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# The Concept of “Power” in Neorealism Theory

## **Introduction:**

*Emerging in the 1970s, neorealism is a major branch of realist theory in international relations. It arose as a response to criticisms of classical realism. Neorealism’s core assumptions focus on explaining international phenomena through the lens of the international system structure (whether unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar) alongside the system’s inherent anarchy, stemming from the absence of a global authority to regulate relations between states. Key proponents of this theory include Kenneth N. Waltz (1924-2013), Stephen M. Walt (born 1955), and John J. Mearsheimer (born 1947).*

In contrast, classical realism, a reaction to the idealism prevalent between the two World Wars, posits that human nature is inherently self-interested and seeks to dominate the anarchic international arena through power acquisition. Within this context, neorealism’s concept of power incorporates non-traditional dimensions of power, such as soft power tools, alongside its traditional counterpart, military power. This shift stems from the perceived inability to transfer or transform power, the post-World War and Cold War era’s emphasis on economic dimensions and the growing significance of transnational interdependence, coupled with the diminished use of coercive power.

Here, it can be said that there are two main directions in the framework of the new realism theory regarding the concept of power, which can be presented as follows:

### **1- Power in Defensive Neorealism:**

American political scientist Kenneth Waltz is considered one of the most important thinkers of defensive neorealism who analyzed the concept of power. He indicated that there is a correlation between a state’s power and its other characteristics, such as natural resources, area, geographical location, economic development, and political stability. In this context, Waltz emphasized that a state’s power is not absolute but relative, measured according to its position within the structure of the international system and the extent of this power relative to that of other states.

Waltz’s concept of power is linked to the concept of anarchy within the structure of the international system. This anarchy requires each state to rely on itself to have enough power to achieve its interests within the

hierarchical nature of the international system. Waltz asserts that changes in the structure of the international system depend on the amount of power held by the major powers within it. Alongside Waltz’s concept of power is what is known as the “security dilemma.” Through this dilemma, Waltz assumes that states are in a constant state of readiness to go to war to defend themselves. Consequently, states strive to maintain their survival by acquiring power and ensuring a degree of security against other states.

Additionally, one of the theorists of defensive neorealism, American political scientist Stephen Walt, linked the concept of power to the concept of threat. Walt revealed that a state’s power is determined by several indicators, the most prominent of which include the overall power of the state compared to its neighbors, its geographical proximity to sources of danger or threat, and the comprehensive capabilities, particularly the offensive military capabilities, of its neighbors. Walt acknowledged that under these circumstances, states resort to all possible strategies to protect themselves from external threats, whether by forming alliances with other parties or by strengthening themselves internally in anticipation of any confrontation with an external party or parties.

Therefore, power in defensive neorealism can be defined as the relative capabilities possessed by a state that enable it to defend itself and achieve its interests compared to the capabilities of other powers within the structure of the international system.

### **2- The Concept of Power in Offensive Neorealism**

Following the criticisms directed at defensive neorealism after the collapse of the Soviet Union in



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1991—such as the ahistorical nature of the theory which neglected the role of important internal factors in explaining a state’s external behavior and other prominent determinants like cultural, moral, and religious dimensions—offensive neorealism emerged.

Regarding the concept of power in offensive neorealism, John Mearsheimer asserted that in the prevailing anarchy of the international system, each state should strive to achieve the maximum amount of power. This pursuit of power would enable a state to achieve the greatest level of dominance over other states. Mearsheimer justifies this pursuit of dominance by stating that states cannot trust the intentions of other states and are unsure whether others will use force against them. This is due to the volatile and changing nature of international relations and the lack of complete information.

In this context, Mearsheimer reveals that states’ pursuit of maximum power stems from their desire to ensure their survival as a fundamental condition for achieving their interests. However, he notes that while most states in this situation will seek to maximize their military power to enable them to destroy one another, they will ultimately realize that the most effective means of ensuring survival in a state of anarchy is to maximize their relative power with the ultimate goal of becoming the dominant power in the international system.

Therefore, power in offensive neorealism can be defined as the acquisition of the greatest amount of absolute capabilities in the anarchy of the international system to dominate other powers.

### 3- The Researcher’s Perspective on How to Employ the Concept of Power

Given the multiplicity of concepts within the various theories in the field of international relations, the researcher believes that choosing the concept of power in either defensive or offensive neorealism as an analytical tool depends on the case under study and

the researcher’s perspective on the suitability of either theory to their research topic.

Moreover, smaller powers that lack the minimum capabilities to defend themselves can resort to forming alliances with regional and major powers to enhance their margin of maneuverability, whether for defense or offense. This becomes a top priority for them in this context. Given the sufficient defensive capabilities of major powers, they may seek alliances to increase their offensive capabilities and strengthen their dominance in the international system.

On the other hand, smaller states must be extremely cautious about entering alliances, as major powers may seek to completely dominate them. This domination could result in smaller states losing their decision-making ability and failing to achieve the benefits and objectives of the alliance, ultimately rendering them mere subordinate states. Therefore, these states should carefully plan the appropriate path for them to build power, whether defensive or offensive.

### 4- Major Criticisms of the Concept of Power within Neorealism

Despite the significant recognition that neorealism continues to enjoy among international relations theories, owing to its ability to consistently explain political phenomena, particularly those related to interactions within the international system and among major powers, it has faced numerous criticisms from other theories such as liberalism. Liberalism criticizes neorealism for its reliance on specific variables like power and conflict while neglecting other important concepts such as cooperation, regional integration, and the increasing role of transnational actors like multinational corporations. Additionally, theories such as constructivism have leveled other criticisms against neorealism, pointing out its excessive reliance on history and its neglect of many other important variables, such as collective identity and shared culture, and their role in explaining interactions in international relations.

### References:

- (١) وَجَّهَت الكثير من الانتقادات للواقعية الكلاسيكية من قبيل اعتمادها المفرط على التاريخ في تحليل الظواهر في العلوم السياسية، وكذلك التركيز على مفهوم القوة واعتباره بمنزلة المتغير الأساسي لتفسير أي ظاهرة، بالتوازي مع الاتفاق على تعريف واحد لمفهوم القوة وهل هي وسيلة أم غاية، فضلا عن انتقاد السلوكيين لها لاعتمادها المفرط على الأساليب الكيفية دون أي تطرُق للمناهج الكمية، وإقصاء الفاعلين الآخرين من غير الدول مثل المنظمات الدولية والفاعلين العابرين للقومية.
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- (3) Brian C. Schmidt, Competing Realist Conceptions of Power, Journal of International Studies, Vol.33, No.3, 2005, p528, pp 536-537.
- (4) Kenneth N. Waltz, Theory of International Politics, 1st edition (United States of America, Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), pp 97-101.
- (5) Kenneth N. Waltz, Ibid, pp 103-129.
- (6) Stephen M. Walt, The Origins of Alliances, 1st edition, (New York, Cornell University Press, 1987), pp 1-10, pp 17-20.
- (7) Gustav Meibauer, Neorealism, Neoclassical Realism and the problem(s) of history, Journal of International Relations, Vol 55, No 5, 2021, pp 1-10.
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- (9) Hussein Solomon, OP.Cit, p55.