

Military Power and the Use of Force in International Politics: A Realist Perspective

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Abstract

Military power and the use of force in international politics has been a source of debate among scholars. While some believe that it is unnecessary others especially, realist scholars maintain that the anarchical nature of the international system (environment) makes military power and the use of force by states in international politics very essential and inevitable. This study therefore examined “Military power and the use of force in international politics: A realist perspective”. The paper argues that while military power and the use of force among states in the international system are necessary to deter and check the excesses of aggressive and over ambitious state actors, it should be regulated and controlled. Data for the study were sourced from secondary sources while the analysis was done descriptively through the qualitative research method. The study adopted the realist theory as its theoretical framework in order to explain why conflict and the use of force is a common feature of international politics. Findings from the study revealed that the complex and anarchical nature of the international system calls for the use of force. The character of some state actors also makes military power and the use of force to deter aggressive behaviour very essential and fundamental. Excessive use of force by states can be checked through the adoption of collective security approach of all members of the United Nations Security Council.

Keywords: *Military power, Use of force, International politics, Realist perspective and State actors*

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Background to the Study

The events that led to the first and second world wars prompted nations to engage in arms race and the acquisition of small and light weapons. The security architecture of a country is usually anchored on its national interest as well as its strategic projection and calculations within its sphere of operation hence, for any nation to have a standard national security system it must place emphasis on improving the socio-economic and political wellbeing of its citizens. This is imperative and fundamental because domestic policies directly influence the foreign policies of any nation. However, conflicts at the global level always occur when the interest and aspirations of states clash at any point. National interest is the key concept in foreign policy as it amounts to the sum total of all national values of nations hence, Vernon Van Dyke (1972), defines national interest as a shorthand expression of the sum total of the objectives and goals of a nation-state. In the same vein, Morgenthau (1978), defines national interest as one guiding stars, one standard of thought, rule for action which statesmen must follow as they set national goals and embark on international relations. In his words:

The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined as power. Statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power and the evidence of history bears that assumption out (cited in Okoro, 2006: p. 4-5).

He reiterated that a nation's foreign policy must embody the national interest defined in terms of the welfare of individuals and groups organized as a national society. Scholars have argued that all statesmen and leaders are guided and governed by their respective national interests, and this depends upon the nation's capabilities. According to Okoro (2006), three kinds of capabilities namely military, economic and demographic are particularly important for foreign policy and without at least a minimum level of capabilities, a nation loses the possibility of implementing its foreign policy effectively. Thus, the desire and struggle to pursue protect and defend their national interest within the international system often lead to conflict of ideology and interests among states. Clash of interest especially when it involves the strategic and vital national interest of states, states can go to any length including declaring war against other states in order to defend its image and interest. In the light of this background, this study examined "Military power and the use of force in international politics: A realist perspective. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the paper was divided into the following sections: Abstract, Introduction, Theoretical framework, Conceptual analysis, Military power and the use of force in international politics: The position of selected scholars, Conclusion, Recommendations and References.

Theoretical Framework

Theories and concepts no doubt play a major role in any research investigation therefore; this study relied on the realist theory in order to explain why nation/states still insist on military power and the use of force as a conflict resolution mechanism in international relations/politics. Realists believe that in a world of opposing interests and conflicts, moral principles cannot be fully achieved as, they are particularly more interested in studying and outlining anarchic society. Realist scholars therefore maintain that peace and order can be maintained in the international society neither through effective enforcement of international law nor by the process of international organizations as long as these institutions do not

provide adequate restraints to moderate state behaviour. According to the realist, the most effective regulatory means for the management of power in the international society is the mechanism of balance of power. The theory of balance of power assumes that the nations involved are seeking to maximize their power and that peace is most assured when and quality of power is reached, and most in danger, when the balance is upset. Balance of power is no doubt a popularly accepted theory that has been used to explain or to justify national policies that encourage the use of military force at the global level. However, a distinguishing characteristic of the realist paradigm is the emphasis on nation-states as the principal actor and the unit of analysis. Thus, scholars in this school of thought argued that as long as nation-states are the dominant form of political organization that politics will continue and states will have to look after their security and prepare for war where necessary. They therefore contended that as a dominant actor in international politics, the state is protector of its territory, the population, and of their distinctive and valued way of life. For the realist, the main responsibility of the state is always to seek advantages and to defend the interest of its citizens and to ensure their survival in times of crisis. This explains why realists believe that military power and the use of force in the interest of the survival of the state is essential and necessary. Proponents of the realist school of thought include: Edward H. Carr, Arnold Wolfers, George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau (1978).

