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ASSESSMENT OF MAINSTREAM THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AS TOOLS TO JUSTIFY INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND MAINTAIN THE STATUS QUO

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ABSTRACT

The discipline of international relations examines the intricate dynamics of state interactions, geopolitical movements, and the evolving architecture of global governance. Over time, various theoretical paradigms have been developed to elucidate these complexities and rationalize international order. This paper critically evaluates mainstream theories of international relation; realism, liberalism, Marxism, and constructivism as instruments for legitimizing international order and perpetuating the status quo. By engaging with an extensive body of scholarly literature, the study delves into the conceptual underpinnings of these theories, the historical trajectories of international order, and the interplay between theoretical constructs and state behavior. The study elucidates that, realism grounded in power politics and national self-interest, conceptualizes global affairs as an unceasing struggle for dominance, as exemplified by the geopolitical maneuvers of the United States, Russia, and North Korea. Conversely, liberalism champions democratic governance, multilateral cooperation, and the primacy of human rights, shaping the foreign policies of nations such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Constructivism underscores the significance of ideational factors, social norms, and international institutions such as the United Nations in shaping global diplomatic engagements. Through a meticulous examination of secondary sources, including academic treatises, peer-reviewed articles, this study concludes that these theoretical frameworks not only deconstruct the complexities of global interactions but also serve as foundational tools for states to justify their actions, fortify existing power structures, and maintain international stability.

Keywords: Mainstream Theories; Realism; Liberalism; Constructivism; Marxism; International Order;

INTRODUCTION

The discipline of international relations emerged as an intellectual pursuit aimed at deciphering the intricate dynamics of war and peace among nations. Early scholars endeavored to address fundamental inquiries: What precipitates armed conflict between states? What underlying imperatives drive warfare? Under what conditions can peaceful coexistence be sustained? These questions gained heightened significance in the twentieth century, particularly in the aftermath of two devastating world wars. However, while the study of war and peace remains central, the scope of international relations has expanded to encompass a broader spectrum of global phenomena, including the functions of international institutions, the structural underpinnings of the global economic order, and the role of gender in political systems.

A pivotal instrument for analyzing these multifaceted global dynamics is the application of international relations theories, which construct analytical frameworks to explicate and anticipate state behavior, strategic interests, and diplomatic engagements. As Walt (1998) asserts, Theories of international relations help us understand the forces that shape state behavior and the broader patterns that define global politics. This paper rigorously interrogates mainstream theories of international relations; realism, liberalism, and constructivism as mechanisms for legitimizing international order and perpetuating the status quo. These intellectual approaches elucidate contemporary geopolitical architectures, such as China and Russia's strategic positioning in global affairs, the influence of regional organizations like the European Union, and the role of supranational institutions such as the United Nations Security Council and NATO in sustaining international stability. Moreover, these theories provide insights into the manner in which global political actors rationalize their decisions to fortify existing power asymmetries.

By critically engaging with these theoretical constructs, this study furnishes a robust epistemological foundation for dissecting contemporary geopolitical events, global conflicts, and diplomatic interactions. As Keohane (2019) posits, International institutions and theoretical frameworks not only shape global interactions but also sustain existing power hierarchies. Each theoretical lens presents a unique perspective through which the behavior of states and the structure of global governance can be scrutinized, ultimately underscoring the premise that mainstream approaches seek to elucidate the empirical realities of the international system rather than construct idealistic prescriptions for world order.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURES ON ORDER

International order was distinguished from the international system, or the comprehensive global context in which states operate. The international system reflects all aspects of economic, political, social, cultural, ecological, and other forms of interaction that exist among states. The neorealist school of international relations theory, for example, suggests that two characteristics of the international system, its anarchic nature and the distribution of power across states (also called the polarity of the system) place constraints on states behaviors and push them to interact in certain ways (see for example Waltz, 1979). These factors can shape behavior, but they are general, emergent characteristics of the system and do not presume the structured pattern of an order.

