizing imposes itself in accordance with the situation of the world on the ground, as the community of researchers and scholars refer to the trends of transnationalism and globalism in world politics, rather than international politics, at least at conceptual

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level, in which a large space of maneuvering is best exploited by non-state actors, transnational movements and sub-state entities working in common for a wide range of issues that matter for the global human community.

Our analysis shall start with the qualitative leap of scholars interested in shifting the focus of attention, academically speaking, to the introduction of other concerns classified within the line of non-military threats, which is the point of attraction of liberalism, as its adherents give precedence to **Low Politics** issues. One of them is the environment that has been largely ignored by early theorists and thinkers, because the state and national interest considerations in the view of realists are of utmost priority under the international relations reality for decades and years ago.

2.1 A definitional glimpse

It is useful to determine the nature of the concept and its content in general, while framing its relevance to field of international relation, in particular, in order to keep it within the conceptual/theoretical framework of analysis, as its widespread usage is not pertinent in our paper. Accordingly, as a concept, it refers to all factors and conditions of geography and biodiversity that can affect both humans and other living being. Furthermore, it is considered as a key component of international relations, thanks to the rising climate change and global warming disastrous effects worldwide, in which both governments and communities are negatively affected by effects of environmental degradation that become unmanageable. Some of such problems that are global include² :

- a) Depletion of the Ozone Layer.
- b) Global Warming.
- c) Biodiversity Loss
- d) Overpopulation.
- e) Oil Shortages.

The following table provides how the environment is classified as less concerned with what realists think of issues of interest:

Table 01. High and low politics issues as stated by realists and liberals.

Realists	Liberals
High politics issues	Low politics issues
National and international security concerns of sovereignty and military power = peace/war dichotomy	Global issues of economic, social, demographic, technological and environmental aspects of relations between governments and people; states and non states

Source: Prepared by researchers.

3. Realism, liberalism and constructivism: three images of interpretation of the environmental issue

As the world today is more complex, vulnerable and unpredictable than ever before, namely revolutionized by several border-cross challenges of global security³, the IR theorizing gets impacted too, leaving no room to those who are still preaching for the realist mental map (States First and sovereignty untouchable), moreover, the emergence of new entities or actors, having entangled relations with states and individuals, involved in multi-level interactions, both internally and externally, led the scholars of International Relations discipline, traditionally controlled by orthodox realists, to think globally, against the backdrop of the constant changes at global level, with a great importance attached to non-traditional topics, like the environment, which is, undoubtedly, the main challenge and the wasting asset for both states and individuals in the world today.

Our theoretical insightful analysis of how IR theories incorporated this pressing challenge shall start with an essential premise:

Global challenges of security (global warming, resources depletion, pollution within the climate change thorny issue) lead to a renewed thinking about the core interest in the Environment as serious object of analysis in international relations, both epistemologically and theoretically.

In our present paper, the analysis of the theoretical interpretation of the role and place of the environment in international relation scholarship shall include the three following approaches; Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism:

