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Research on Scarcity in International Relations

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Abstract: The main issue of research is the scarcity problem that exists in international relations. The purpose is to explore whether scarcity and the problems it brings can be eliminated in international relations. In the research, the main methods used were literature collection, analysis, and extended argumentation. It mainly uses data from books on international relations and related literature. The research results show that scarcity holds a unique and important position in international relations, which cannot be eliminated. Meanwhile, it is more of a means that can be applied to competition between countries. Wrong cognition and psychology, irrational decisions and actions. Ultimately, it led to the scarcity of resources and the outbreak of crises. This article mainly provides a new perspective for the analysis and research of past international relations history and relevant current political cases. Simultaneously providing reference for national diplomacy and international competition strategies.

Keywords: International Politics; International Relations and Cooperation; Security Dilemma; International Conflicts and Crises; China US Relations.

1. Introduction

When we talk about the origins of realism in international politics, we cannot help but mention the great British political philosopher ——Hobbes.

In Hobbes' theory, human nature is inherently selfish and greedy, and the only natural right that everyone has is survival. However, due to the scarcity of resources, it is impossible to sustain the survival of everyone, so one's right to survival inevitably conflicts with others. [1]

With the continuous development and progress of international relations and society, we have to carefully consider a question: can scarcity, one of the most important sources affecting international relations, be eliminated?

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2. What is Scarcity?

The concept of scarcity is based on demand, where human needs are inflated and infinite, but resources are often limited. Scarcity is divided into absolute scarcity and relative scarcity. And the most important extension of this issue is actually the definition of economics - the rational allocation of limited resources. And this viewpoint will continue in international political science.

In fact, there is no clear boundary between relative scarcity and absolute scarcity in essence. The two are interconnected and can be transformed into each other. For example, oil. From a macro perspective, oil is absolutely scarce, but in reality, countries can use various means to restrict other countries' oil resources and achieve relative scarcity.

3. Scarcity from the Perspective of Social History

Geographical history has raised a famous question - tropical powerlessness. Almost all major powers and powerhouses in human society were born in the northern temperate zone, and there has never been a single strong country in the tropical region to this day.

The first viewpoint is that the tropics are either extremely dry and unsuitable for survival, or they are abundant rainforests. It is difficult to cultivate in the era of underdeveloped productivity, which means that it is difficult to develop agricultural civilization in these areas. But the problem is that Europe and the Mediterranean coast, which are equally barren and unsuitable for developing agricultural civilization, have led the development of the entire world in modern history.

The second viewpoint is more convincing - the issue of scarcity. For people in tropical regions, filling their stomachs only requires basic gathering, while for people in Europe, their land does not have the lush vegetation of tropical regions, so they must expand in order to survive, through commercial trade and technological development, to maintain the survival of civilization. In contrast, scarcity has become the driving force behind the development of European civilization, while for tropical regions, the lack of scarcity has become a trap for civilization development.

Human beings have never truly solved the problem of scarcity, but the development of human society has always revolved around scarcity, which has become a major driving force for human social progress.

Relative scarcity is artificially controllable, with three typical examples:

Firstly, there is the diamond scam. In fact, diamonds are by no means a scarce resource on Earth. Humans have shown that the proven reserves of diamonds on Earth are enormous in the South African and Soviet diamond mines. But De Beers, founded in 1888, monopolized diamond mines at the time and controlled production annually. In 1934, it established the "Central Sales Organization" to unify the sale of raw diamonds and monopolize the international market to drive

up prices. [2]

In 1973, the Sadat government of Egypt launched the famous Fourth Middle East War, also known as the Yom Kippur War, against Israel. The Arab world is unprecedentedly united in this war, while Gulf countries are picking up their real weapon - oil. And it caused the famous' oil crisis'. By imposing oil embargoes on Western countries to fundamentally affect their economies, the economic development of major developed countries was cut off, and this action had to force many Western countries such as Europe and Japan to shift their support towards Arab countries .After this incident, the Bretton Woods system led by the United States led to the complete collapse of the dollar-gold standard, and the United States further turned from "gold" to "black gold"(oil) to support. Gulf countries and provide military protection. It can be said that by leveraging scarcity, Gulf countries have effectively accomplished two goals simultaneously: expanding their international influence and safeguarding their national security. [3]