Some analysts further distinguish between order and the international community, which can be seen as the embodiment of liberal normative ideals exerting an influence on international politics, often through the activities of networked nongovernmental groups (Lindberg, 2019). The English School of international relations theory places special emphasis on the closely related concept of an international society, which forms when a group of states with common interests and values bind themselves together with a set of rules and institutions (see, for example, Bull, 2018). The notion of an international society might presume the existence of an

order indeed; it is difficult to imagine the existence of a society without an order. But the two concepts are analytically distinct.

Thus, the term international order goes beyond such broadly systemic realities to refer to organized configurations within the international system. Order presumes some degree of institutionalization or established structure established through ordering mechanisms that play some role in governing the relationships and behaviors among actors in a system. Even if they eventually become quite structured, these patterns can be emergent and unplanned, arising naturally through interactions or planned outcomes.

CONCEPTUAL EXPOSITION

Theory is nothing but systematic reflection on phenomena, designed to explain them and to show how they are related to each other in a meaningful, intelligent pattern, instead of being merely random items of an incoherent universe. Every discipline requires theory to guide research, to provide a basis for explanation, and if possible, to lead to a probabilistic predictive capability.

Scholars and theorists have defined theories in varied ways and every different definition implies how theory can do wonders for us. Theories have been defined as set of interrelated propositions (Hoover, 2017), set of systematic hunches (Burgoon, 2018) set of systematic generalization (Severin & Tankard Jnr., 2019) set of ideas (McQuial, 2020). These systematic concepts, notion or ideas explain, understand and predict events, phenomenon and situations (Hoover, 2017, McQuial, 2020, Garrison, 2000).

The concept of international order has been defined and conceptualized in various ways by scholars across the field of international relations, with an emphasis on rules, norms, and institutions that govern global interactions. Bull (2018) defines international order as: "A system of rules, norms, and institutions that govern the interactions of states and other actors in the international system, aimed at maintaining peace and stability. This order is based on a shared recognition of these rules and the mutual understanding of state interests." Bull highlights that international order is a structured system that provides stability and guides the behavior of states, particularly in terms of maintaining peace and security.

Status quo is a Latin phrase meaning the existing state of affairs, particularly with regard to social or political issues. To maintain the status quo is to keep the things the way they presently are. According to Heywood (2019) defines status quo as "The maintenance of existing power structures, policies, or social conditions, often defended by those who benefit from the current arrangements and challenged by reformist or revolutionary movements."

METHODOLOGY

The method for data collection employed in this study is qualitative in nature utilizing secondary method by reviewing related literatures from books, articles, publications and academic journals to assess mainstream theories of international relations as tools to justify international order and maintain the status quo. Credibility, relevance and recentness were considered in selection of the materials as most of the sources published between the periods of 2017 and 2024 were given much attention.

THE NEXUS BETWEEN MAINSTREAM THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL ORDER

International order denotes the intricate matrix of relationships, institutions, and normative frameworks that govern global interactions between sovereign states and non-state actors. It is moulded by the interplay of power dynamics, economic architectures, social stratifications, and ideological forces. The mainstream theories of International Relations (IR) Realism, Liberalism,

and Constructivism offer divergent expositions on how international order is forged, perpetuated, and transformed. Each theoretical lens elucidates distinctive mechanisms that undergird global stability, the provenance of disorder, and the role of various actors in shaping the international milieu.

Realism posits that international order emerges from the relentless struggle for power between sovereign states. It delineates an anarchic global system wherein states, propelled by the imperative of survival, vie for security and ascendancy, rendering conflict an endemic feature of international relations. Hans Morgenthau avowed that "international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power" (Morgenthau, 1948). In this paradigm, order is contingent upon a precarious equilibrium of power or the hegemony of a dominant state that enforces stability. Kenneth Waltz amplified this by asserting that "a self-help system compels states to act in ways that tend toward the establishment of balances of power" (Waltz, 1979). Thus, the nexus between realism and international order is premised on the dynamics of competition, deterrence, and strategic balancing, wherein stability is either secured through mutual apprehension or hegemonic imposition.