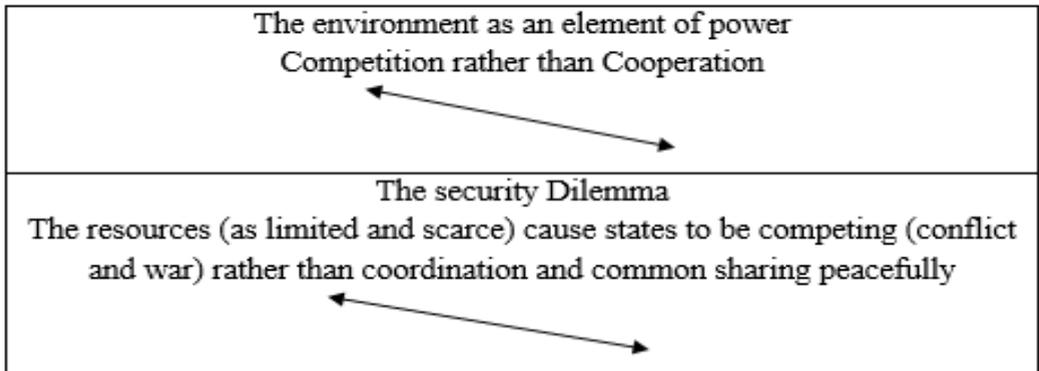
3.1. Realism

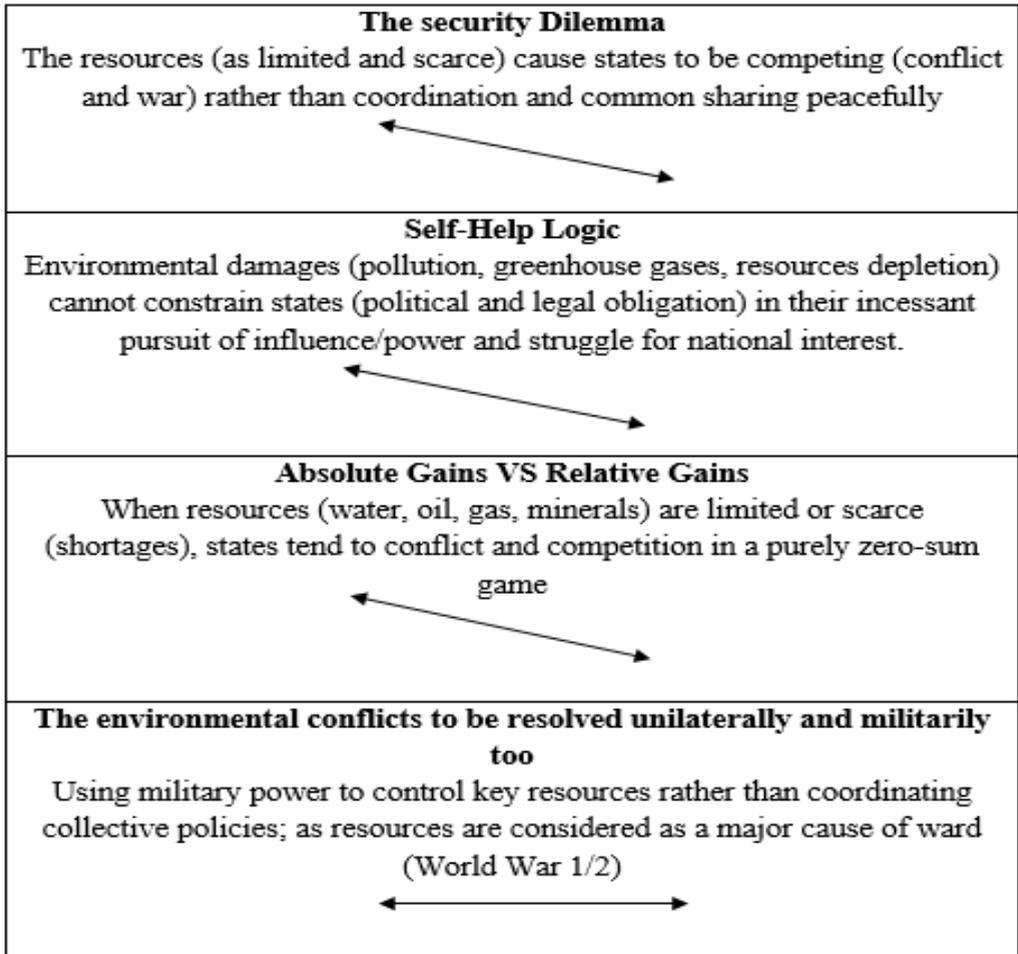
The environmental issues have been neglected in traditional realist theorizing, as evidenced in Hans J. Morgenthau's famous text, *Politics Among Nations* 1955, in which the natural environment is seen as a mere fixed contextual factor or a constituent of national power⁴.

