

Realism/Neorealism

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Abstract

Realism is an approach to international politics that has a long historical tradition and numerous variants. It focuses on the actual state of the world, takes as given that the key actors are self-interested states, and that they interact in an anarchic setting, one in which there is no central authority to enforce order. As a result, states seek power and what emerges is a conflict-ridden world in which the balance of power is the only basis for order. The perspective has problems and limitations but few analyze international politics without focusing on the distribution of power.

Varieties of Realism in International Politics

Realism is a broad approach to conceptualizing international politics. As with any broad approach, it has intellectual antagonists, internal disagreements generating subtle distinctions among types of realism, and experiences recurrent efforts at reformulation.

Realism is a tenet that views the world as it is, and not in terms of an unrealized ideal. It emphasizes the constraints of the real world and the need for pragmatism and prudence. Applied to international politics, realism sees a conflict-ridden world of states concerned preeminently with their security, struggling for advantage, sometimes seeking dominance, and therefore pursuing power as the means to assure these. Realists therefore see the distribution of power as the major determinant of state behavior and international stability. Within this broad rubric, realists have developed alternative formulations, emphases, and distinctions, and others have appropriated aspects of realism and conjoined it with a plethora of other perspectives.

The Realist Vision

The realist vision of international politics holds that states interact in an anarchical international environment in which survival is uncertain. Because power is the key requisite for survival, states define their interests in terms of power and constantly assess their strength relative to that of others. What emerges from their interaction is a balance of power that is the sole basis for order, regularity, and stability in international politics.

Realism emphasizes the competitive and conflictual nature of international politics. States either constantly prepare for war or are actually at war with one another. Fearing adverse shifts in the balance of power, they respond with balancing behavior, either through internal mobilization and, should that prove inadequate, with external alignment. Self-reliance is preferred in such a system of self-help, but allying with others to confront a common threat may be temporarily necessary. Cooperation is thus short-lived, lasting only as long as the common threat, and is a function of common interests and not common values or ideology. Realism can therefore readily explain alliances between wholly antithetical political systems, such as the Nazi–Soviet pact of 1939. The mobilization and alignment that result in response to adverse shifts in the balance of power return the system to a state of balance. Hence, balances of power recur and reemerge in international politics.

Realist Assumptions

Realism is a statist perspective, for it assumes states to be the key actors in the international system. It excludes multinational corporations, nongovernmental organizations, and a variety of transnational and subnational entities that matter only to the extent that they affect states.

The theory assumes that states face recurrent threats and challenges in the international system. Power, especially military power, is the basis of both threats to a state and to its ability to assure its survival. Although some acknowledge a variety of forms of power, the overwhelming focus is on military capabilities, their distribution and those material resources that make them possible.

Realism presumes survival and its requisites to be the highest priority of states, indeed, their very reason for being (*raison d'état*). States value security considerations above all and respond to the imperatives of the international system. The primacy of security implies that other policies, including foreign economic ones, reflect considerations of international power politics. Other state objectives, such as ideological ones, are inherently secondary. They are only pursued when security is assured, and they are readily abandoned when security is threatened.

Realism Deemphasizes

For realists, international law and international organizations are largely irrelevant to international politics. Both reflect the interests of powerful states, for in international politics might makes right, and international institutions do not constrain great powers but merely provide additional venues for the exercise of power. At most, both play a role only in matters of low politics, in regulating transportation, communication, and economic exchange, for example, and not in matters of high politics, especially military security.

Realists also consider the requisites of survival to dominate any moral considerations. The requisites of survival are more important than any ethical considerations. Indeed, realists transform necessity into a moral imperative.

Realism downplays the role of domestic politics. It treats states as unitary actors that are functionally equivalent to one another, and the constraints imposed by the international system generate similar behavior even by dissimilar states. The international system once consisted largely of monarchies and then of authoritarian and military governments, and is now increasingly composed of democratic states. For realists, however, it continues to function in the same way. Differences in the internal composition of states do not matter, except if they affect relative power.

Self-reliance precludes states from allowing the development of any division of labor or any interdependence regarding the requisites of state survival. Small states may have no choice but to rely on others, but great powers do have such choices and thus do not allow the emergence of any meaningful interdependence.

Realism as Equilibrium Theory

The balance of power is an equilibrium theory. The security policies of nations result in a balance of power among states. The equilibrium can be disturbed, but only by exogenous shocks, ones outside the model. The disturbance then sets in motion forces that return the system to a new equilibrium. The implosion of the Soviet Union, for example, disturbed the balance of international power, but was an event outside the model and inexplicable by it. But realism does purport to explain the set of forces that then would come into play to return the system to equilibrium. For some, a balance of power is something states seek; for others, it is an unintended result.

Put this way, balance of power theory functions like Adam Smith's invisible hand in creating an unintended outcome. For Smith, the self-interested behavior of producers in a competitive market generated the best price for consumers. In international politics, the pursuit of national interest and the struggle for power in an anarchical system create a peaceful stable order. It is not the search for peace but the search for security that creates this stability. The preparation for war assures peace.