Liberalism, by contrast, underscores the pivotal role of international institutions, economic interdependence, and democratic governance in cultivating order. Contrary to Realism, which venerates anarchy as the source of instability, Liberalism contends that institutions such as the United Nations, global economic organizations, and legal frameworks mitigate state behavior and engender cooperation. Robert Keohane argued that "institutions reduce uncertainty by facilitating the making of commitments and providing information" (Keohane, 2019). Economic interdependence obviates the proclivities for conflict, while the diffusion of democratic ideals promotes pacific interrelations. Bruce Russett corroborated this, asserting that "democracies are less likely to fight each other due to mutual respect for liberal norms" (Russett, 2018). Liberalism, therefore, reconceptualizes international order as a system of structured cooperation, where established rules and norms temper anarchy, permitting states to engage in predictable, mutually beneficial interactions.

Constructivism subverts the materialist assumptions of both Realism and Liberalism, emphasizing the paramount significance of ideational factors, norms, and identities in constituting international order. From a Constructivist standpoint, the international system is not merely a function of material power or institutional configurations but is socially constructed through shared beliefs, collective identities, and historical experiences. Alexander Wendt provocatively declared that "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 1992), insinuating that international order is contingent upon the ways in which global actors perceive their roles and relationships. Martha Finnemore further argued that "international norms and institutions shape state interests and behavior rather than simply constraining them" (Finnemore, 2018).

The nexus between these theories and international order resides in their respective explanations of stability, transformation, and governance. Collectively, the perspectives of these theories offer a nuanced and multidimensional understanding of the formation and perpetuation of international order, reflecting the complexity and fluidity of global relations in a rapidly evolving world.

REALISM THEORY

Realism in international relations is a theory that emphasizes power politics, national interest, and the anarchic nature of the international system. It traces its roots to classical thinkers like Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, but modern realism was shaped by scholars such as Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, and John Mearsheimer. The theory asserts that states are the primary actors in global politics and operate in a self-help system where security and survival are their main priorities.

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Realism argues that international relations are driven by competition rather than cooperation, as power imbalances create security dilemmas that lead to conflicts or strategic alliances. Military strength, economic resources, and strategic positioning are central to a state's ability to maintain influence. Waltz (1979) asserts, "In an anarchic world, the distribution of capabilities among states determines the structure of the international system." This perspective explains why global stability is often maintained through power balancing rather than idealistic diplomacy.

Another core assertion of realism is that moral principles cannot dictate foreign policy, as states act based on pragmatic calculations of power and security. Morgenthau (1948) emphasizes this by stating, "Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe." This principle justifies actions such as military interventions, deterrence strategies, and economic dominance as necessary tools for national survival.

Realism Theory and the Justification of International Order and maintenance of the status quo

Realism provides a framework for understanding how global stability is sustained through power dynamics. The preservation of global power structures is a key realist principle; as dominant states work to prevent major shifts that could threaten their influence. The United States, for example, upholds a world order that aligns with its strategic interests, maintaining military alliances and using international institutions to reinforce its leadership. "The global order, as structured by realist principles, is not about promoting justice but about maintaining equilibrium that prevents large-scale conflict" (Mearsheimer, 2021). This perspective explains why powerful states resist radical changes to the system, ensuring that their dominance remains intact.

The balance of power is another central mechanism through which realism justifies international order. Stability is achieved when competing powers counterbalance, each other, preventing any single state from becoming too dominant. The Cold War exemplifies this principle, as the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in strategic competition through military alliances, economic influence, and nuclear deterrence. Today, similar dynamics exist in the U.S.-China rivalry, where both nations seek to expand their influence while preventing the other from achieving global supremacy. The United States strengthens alliances such as NATO and the QUAD, while China advances its interests through economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative. These actions reflect the realist belief that global order is sustained through continuous power adjustments rather than through idealistic cooperation.

Military strength plays a crucial role in maintaining the status quo. Realists argue that deterrence is necessary to prevent aggression and maintain stability. The doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) during the Cold War ensured that neither the U.S. nor the Soviet Union launched nuclear attacks, preserving a tense but stable order. In contemporary geopolitics, India and Pakistan both possess nuclear weapons, which, despite their historical tensions, serve as a deterrent against full-scale war. Similarly, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a realist move to secure its strategic interests in Ukraine, countering NATO’s influence in Eastern Europe. These examples demonstrate how states prioritize military power to uphold their security and geopolitical standing.