The third one is Hitler's theory of race living space used to incite the masses. In this regard, Hitler is truly a magician of rhetoric. Firstly, it has created a concept of absolute scarcity for the people, that is, the living space of ethnic groups is absolutely limited on a global scale. The resources needed for the survival of a nation, such as land, minerals, and water sources, are absolutely scarce. In this competitive game that concerns the survival and development of the nation, the basic rule is zero sum game. Subsequently, Hitler cleverly transitioned from absolute scarcity to relative scarcity. In his view, the current situation facing Germany is that precious and absolutely scarce national survival resources are firmly controlled by countries such as Britain, France, and the United States. If Germany wants to emerge from the shadow of defeat and return to the peak, it must actively prepare for war, launch wars, and seize these resources that it considers absolutely scarce. And with the full-scale operation of the Nazi propaganda machine. The whole of Germany formed such a fanatical trend, laying the groundwork for the rise of the Nazi Empire and the outbreak of World War II. [4] It has been proven that with the achievements of modern economy and the European Union. Even if Germany does not engage in war or compete for these so-called scarce resources. Germany can still serve as the locomotive of the European economy and thrive in today's European integration. But at that time, this ideology played a very important role in mobilizing the masses, expanding the military, and preparing for war for the Nazi Empire. [5]

It can be found that scarcity has been both a soil for development and a driving force for development throughout human history, even becoming a means of competition and containment between countries. And this important and special status also ensures that scarcity will not disappear, but will exist for a long time.

4. Scarcity from the Perspective of International Political

The basic proposition of realism is that international relations are in a state of chaos and naturalness. Without an authoritative government order, countries can only protect their own security on their own, and in this situation, due to the lack of government and the inability to coordinate conflicts and suspicions between countries, they fall into an arms race or security dilemma. So, as we mentioned earlier, the formation of such chaos and natural states is not unrelated to scarcity. [6]

In Hans Morgenthau's classical realism, it is proposed that human nature drives the development of international relations, and the innate pursuit of power in life leads to the constant imbalance and replacement of power, resulting in constant wars and ultimately returning to balance. In the end, we will find the shadow of scarcity here, and the power that people pursue is actually the allocation of scarce resources.[7]

In the realism theory of international politics, we will find that security dilemmas are always the inevitable direction of national development. Only a few countries, or a very few countries, have true 'security' among nations. The "rational state theory" proposed by Kenneth Waltz in the Three State Hypothesis holds that any country should maintain basic rationality, and no matter what, the behavior of the country will be based on certain rationality. For a rational country, this is unacceptable, and the threatened country will begin to develop its military. And this behavior, in turn, can make other countries feel fearful and threatened.[8]

And the most typical fact is the naval competition between Britain and Germany. Guided by Wilhelm II's global strategy (Weltpolitik), Germany embarked on an aggressive naval expansion program. As the global superpower, and particularly as a maritime nation, Britain was keenly aware of the threat the German naval buildup posed to its security and national interests. Consequently, the two nations embarked on an intense arms race, with Britain even proposing the well-known "Two Plus Three" plan, aiming for the British navy's tonnage to surpass that of the world's second and third powers, Germany and France respectively. For every one capital ship Germany constructed, Britain built two, and this almost unhealthy competition and seemingly endless security dilemma ultimately plunged both nations—and the world—into the quagmire of World War I. [9]

We have to mention another issue in international politics here --balance of power.

So, at this point, we have already encountered a new problem. Since balance of power is the balance of power and security struggle, as we said, the key to scarcity is power and security. If a balance of power is formed between countries. Does that mean that scarcity in international relations has been eliminated to some extent?