Realists have a pessimistic view of the prospects for international environmental cooperation; they focus on the difficulties in forging environmental cooperation among states that are competing politically, militarily and economically, referring to the anarchic nature of the international system; the first challenge is that no state can ever be compelled to join an international agreement or to undertake a particular regulation⁵.

As they are less interested in cooperation, and skeptical about common action to resolve the security dilemma, states remain deeply concerned about their economic and military power, while showing rejection to any agreement about coordination and cooperation, especially with reference to the core concept of relative/absolute gains; as the relative ones constrain states and throw them into the possibility that the agreement will allow one state to gain economically or militarily. The main idea of this theory is summarized in this illustrative schema:

Fig. 01. The environment and conflicts: a realist interpretation.





Source: Prepared by the researchers.

3.2. Liberalism

For liberals, the international system is anarchical, lacking mutual trust, as realists put it, however, it can be managed and transformed into a place of living together in peace and prosperity through collaboration and cooperation ⁶. Additionally, the importance of the environment in liberal theory stems from the significant of low politics issues as portrayed by liberal theorists, like Robert “Keohane” and “Joseph Nye”, who emphasized the priority given to non-traditional concerns of power, defense and strategy which were preferred by realists in their analysis.

Liberals start their analysis with the assumption that cooperation should be the best way to resolve conflicts among self-help actors, the best tool to control power inside international institutions, in which the egoistic tendencies of nation

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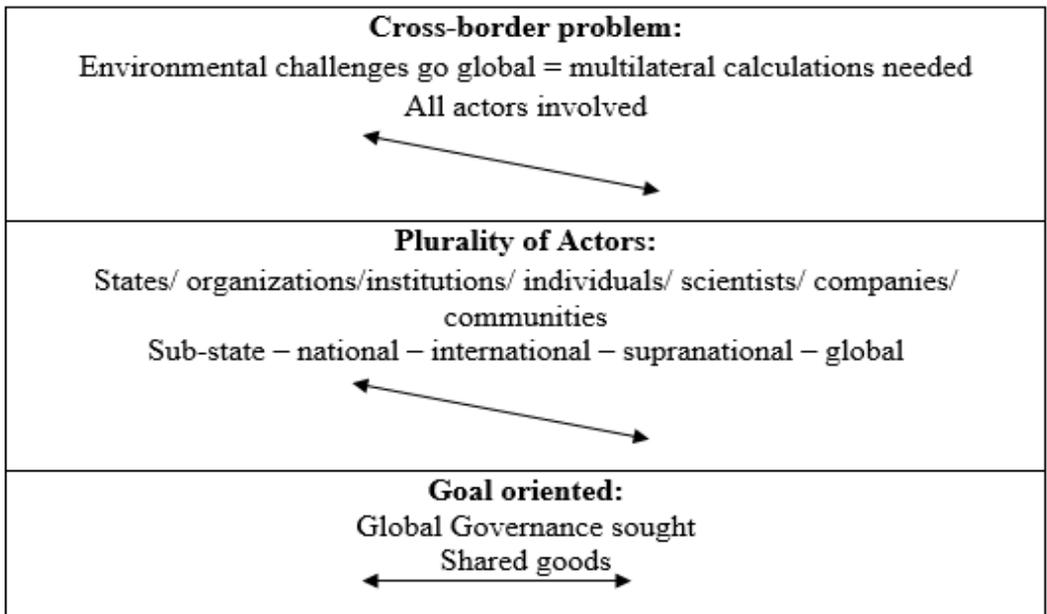
states become less acute and the common interest norm prevails, not to mention the fact that the common action make states less prone to competition and conflicts over resources of all forms.

As the environment attracts the attention of liberals, they place an increased importance on their theory's core concepts of analysis⁷:

- a) Cooperation.
- b) Complex interdependence.
- c) Plurality of actors.
- d) Positive view of conflict resolution (Optimism).