Economic strategies also reflect realist principles, as states seek to control resources and maintain economic dominance to reinforce their global influence. China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which invests in infrastructure projects worldwide, is a strategic effort to expand its geopolitical reach while securing access to critical resources and trade routes. Likewise, Saudi Arabia and OPEC manipulate oil production to maintain their leverage in global energy markets,

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ensuring that economic power remains concentrated within key players. These strategies align with the realist argument that economic power is a fundamental tool for sustaining international order. As Waltz (2018) notes, "Economic strength and military power are inseparable in a realist world, where states must use both to maintain their position in the global hierarchy."

Several nations adopt realist policies to safeguard their interests and maintain global order. The United States prioritizes military supremacy, strategic alliances, and economic policies that reinforce its leadership. China challenges the existing power structure by expanding its economic and military influence while avoiding direct confrontation. Russia employs military interventions, energy politics, and regional alliances to maintain its influence in former Soviet territories. India balances regional power through military expansion and strategic partnerships, while Israel relies on military strength and intelligence operations to deter regional threats.

LIBERALISM THEORY

Liberalism in international relations is a theory that emphasizes cooperation, international institutions, economic interdependence, and the promotion of democratic values as pathways to global peace and stability. Its intellectual roots can be traced to philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and John Locke, while modern proponents include Woodrow Wilson, Robert Keohane, and Michael Doyle. Unlike realism, which sees international relations as a struggle for power, liberalism asserts that states can work together to achieve mutual benefits through diplomacy, trade, and international organizations.

A central claim of liberalism is that democratic states are less likely to engage in war with one another, a concept known as the democratic peace theory. Doyle (2020) argues, "Liberal democracies tend to maintain peaceful relations because their political systems encourage negotiation and compromise over conflict." This principle underlies international efforts to promote democracy as a means of securing global stability.

Liberalism also highlights the role of international institutions, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, in fostering cooperation and reducing conflict. Keohane (2019) states, "Institutions provide the framework for sustained cooperation by reducing transaction costs and increasing transparency between states." These organizations facilitate diplomacy, economic agreements, and conflict resolution mechanisms that help maintain international order.

Economic interdependence is another core aspect of liberalism, as increased trade and economic ties between nations reduce the likelihood of conflict. Rosecrance (2022) explains, "The more states become economically interdependent, the more they have to lose from conflict, making war an unattractive option." This belief supports policies such as globalization and regional trade agreements, which aim to strengthen economic ties to ensure peace and prosperity.

Liberalism Theory and the Justification of International Order and maintenance of the status quo

Liberalism justifies international order by emphasizing the importance of multilateral institutions and global governance structures that facilitate cooperation among states. The United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the European Union (EU) are central to liberalism's vision of international order. These institutions provide a framework for managing conflicts, promoting trade, ensuring human rights, and supporting global peace. As Keohane (2019) suggests, "International institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing uncertainty, providing transparency, and structuring repeated interactions among states." The UN, for example, justifies the international order by promoting peacekeeping missions, human

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rights, and diplomatic negotiations. The WTO regulates global trade, ensuring that states abide by established rules, thereby preventing trade wars and fostering economic stability.

In addition, liberalism advocates for the promotion of democracy as an essential element in creating a just international order. The democratic peace theory, central to liberal thought, posits that democracies are less likely to engage in war with one another. The promotion of democracy and the establishment of democratic norms are seen as vital to creating a global order that reduces the likelihood of conflict. Doyle (2020) notes, "Liberal democracies have internal mechanisms that encourage peaceful negotiations, making them more likely to engage in cooperative international relations." The European Union is a clear example of liberalism in practice, where democratic values and economic integration among member states have contributed to long-term peace and stability in Europe.