Realism's Historical Roots

Realism traces its lineage to Thucydides, who argued that his History of the Peloponnesian War (1996) provided the one and true explanation of the war: the growth of Athenian power and the fear this struck in Sparta. Thucydides argued that preceding incidents and specific complaints notwithstanding, the true cause was a shift in the balance of power.

As important to current realist formulations is the work of Thomas Hobbes, who translated Thucydides into English and argued (in Leviathan) that the state of nature, which he characterized as a war of all against all, is one in which war and preparation for war are a constant. Conflict is limited within societies by the creation of the Leviathan, a coercive state. For modern realists, who distinguish international from domestic politics, international relations remains an anarchic realm; there is no Leviathan and the war of all against all endures.

Realism dominated the study of international relations in the middle of the twentieth century as the world came to grips with the occurrence of the Second World War and the failure of both international law and international organizations to prevent it. Hans Morgenthau's (1948) influential formulation of realism drew upon psychology and rooted realism in a human nature presumed to be inherently aggressive and in a view of individuals as power seeking.

Beginning in the 1950s and increasingly in the 1970s, an alternative realist version emerged. It coincided with the rise of (and often appropriated the terms of) systems thinking in the 1950s and structuralism in the 1970s. This variant rejected basing realism in any theory of human nature or any internalized commitment to a balance of power. This neorealist formulation did not posit any individual or collective propensity toward power maximization per se. Neorealism was a purely systemic theory, one that focused on the characteristics of the international system structure, rather than the nature of individuals or states. Rather, it posited a minimalist concern with survival in an anarchic setting as the only necessary conditions. The anarchic system, the absence of hierarchy assured a struggle for survival and an emphasis on power. All states caught in an anarchic structure have no choice but to arm themselves in preparation for the possibility of war and must assiduously guard their relative power. Neorealism or structural realism firmly rooted the problem of international politics in the international system and not in the nature of individuals or states.

Realism has a core set of assumptions and relaxing any one opens the door to an alternative approach. Neorealists maintain a pristine structural approach that abjures discussion of foreign policy. They provide a theory of international politics and not one of foreign policy. Others have returned to what they describe as a more classical perspective and developed a neoclassical realism that aspires to provide a theory of foreign policy, maintaining the international system as a key independent variable but including domestic constraints and elite perceptions as important intervening variables.

The Realist View of History

For realists, history consists of the rise and fall of great powers and of changes in the distribution of power in the international system. Much like economic structures are characterized by the distribution of firms (monopoly, duopoly, oligopoly, and a competitive market), the international system is characterized by the distribution of power, and more specifically the number of great powers. Multipolarity is a system of three or more powers, bipolarity is a system of two great powers, and unipolarity (or hegemony) is a system with one dominant power. Changes in the distribution of power constitute major break points in history and determine the structure of the international system. The multipolarity of the nineteenth and early twentieth century is contrasted with the bipolarity of the Cold War and contrasted with the unipolarity of the post-Cold War world. Historical periods are characterized by the distribution of power in the system, and the challenge of international politics in any era is that of dealing with changes in the relative power of great powers. The end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century had to deal with the rise of German power, and the current age is dominated by a focus on the rise of Chinese power.

This characterization of the international politics of the last century contrasts with those that emphasize the role of ideological competition and conflict. Diplomatic histories of the last century invariably focus on ideological conflict. They note the conflict between liberalism, fascism, and communism as the dominant feature of both domestic and international politics. The emergence of a Communist Russia is seen as a central feature shaping international politics from 1917 to 1989. Nazism and fascism are deemed to have posed a challenge to international order in the 1930s and 1940s. The Cold War that followed the end of World War II is not simply a case of bipolarity but to be understood as a conflict between Communism and the liberal west. Finally, the collapse of the Soviet Union is not merely the collapse of one of the two superpowers in a bipolar world but the end of the Communist challenge and the triumph of liberalism. For realists, however, ideological conflict was merely epiphenomenal to changes in the set of great powers and the distribution of power in the international system.

Disagreements and Debates

Despite the consensus in emphasizing states as the central actors, security as their prime concern, and power as their key instrumentality, there is some confusion and disagreement in the core of realist thought. First, there is disagreement about the level of analysis of realist thought and the nature of both its dependent and independent variables. For neorealists especially, realism is a purely systemic argument. It merely explains the recurrence of balances of power in the international system. It is a theory of international politics and not of foreign policy. It cannot explain the foreign policy of any particular state but merely the tendency of the system to arrive at a balance of power. For others, harking back to a classical realism, and dubbing themselves neoclassical or neotraditional realists, the emphases on power and interest imply particular foreign policies in particular circumstances.

A second related source of confusion and disagreement is whether the theory is positive or normative. Realists typically argue that theirs is a positive theory of how the system actually works (an iron law of international politics), yet many (including structural realists) have also used realist precepts to criticize the foreign policies of specific countries. Realists, for example, criticized US military involvement in the Vietnam War in the 1960s and in the Iraq War of 2003. Yet, if realism can be used to criticize extant policy, then it is inadequate as an explanation of that policy. Moreover, if it provides no theory of foreign policy then it should hardly be used as a basis for criticizing a particular foreign policy.