Conceptual Analysis

The use of military force or power in national and international assignments has no doubt generated debates among scholars. While some see it as necessary and fundamental, others believe that its use should be regulated and controlled in order to protect the fundamental rights of citizens and also guarantee internal peace and security in the state hence, Osgood and Kissinger (1971) argued that the use of military power when controlled can be used to check the excesses of ruthless states within the international system. In the words of Robert E. Osgood:

The unstable, unregulated nature of the contemporary international system makes the capacity to wage war an indispensable instrument of national survival and of a just international order. Yet the immense destructive power of modern weapons makes war itself a highly volatile and potentially self-defeating instrument of policy. Therefore, the task of modern statecraft is to restrain military power and control it for legitimate political ends (Osgood, 1971:p.106).

He went further to define military power as the ability of states to affect the will and behaviour of other states by armed coercion or the threat of armed coercion. According to him, by military power, we mean the ability of states to effect the will and behaviour of other states. This, therefore, implies that the size and quality of a nation's military determines its sphere of influence within the comity of states at any level. On his part, Hans Morgenthau cited in Okoro (2002) argued that a nation must have the military capability to operate in order to make any meaningful impact in the international or regional arena. Implicit in this realist belief is that "might is Right" (Okoro, 2002: 3). The view that military power provides the essential underpinning for regional and international political intercourse has been widely appreciated by scholars and researchers decades ago. However, Azinge (2013) argues that the military should not be involved in internal civil matters as they are not trained for such

purposes. He reiterated that the continuous deployment of the Nigeria military for internal security operations have always ended in the gross violation of the rights of civilians and innocent citizens.

The concept of peace and internal security has also been viewed differently by different scholars. Some scholars are of the view that the concept of peace and security has always been associated with the safety and survival of the state, its institutions and citizens from any form of threat. Scholars in this school of thought therefore maintain that issues bothering on security and defence should be the prerogative of the state and its institutions (Zabadi, 2005: 3). Section 217 of Nigeria's Constitution clearly states that the constitutional responsibilities of the military (Army, Navy and Airforce) will be to defend the country from external aggression, maintain its territorial integrity and securing its borders from isolation on land, sea, or air, checking and quelling insurgency as well as acting in support of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so by the president and commander in chief. Section 217 of the 1999 Constitution also made it clear that the military in Nigeria can perform any other function as may be specified by an Act of the National Assembly. In the same vein, Section 8(1) of the Armed Forces Act further empowers the President to deploy the military for any assignment in the interest of the national peace and security (national interest). However, the military's involvement in internal security operations in Nigeria is specifically contained in Section 217 (c) of the 1999 Constitution as amended. It states that: suppressing insurrection and acting in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do by the president but subject to such conditions as may be prescribed by an Act of National Assembly. It is therefore obvious to state that in Nigeria the constitution permits the military to participate actively in internal security operations hence, records have shown that the military in Nigeria is actively involved in several operations aimed at quelling internal insurrections and uprising in different parts of the country. From Operation Lafia Dolle in the North East to Operation Crocodile Smile and Python Dance in the Niger Delta and South-East respectively, the Nigeria military has demonstrated capacity to rise to the occasion whenever national security is threatened.

Military power potential consists in the resources that a nation-state can mobilize against other nation-state for purposes of military deterrence, defense and war. O'brien (1968) therefore posited that national power in interstate relations is the ability of nation-states to produce desired effects in the behaviour of other nation-states. He added that a wide variety of conditions and means, non-coercive as well as coercive, may be available to a nation-state to produce such effects. According to him, one such condition, of prime importance in interstate relations, is power more narrowly defined as military power. In his words: National power is the ability to coerce other nations, and coercions refer to physically constraint rather than to such other means of pressure as economic reprisal. While explaining the place of strategy in military warfare Liddell Hart (1967) posited that military strategy maybe either direct or indirect and sequential or cumulative depending on the nature of the operation. According to him, military force supplies the paramount element of a direct strategy whose focus is violent perhaps sequential assaults on the enemy's main strength with the aim of overcoming his forces in decisive battle and thus, rendering him vulnerable to coercion. In his words: In the extreme, the destruction become so complete as to lead to his political overthrow and might be

characterized as a strategy of annihilation. Should a decisive victory prove impossible, the direct approach may end in exhausting the enemy's forces or will through attrition. Indirect strategies often involves less violence and typically include a series of military, economic, diplomatic, or psychological actions completed in no fixed order but aimed at enemy weaknesses, often locations on his periphery. Clausewitz (1976) also helped to push the domain of strategy beyond the battlefield when he acknowledged that the tactical and operational successes sought by military commanders are but means to political ends.