The main idea of this theory is summarized in this illustrative schema:

Fig. 02. The Global challenge of the environment: actors and governance response.



Source: Prepared by the researchers.

3.3. Constructivism

With the epistemological turn of theorizing international relations 'IR' in the post-cold war era, there has been much interest about how to think about the global dimensions of world politics, at different levels, since new variables of

analysis see light; like ideas, culture, humanity, identity, global solidarity and other topics related to post-positivism⁸ shared by new theories in this discipline, among them constructivism as one of the three approaches that is included in our research paper.

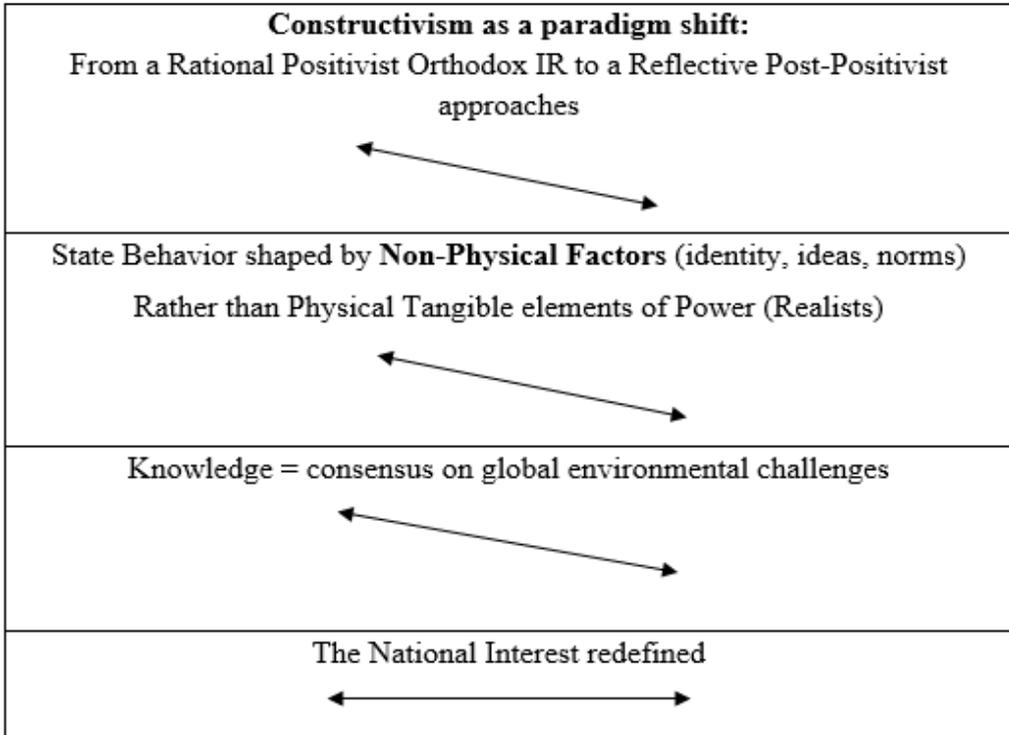
The constructivist model which the international relations theory witnessed in the second half of 1980s which didn't only pose a new challenge to only realists and liberals; it had been a space for cultural and social standpoints in international relations⁹. Constructivism concentrates on how ideas such as identities, interests and norms, shape behavior⁸. Whereas environmental issues show relevance of key material factors, like water, oil and minerals, so, constructivists are trying to focus their analysis on the role of ideas¹⁰ (non-physical) in shaping behavior¹¹ toward the environment and its policies. In this context, a useful starting point can be found in the intersection of the green political thought and constructivist in the tenets of the Japanese thinker “Robyn Eckersley” despite the fact that he is not a renowned figure in academic circles, he is deemed as a leading scholar in the green political thought, as he talked about the possibility of greening the international theory¹².