In the author's view, the answer is negative. In international relations theory, balance of power is an important theory: it is not just a state of state power balance, but more of a special means of handling international relations: it is to maintain tension and coordinate contradictions through nonviolence. Therefore, from this point, we can see that the interests and core issues between countries have not been eliminated. It is precisely because of this scarcity that the struggle has made countries exhausted from fighting. If we continue to fight like this, all countries will ultimately end up with a scorched earth, leading to a lose outcome. And as the rational country mentioned earlier, any rational country cannot accept this. Therefore, balance of power does not mean that scarcity has been eliminated internationally, on the contrary, it reflects the highly intense struggle for scarcity in the international order.

The Napoleonic Wars and the Vienna System stand as the most emblematic examples in the history of international relations. The Napoleonic Empire's formidable expansion in this zero-sum game nearly stripped every nation of their security and power resources, plunging all continental nations, including Britain, into a state of scarcity, with France

emerging as the sole dominant power. Faced with this situation, European nations assembled seven anti-French coalitions that ultimately defeated Napoleon, exemplifying the scarcity inherent in international relations. [10] The subsequent Vienna System, often referred to as the Golden Age of European Balance of Power, was riddled with cracks from its inception. From the secret agreements among the Vienna powers to the 1848 European Revolution and the 1856 Crimean War, this balance of power never resolved the scarcity, merely masking the conflict to some extent. This masking came at a steep cost: just decades after the collapse of the Vienna System, a world war erupted.[11]

In modern international relations theory, there is a basic definition of hegemonic order: hegemony refers to a powerful country that possesses powerful material resources, creates and maintains an international security system, controls capital resources and technology, and has advantages in high-end manufacturing.

From these discussions, we can see that scarcity is the best weapon for a hegemonic, powerful country that can dominate the international order. The most typical country is the United States. For them, it is true that a country can control a large amount of scarce natural resources and possess strong material, technological, and resource power. To maintain hegemony, the United States not only needs to be able to achieve "what the United States has", but more importantly, it needs to be able to achieve "what other countries do not have".

In Mearsheimer's "***The Tragedy of Great Power Politics***," the chapter on the material basis of power states that in power struggles between nations, the chances of success are undoubtedly greatly influenced by the balance of resources, especially in protracted wars of attrition where each side attempts to rely on material advantages to bring down the other. Of course, a country wants to have more rights than its opponents, not less, because the more resources it has at its disposal, the more likely it is to have an advantage in war. We will find that for major powers, they are never afraid of scarcity, they are only afraid of resource scarcity happening to themselves. And whenever there is an opportunity, they will artificially create scarcity to restrict the development of other countries.[12]

In summary, we can divide the main impacts of scarcity in international relations into the following three aspects:

The first type is economic competition, and the most typical one is the trade war between China and the United States, which illustrates this theory and phenomenon.

The second type is geopolitics, and the most typical example is the United States. In fact, if we only look at the development of the United States itself, the original sphere of influence of the United States was at least sufficient in terms of mineral and oil production in the Americas to support its development. However, in order to maintain its world hegemony and the current world system, the United States has carried out a strict strategic layout in the Middle East, even resorting to military means to protect the monarchy of Saudi Arabia in order to control the oil resources in the Middle East.

The third type is conflict cooperation, in fact, conflict here does not necessarily lead to war, such as the "Cod War" between Iceland and Britain in the last century, and the most typical cooperation is the Franco German Coal and Steel Community.

The fourth type is international reputation and influence. For competition and relations between countries, international reputation and influence are also scarce. There are always countries with stronger propaganda machines that can mobilize public opinion and incite the masses. On the other hand, there must also be a country that needs to be discredited. As Chairman Mao warned us, no matter what, we must not lose the battlefield for propaganda and public opinion. Just like the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Besides vigorously promoting their positive image, the most important thing for both sides is to belittle the opponent's image. Just as a movie must have both positive and negative characters, it is impossible for every person and every country to have a positive image. If there is, then this' positive image 'will inflate like currency and become cheap. At this point, it is necessary to use various means to smear and belittle the other party in order to enhance one's own image. From this perspective, international reputation and influence are undoubtedly zero-sum games.

From here, we can see that the greatest scarcity between countries is not natural resources, but rather security and power. Meanwhile, scarcity itself is also a weapon that can be utilized by countries.