Furthermore, liberalism justifies international order through economic interdependence. Trade and economic cooperation between states reduce the likelihood of conflict, as states that are economically connected have strong incentives to avoid war. Economic organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank help to regulate global finance, stabilizing the world economy and reinforcing the existing order. Rosecrance (2022) argues, "As states become more economically interdependent, the costs of war rise, making cooperation a more attractive long-term strategy." The global integration of markets, particularly seen in organizations such as the WTO, ensures that economic relations continue to foster a stable, interconnected world.

Liberalism not only justifies international order but also helps maintain the status quo by reinforcing existing global power structures and institutions. Economic interdependence is a crucial component of maintaining stability, as it aligns the interests of states to prevent conflict and promote cooperation. For instance, the United States, as a major liberal power, plays a leading role in global economic institutions and promotes policies that sustain the existing global economic system. The dominance of the U.S. dollar, the strength of U.S.-led financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, and the U.S.'s influence in global trade and security arrangements all serve to maintain the status quo. These institutions ensure that the U.S. maintains its position at the center of the international order while fostering stability in the global economy.

The European Union (EU) is another practical example of liberalism maintaining the status quo. Through economic integration and democratic governance, the EU has created a framework that both justifies and maintains stability in Europe. By promoting the rule of law, human rights, and democracy, the EU has created a stable regional order that integrates former adversaries like Germany and France. Additionally, the EU's economic policies ensure that member states adhere to shared norms, helping maintain a stable and predictable international environment. However, this system also reinforces the status quo by ensuring that established powers, such as Germany and France, retain influence over regional affairs.

The U.S.-led global order also exemplifies how liberalism maintains the status quo. Through international institutions such as the United Nations, NATO, and the WTO, the U.S. continues to promote liberal norms like democracy, free trade, and human rights, while maintaining its own geopolitical and economic dominance. In regions like East Asia, the U.S. has used liberal mechanisms to ensure stability while containing emerging powers like China. NATO, for example, has expanded to include new members in Eastern Europe, stabilizing the region and preventing Russian expansionism. This reflects how liberalism reinforces the existing order by creating structures that limit challenges to dominant powers.

CONSTRUCTIVISM THEORY

Constructivism in international relations, as a theoretical framework, primarily focuses on the role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping the behavior of states and the structure of the international system. It challenges the materialistic foundations of theories like realism and liberalism by suggesting that international relations are not simply determined by power or economic interests but by the social constructs that define how states perceive each other and the world.

Prominent proponents of constructivism include Alexander Wendt, Peter Katzenstein, and Martha Finnemore. Wendt, in particular, is one of the most influential scholars in the field. He argues that "anarchy is what states make of it," suggesting that the international system is socially constructed and not inherently conflictual (Wendt, 1992). Constructivists like Finnemore (2018) emphasize the importance of international organizations in shaping state behavior, stating that "international organizations like the UN are not just mechanisms for solving problems but are agents in the creation and propagation of norms that define legitimate state behavior."

The theory's major assertions revolve around the idea that state interests are not fixed but are shaped by the social environment, including norms, identities, and historical contexts. It stresses that the identities of states are crucial in shaping their behavior, which in turn influences the structure of the international system. Katzenstein (2021) highlights this by stating, "The culture of national security is shaped by norms and identities, which govern the ways states approach security." Constructivists also argue that international relations are a product of human interaction, meaning that they are subject to change over time. As Adler (2019) observes, "The identities and interests of states are not fixed, but are shaped through interaction with other states within the international system."

Constructivism Theory and the Justification of International Order and the Maintenance of the Status Quo

One of the main tenets of constructivism is the idea that states' actions are often motivated by the need to conform to established norms and practices. The United Nations (UN), for instance, serves as a platform where international norms such as peace, human rights, and environmental protection are collectively defined and institutionalized. As Finnemore (2018) states, "International organizations like the UN are not just mechanisms for solving problems but are agents in the creation and propagation of norms that define legitimate state behavior." Through its peacekeeping missions, human rights advocacy, and global frameworks for addressing climate change, the UN reinforces the legitimacy of the existing international order and ensures that states comply with widely accepted norms.