According to Clausewitz, at the highest level, therefore, military strategy and national policy overlap with the later shaping and directing military operations and force development. In his words: the strategic calculations of the government and armed forces depend not simply on the state and the army, but also on a sound estimate of popular attitudes, the existence of a national will to carry war to a successful conclusion. This therefore implies that successes or victory in battles depends on both military and non-military factors. However, the proliferation of weapons including weapons of mass destruction across the world prompted the industrialized nations to go into partnership agreement in what is referred to as “the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) in the 1970s in an attempt to control the number of (Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICMBS) and ABM defense systems. The SALT I treaty was signed by President Richard M. Nixon and Soviet Premier Leonid I. Brezhnev in 1972. This therefore means that uncontrolled used of the military at the global level could be counter-productive. According to Okoro (2006), the realist paradigm believes in the use of military force to advance the national interest of nation-states. In his words: The realist paradigm tries to conceive, understand, and explain international politics as it actually is and as it ought to be in view of its intrinsic nature rather than as one will like to see it. It is believed that for ages the controlling dynamic of the state system has been power politics. This is however, characterized in a way that the relationship between states is governed by force or threat of the use of military force to advance the national interest of nation-states (Okoro, 2006: 11). While justifying the use of military force at the global level Hedley Bull (1988) posited that in a world of opposing interests and conflicts, moral principles cannot be fully achieved. He reiterated the realist position when he stated thus, peace and order can be maintained in the international society neither through effective enforcement of international law nor by the process of international organizations as long as these institutions do not provide adequate restraints to moderate state behaviour. This further explains why the theory of balance of power is essential in restraining the excesses of state actors in the international stage.

Military Power and the Use of Force in International Politics: The Position of Selected Scholars

Several scholars including Bull (1988) have justified the use of military power at the global level. In his work “disarmament and international system”, he stressed that even if disarmament was possible, it would have the effect of destroying international relations. Synder (1961) also examined the relationship between armament and political tension. Thus, he introduced the concept threat perception and wondered whether disarmament should take place before or after political settlements have been negotiated. In his contribution to the subject-matter, Bower (1968) was more explicit when he added that the minimum requirements for the attainment of limited objectives are stringent. In his words:

No arms control plan can remain effective and dependable unless it continues to serve the national interest of each of the parties to it. This clearly means that for any disarmament process or policy to succeed at the global level, it must serve the interests of all the parties involved.

Several conservatives and idealists have argued that peace and security can be maintained through diplomacy application of international law and conventions etc. Scholars who are opposed to this school of thought are described as realists hence; this section of the study examined the views and positions of realists on the subject-matter (military power and the use of force in international politics).

1. Thomas C. Schelling (1966): In his book “Arms and Influence”, Schelling affirmed the validity and utility of military power in international relations and posited that military strategy deals with the question of how, and when to apply, increase or withdraw military power. This position was corroborated by Garnett (1970) when he stated thus, for the implementation of their foreign policies, states have at their disposal variety of techniques, some persuasive, some coercive, diplomacy, including propaganda; he added that economic and military pressure also provide the instrument through which a state can exercise its power to modify the policies and actions of other states in a desired fashion. In his “diplomacy of violence” Schelling argued that with enough military power and might a country may not need to bargain. In his words: some things a country wants it can take, and some things it has, it can keep, be it sheer strength, skill and ingenuity. In his words: It can do this forcibly accommodating only to opposing strength, skill and ingenuity and without trying to appeal to an enemy's wishes. Forcibly a country can repel and expel, penetrate and occupy, seize, exterminate, disarm and disable, confine, deny access, and directly frustrate intrusion or attack. It can, that is, if it has enough strength. 'Enough' depends on how much an opponent has (Garnett, 1970: p. 64). However, the relevance of military power in international politics was further elucidated in Thomas Schelling's Arms and Influence and John Garnett's Theories of Peace and Security respectively.