In summary, we have identified that power and security, the most central issues in international relations and the fundamental interests among nations, are the most scarce elements within international politics. Moreover, they differ from any previously discussed scarcity of material resources. The scarcity issues in international politics exhibit distinct dual characteristics, encompassing both absolute and relative scarcities. Regarding absolute scarcity, our exploration reveals that power and security, the core interests and issues in international relations, are invariably scarce, with only a minority of countries ever attaining security and power (which are temporary and relative). Structural contradictions, security dilemmas, and an irreversible state of anarchy will persist. It is evident that regardless of the development or lack thereof in international political relations, the scarcity of power and security will always be present.

And at the same time, it has the characteristic of relative scarcity, because the scarcity of power and security can be artificially changed, because the comparison of power between countries can never be balanced and static. There will always be a relative decline in the strength of a country, a relative rise in the strength of a country, and a relative contradiction between a hegemonic country and a rising country. For major powers capable of leading the international order, scarcity is their best weapon.

Therefore, scarcity is always a factor that cannot be ignored in international relations. It can be said that scarcity is not only the cause of the most core issues and conflicts of interest in international relations, but also the result of this process. For hegemony and international order, scarcity is a powerful weapon for hegemony to maintain its national interests and the current international order. From this point of view, as long as there is a dominant country and a "pole" in the international community, scarcity will not disappear.

So, if there is something that is both the foundation of your existence, the driving force for your development, and the necessary tool for you to suppress dissidents and maintain your survival. So, do you think this thing can be eliminated? I think the answer must be negative.

5. “Animal Spirit”

In 1929, the United States was long bathed in the glory of Coolidge's prosperity, and during the "five-year peak," the US

stock market continued to soar. But at this time, with the outbreak of Black Monday, a global Great Depression swept across, and the damage and duration caused by this economic crisis were unprecedented in human history. After Roosevelt took office in 1933, even after experiencing the terrifying Great Depression, the finances of the United States were already stretched thin. But Roosevelt still insisted on the "3R Plan" (relief, recover, reform). And based on this, establish a “civilian protection group” and launch the "Federal Plan One". The Civilian Protection Corps recruits a large number of unemployed youths for infrastructure construction. The Federal Program One recruited and encouraged artists to create a large number of inspiring works of art.

Whether it's large-scale infrastructure development or artistic endeavors, such pursuits are justifiable in a prosperous nation. Yet, at that time, the United States was in a state of rejuvenation, with everything waiting to be revitalized, and government finances were severely strained. Why did Roosevelt persist in pursuing these initiatives despite the pressure? Beyond the job creation we learn about in textbooks, there lies a more profound reason—animal spirits.

This is an economic theory proposed by Keynes - animal spirit.

Keynes also believed that most economic actions often stem from rational economic motives. But such rational economic motives are often relatively stable and can continue to develop. But at the same time, there are also a large number of economic activities that are actually dominated by animal spirits, which are the main cause of economic fluctuations.[13]

Animal spirit is actually the confidence and emotional factors that influence people's economic decisions, manifested in various non-economic motivations and irrational behaviors. When people are confident about the future, they are more inclined to invest and consume. For example, before the Great Depression, during the Coolidge boom, the people and capitalists were fervently buying stocks and engaging in excessive consumption, speculative investment, and even a trend of comparison. When people's confidence is low and they feel lost and uncertain about the future, it will correspondingly decrease. For example, once a crisis strikes, the public and capitalists panic and sell stocks, run on banks.

And where does this key confidence come from? It does not necessarily come from a specific substance, and in most cases, confidence often comes from the perception of a positive signal. Just as Roosevelt's policies were aimed at boosting people's confidence and giving positive signals to the public that the US economy was improving.

Conversely, once negative signals are perceived by people, their rationality will be impacted by fearful emotions, ultimately leading to uncontrollable situations. In international relations, the scarcity of a certain resource - the emergence of scarcity - is a very typical negative signal.