In addition, constructivism justifies international order through the socialization of states into certain norms, such as democracy, human rights, and rule of law. States are influenced by the norms and practices of powerful international organizations and are often motivated to align their domestic policies with these global standards to maintain legitimacy. The European Union (EU) is an example of this process, as it has been successful in integrating former communist states into its framework through the promotion of democratic values and market economies. In this context, the EU justifies international order by establishing norms that promote political stability and economic development, leading to the convergence of states policies with the EU's institutional requirements.

Furthermore, constructivism also helps justify international order by highlighting how the identity of powerful states is shaped by normative expectations. As Adler (2019) suggests, "The identities and interests of states are not fixed, but are shaped through interaction with other states within the international system." This recognition of shared identities and the expectations

of cooperation between states further strengthens the justification of the existing international order, as states adopt the shared norms and goals of the international community.

Constructivism also plays a key role in maintaining the status quo by promoting the stability of established norms and practices that shape the international system. States are socialized into the existing global order, and their identities and actions are often framed within the context of these norms. Constructivist scholars argue that state behavior is largely influenced by the need to conform to the expectations of other states, which helps maintain the existing international system.

The United States, as a leading global power, provides an example of constructivism in practice by acting in ways that align with the established norms of democracy, capitalism, and international security. The U.S. has historically played a pivotal role in shaping and maintaining the international order through its leadership in international institutions such as the UN, NATO, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The U.S. helps to sustain the status quo by reinforcing the global liberal order based on free markets, democracy, and human rights, even as it sometimes acts unilaterally to safeguard its interests. By adhering to international norms and practices, the U.S. helps maintain the stability of the global system while also asserting its leadership within it.

The EU, as another example, maintains the status quo by promoting political and economic integration based on shared norms of democracy and human rights. The EU's expansion to include countries in Eastern Europe has been driven by the idea of spreading democratic values and securing stability in the region. As a result, countries that seek EU membership must align their policies with the EU's established norms, which ensures the maintenance of the EU's political and economic order. This process, referred to as "normative power Europe," highlights the EU's role in preserving the status quo by socializing new member states into its institutional framework.

Another instance of constructivism maintaining the status quo is the global norm of non-proliferation, which is reflected in the efforts of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The NPT has played a critical role in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons by establishing the norm that nuclear weapons states should not transfer nuclear weapons to non-nuclear states. This norm has been endorsed by most states, and adherence to the NPT helps to maintain international security and the existing balance of power. As Katzenstein (2021) notes, "International norms of non-proliferation have not only shaped state identities but have also contributed to the stabilization of the global security order."

Furthermore, as Ruggie (1998) observes, "The international order is a social construct, where the practices and expectations of states evolve over time based on shared norms, ensuring that the status quo is maintained through a continual process of reinforcement." This highlights the ongoing process through which states internalize international norms, contributing to the continuity of the global system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mainstream theories, via realism, liberalism, and constructivism have often been criticized for their state-centric focus, their tendency to favor dominant global powers, and their inability to address deep-rooted inequalities in the international system. Instead of relying on these theories to justify order, a more critical and transformative approach should be adopted. In order to ensure that, this paper recommends the following:

i. A shift from state-centric models to people-centered frameworks is necessary.
ii. That global institutions should be reformed to reduce the disproportionate influence of powerful states
iii. That, a de-colonial approach to international relations should be embraced

CONCLUSION

International relations theories serve as essential tools for both justifying international order and maintaining the status quo by shaping global governance, security, and diplomacy. Realism, with its emphasis on power politics and state sovereignty, justifies international order by arguing that a balance of power ensures stability, while maintaining the status quo by reinforcing existing power structures, as seen in U.S. and Russian foreign policies. Liberalism promotes international cooperation and institutions to uphold a just international order, advocating for democracy, human rights, and economic interdependence, as reflected in organizations like the United Nations and the European Union. However, it also maintains the status quo by embedding Western-led global governance models. Constructivism highlights the role of social norms and identities in shaping international order, justifying change through evolving norms but also maintaining the status quo when dominant global narratives resist transformation, as seen in NATO and international human rights frameworks.

Ultimately, these theories provide competing yet complementary lenses for understanding global politics. While some emphasize power and hierarchy, others advocate for cooperation, social change, or economic justice.

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