2. John Garnett (1970): In his work “Theories of Peace and Security”, the realist scholar justified the use of military force and power in international politics but added that there is a great difference between nuclear war and conventional military battles. According to him, restraint can occur during war. In his words: The difference between nuclear weapons and bayonets lies not in the number of people it can eventually kill but in the speed with which it can be done, in the centralization of decision in the divorce of the war from political processes and in computerized programmes that threaten to take the war out of human hands once it begins. In terms of the capability of nuclear weapons Garnett (1970), cautioned that nuclear weapons make it possible to do monstrous violence to the enemy without first achieving victory. According to him, with nuclear weapons and today's means of delivery, one expects to penetrate an enemy land without first collapsing his military force. In his words: what nuclear weapons have done, or appear to do, is to promote this type of warfare to first place. Nuclear weapons threaten to make war less military and are responsible for the lowered status of military victory at the present time. Victory is no longer a pre-requisite for hurting the enemy and it is no assurance against being terribly hurt. One needs not wait until he has won the war

before inflicting unendurable damages on his enemy (Garnett, 1970: p. 81). Like Schelling, Garnett also affirmed that the use of nuclear weapons has made war less attractive because of the level of destruction it can cause to the enemy and the environment.

3. Henry A. Kissinger (1969): In his book “Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy”, Kissinger x-rayed the revolution that has taken place in the field of science, technology and military affairs and concluded that whatever the problem, whether it concerns questions of military strategy, of coalition policy, or relations with the Soviet bloc – the nuclear age demands above all a clarification of doctrine. He reiterated that at a time when technology has put in our grasp a command over nature never before imagined, the value of power depends above all on the purpose for which it is to be used. While explaining the fact that nuclear weapons help to change the nature of wars at the global level he stated thus: Nuclear weapons came with fundamental changes as a result of the revolution in military affairs and its attendant consequences. He acknowledged the fact that the world order is still dominated in the military sense by two super powers (the Soviet Union and the United States). Recognizing the problems involved in modern warfare and the application of nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons Kissinger (1969) advocated the use of diplomacy and foreign policy as a means of controlling and regulating the conduct and actions of states and actors in the international stage. It is pertinent to state that the United Nations Security Council is playing the role of international watch dog/police by regulating the conduct of states economically, socially, politically etc. The above analysis clearly shows that military power and the use of force in international politics has its merits and demerits. Nevertheless, realist scholars in their postulations have maintained that military power if well managed and applied will guarantee international peace and security as no single nation will have the ability and capacity to hold the world hostage. According to them, through collective security and other framework that will strengthen international coalition, such erring state or nations can be called to order through the use of force/deterrence.

Conclusion

The place of military power in international politics remains a source of debate among scholars and researchers in international relations hence, this study examined “Military power and the use of force in international politics: A realist perspective”. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the paper was divided into the following sections: Abstract, introduction, theoretical framework, conceptual analysis, military power and the use of force in international politics: The position of selected scholars, conclusion, recommendations and references. The paper concludes that the complex and anarchic nature of the international system coupled with the over bearing attitude of state actors makes military power and the use of force in international politics inevitable and necessary in order to ensure and guarantee international peace, stability and security at all levels. Despite the arguments advanced by realists in the study it is obvious that unregulated use of military power by states could be counterproductive especially as it concerns the use of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

Recommendations

The following recommendations will no doubt help to guide the use and application of military power by nation-states:

1. Military power and the use of force in international politics should be clearly explained and documented for states to endorse and know their limits. Such a document should be controlled by the United Nations or any acceptable international organization.
2. The United Nations Security Council and its organs and frameworks used for the enforcement of peace and security protocols should be strengthened and made functional in order to compel nation-states to adhere to its charter and protocols.
3. There is need for equity and fairness in the application of military force via collective security framework against erring aggressor nation-states in order to treat nation-states especially members states of the United Nations equally.
4. There is need to improve military civil relations during military operations including peace keeping operations across the world. This is important because un-controlled military operations will lead to human rights violations.
5. Joint military operations should be encouraged especially during confrontation with terrorist and insurgent groups. Such partnership will lead to early defeat of enemies of the state etc.
6. While military operations can be allowed to maintain law and order such operations should be brief and restricted. Thus, the military should not be allowed to take over the political leadership of any state under any guise. In Africa and the third world where military rule still exist such military regimes should be declared illegal and made to stay on their own.
7. Military and civilian leaders known to have violated the human rights of their citizens should be arrested and prosecuted at the International Criminal Court (ICC). Such leaders should be made to pay for all the crimes committed while in office to serve as deterrence to others.

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