In international politics, the most typical example is undoubtedly the arms race between Britain and Germany mentioned earlier. When William II came to power, the High Seas Fleet put forward its ambitious shipbuilding plan. Britain knew and only cared about one thing - that was, Britain discovered that its maritime hegemony, which it had always regarded as taboo, was facing unprecedented challenges, and subsequently formulated an exaggerated two power plan. It has been proven that in the future World War I and the Battle of Jutland, even after experiencing rapid development for a long time, the High Seas Fleet was still unable to compete with the Royal Navy. But this fear still led the British government to adopt irrational and extreme military expansion policies.

Therefore, scarcity and such animal spirits are highly intertwined in international relations. (It can even be said to be integrated). Once scarcity arises, the fear that arises between countries largely outweighs the consequences of scarcity itself. On the one hand, the scarcity and crisis will fundamentally awaken the animal spirit among countries. And once this spirit is stimulated, the competition and plunder of scarce resources will only deepen the existing crisis and disaster, ultimately falling into a vicious cycle once again. On the other hand, this also explains why frictions between countries over scarce resources, power, and security often spiral out of control and evolve into conflicts or even wars, because the correlation between scarcity and crisis intensity is often not a monotonically increasing function, but rather a curve (exponential function). And this also aligns with our previous discussion: true scarcity and major crises often do not originate from nature but are the result of human activities.

At the same time, this paragraph actually demonstrates the previous part from another perspective. In the previous section, we focused on the nature of scarcity and proved that scarcity cannot be eliminated in international relations. And this paragraph emphasizes that in international relations, resources that cause international conflicts and crises may not even be scarce. Wrong cognition and psychology, the stimulation of animal spirits, often lead to scarce resources and avoidable conflicts, ultimately evolving into crises.

Here, we must introduce a paragraph from " *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* ". In Chapter 10 of this book, the author wrote a "very interesting" passage:

“China has become a behemoth, and by the best measure of economic performance, in the 35 years since Ronald Reagan became president, China's economic size soared from 10% of the US economy to 60% in 2007. In 2014, the economic scale of China and the United States was equal, but now it has risen to 115%, continuing on the current trend. By 2023, China's economic scale will be 50% larger than that of the United States, and by 2040, China's economic scale will be nearly three times that of the United States, which will mean that China has three times the resources to influence international relations.”[14]

Of course, due to its early publication, this prediction seems slightly exaggerated at present. But the most crucial thing is that such a statement seems exaggerated today, and at that time it was undoubtedly shocking. However, the above statement is not just a topic of conversation for ordinary people after dinner, but a book carefully published by American scholars and top think tanks, which is used as a reference by high-level officials in the United States. This statement fully reflects this fear psychology (after all, the author is an American standing from the perspective of the United States). A few years ago, when there was still a gap between China and the United States, this was already the case. Nowadays, the power comparison between China and the United States is constantly narrowing, and the mentality of the United States can be imagined. Fear and anxiety are only increasing and not decreasing.

As we analyzed earlier, resources, power, security, and international influence. These scarce resources, which were seen as the bottom line by the United States, now face the strongest challenger in the post-Cold War era, ——China. As

analyzed in this article, once this scarcity arises, fear and anxiety begin to spread, and animal spirits are stimulated, all of which occur in the two strongest countries in the world today.

Even more terrifying, as analyzed earlier. If China really has three times the resources to influence international relations at that time, then in this' destined war ', the influence and power that China can actually generate, as well as its advantage over the United States, will be far more than three times. The sword of Damocles, known as scarcity, once again hangs over the head of China US relations.

6. Summarize

Firstly, we introduce scarcity from an economic definition. Subsequently, scarcity was elucidated through macro level social and historical perspectives and micro level specific historical events.

Subsequently, we focused on the nature of scarcity and proved its unique, important position in international relations, which cannot be eliminated.

At the same time, we also argue that resources that cause international conflicts and crises may not necessarily be scarce. Wrong cognition and psychology, as well as the stimulation of animal spirits, often lead to scarce resources and avoidable conflicts, ultimately evolving into crises.

At the end of this article. As the only country in the world capable of challenging US hegemony at present, China's confrontation with the United States in the international arena in the future not only has the traditional military threat, but also should pay attention to the US "hidden arrow" - the deadly threat brought by scarcity (resources, technology, geopolitics and international reputation, etc.).

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