For a more coordinated and cooperative international environmental world, an idea of the recognition that a problem exists ‘the climate plight’ and that international collaboration is necessary to solve it. This formation of shared purpose is the type of process on which constructivists focus. For example, in a study conducted by “Peter Haas”, he showed that agreement to take steps to combat pollution of the Mediterranean Sea was fostered by a transnational community of government scientists that first arrived at agreement on the key issues and then worked to promote agreement within individual governments¹³.

Ideas on the dangers that may come from climate change had a considerable impact on state policies in this regard, so a crucial question of constructivists is what factors can cause interest to shift the IR thinking about the best solution to find in coping with the climate challenge in the world, of course, ideas and norms can make a difference in this direction.

The main idea of this theory is summarized in this illustrative schema:

Fig. 03. The constructivist approach of the environmental issue as a paradigm shift: the non-physical dimensions



Source: Prepared by the researchers.

4. Lessons learned and recommendations

Against the backdrop of the reality of the environmental developments; practices, policies and agreements among states, it is widely assumed that the climate issue, though it has been long ignored by early realists in 1930 and 1940s, since the military power concern was dominant and central to any academic investigation at that time, has emerged with a new academic interest among IR scholars, especially in 1980s, due to the liberal response to the emergent problems of global environment change:

Ozone diplomacy = climate change biodiversity as a high politics issue (more prioritized than military and nuclear conflicts’ = agreements coordinated ‘Montreal Protocol 1987 + RIO Earth Summit UNCED 1992 until COP Summit now.

The growing awareness of environmental issues in the late 1980s is

explained by the following factors:

- 1- The collapse of the ideological and political realities of the cold war (the nuclear brinkmanship and a probable third war between the two superpowers 1962).
- 2- The hugely remarkable theoretical shift: positivist epistemology attacked (Constructivists).
- 3- The globe challenges: global environment/climate degradation and its aftermath.

Both scholars and policy makers worldwide can take advantage of the developing map of the climate risks and challenges with their destructive fallouts for both states and individuals, amid an array of natural disasters, food insecurity spots, climate irregular phenomena, added to the already tension points throughout the world 'military, economic, social, religious concerns'. Accordingly, we can present the following recommendations relevant to our research question and the topic as a whole, as follows:

1- The climate and its factors of instability should be quickly taken into consideration by both practitioners and scholars, while noting that the scientific community is tasked with a highly important role of raising awareness about how serious is our globe under the global warming and its disastrous ramifications, like drought, floods, high temperatures. Etc.

2- For a good global governance of the environment and climate, an international cooperation is more than needed, coupled with individual involvement in deepening this goal, based on the deep conviction that we are all living in a global village in which a strong global solidarity is vital, and a complex interdependence is required (plurality of actors to tackle the climate challenge).

3- Rethinking theories of IR is unquestionably required, for a good scholarly investigation of post-IR; namely a new range of topics beyond states and their traditional security concerns of security and defense in terms of military and strategic criteria. This is an opportunity to pave the way for a human security approach to deal with factors and causes of human sufferings in a world of all sources of insecurity.

5. Conclusion

Our research paper provides an insightful analysis of how three theories of international relations, belonging to two different generations; positivism and post positivism, namely realism, liberalism and constructivism, with various core concepts of analysis, explain concisely and precisely the place of the environment in their assumptions and analysis, leading us to measure the way each one of them depicts the relevance of the climate/environment phenomena, especially with the mounting calls of all actors, states and non-state actors to act swiftly in order to limit the serious impact of the global warming on governments, individuals and the nature itself, which turns to be seen as a genuine wasting asset, why not and we are working hard to make a sustainable future possible for us and the generations to come.

Based on the foregoing, it is proposed that, as a general rule, all stakeholders ‘governments, individuals and global trans-national entities’ should work collaboratively, in close coordination, in order to stem the tide of the climate hazards and global warming effects, in the short and long term. Additionally, our paper can be adopted as a set of guidelines we must benefit from in the coming theoretical projects on the environmental security as one of the strategic components on national strategy of governments, while ensuring the ecological security of current and future generations.

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