That politicians adopted the argument also led to disagreement. First, the term balance of power has come to be used loosely and applied to virtually every configuration of power. Second, there is a disagreement between scholars as to whether realism operates through intention (states must aim for a balance of power) or irrespective of it (as an unintended consequence).

Disagreement about the nature of the dependent variable (does realism explain foreign policy or just international politics) is matched by disagreement on the independent

variable side as well. Although all scholars emphasize the role of power and the distribution of power, there are those (neoclassical realists) who see the impact of power as mediated by domestic politics. Thus they do not argue that dissimilar states will always respond in the same way to a particular distribution of power.

Finally, there is even a little disagreement about the core proposition of balance of power theory, that the workings of the system mean that balances recur and are the basis of international stability. First, there are different balanced configurations of power and there is some disagreement about the relative stability of different configurations of power, about whether bipolar or multipolar international systems are more stable. Most scholars argue that bipolarity is more stable because states readily respond to adverse shifts in the balance of power. In contrast, in multipolar systems, states will pass the buck in the hope that others will deal with adverse changes in the balance. This delays the return to balance and stability. Multipolar systems are thus thought to be more war-prone and unstable. By and large this is the consensus, though there is some disagreement on this point.

Most realists, as balance of power theorists, agree that the international system tends toward balance (though more predictably and more quickly in some settings than others) and that hegemony and unipolarity are therefore not possible or sustainable. Any state aiming for global domination generates countervailing coalitions of power and thus attempts to achieve hegemony have historically failed. Yet, there are those scholars who hold that the system tends toward power preponderance rather than balance, and that hegemony is stable but that a balance of power is not. This has played out in the last two decades in competing predictions of the post-Cold War world. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar order, balance of power realists argued that US hegemony, or global unipolarity, would be short-lived. Coalitions that had been built to contain Soviet power would come apart once the threat that had been the basis for their existence disappeared. Moreover, the US would succumb to imperial temptation, and even if not, others would balance against US power and multipolarity would soon emerge. In contrast, others have argued that unipolarity is stable and sustainable, either because they believe that preponderance is generically stable or because they believe that US hegemony differs from prior attempts to achieve global domination.

A sustained debate has emerged within realism between offensive and defensive realists. The former argue that anarchy and the concern with security, and therefore, power result in states that are power maximizers. All states are revisionists, assertive expansionists seeking to maximize their power relative to others. Like classical realists, they argue that states are power maximizers. But they do not root this in any individual will to power, but in the requisites of survival in an anarchic world. In contrast, defensive realists emphasize that security seeking leads states to respond to adverse shifts in the balance of power but also leads them to forgo seeking advantage over others. Security-seeking states recognize the existence of a security dilemma, in which a state's search for military superiority will result in comparable reactions by others, leaving the state no better off and perhaps worse off. The result is a world in which

status quo states predominate and revisionist states are rare. Defensive realists see a world less conflict-ridden than offensive realists.

Problems

Realism is criticized for leaving too much out. A pristine realism that only says that balances recur cannot explain most foreign policies of most states most of the time. Moreover, the theory is static and cannot explain change over time. Important transformations of recent centuries, such as the rise of nationalism, the industrial revolution, the rise of ideological politics, the spread of democracy, the revolutions in communication, transportation, and warfare, realists judge irrelevant to international politics, which they treat as unchanged as long as anarchy continues to characterize international politics. Realists deem these factors to matter only to the extent that they affect the relative power of states (whose alteration is the only source of change in international relations) and are viewed as exogenous shocks. The only transformation that some realists accept as affecting world politics is the nuclear revolution, which they consider to undercut fundamentally the importance of relative power in a classical military sense.

The theory is also vague and imprecise. It is not clear what factors enter into a calculation of the balance of power, nor how balance is ascertained. It is difficult to test assertions of the theory when there can be wide disagreement over whether a particular distribution of power is balanced or not. Scholars dispute whether stability during the Cold War derived from US military superiority, a balance of power between the US and USSR, or the existence of nuclear weapons. Scholars disagree whether past wars occurred as balance or imbalance was emerging.

More important, the theory is indeterminate. It cannot predict which particular distribution of power will emerge, only that balance will. Nor can it predict the process by which balance is restored. US containment of the Soviet Union during the Cold War can be explained as the working of the balance of power, but so can the US roll back of German and Japanese power during World War II. A US decision simply to contain German and Japanese power in the 1940s would have been as consistent with realism as the actual US decision to wage war and undo the consequences of German and Japanese aggression. The theory cannot explain when war is used to restore the balance of power and when containment restores the balance.

The theory makes precise predictions only when the constraints of the international system are presumed to be tight. Although the theory holds that it is great powers that structure global politics, the international system is most constraining of small powers and least constraining of large ones. Hence, the theory is typically indeterminate regarding the behavior of the great powers, which are presumed to matter most for international politics.

Formal studies have shown that realist premises are consistent with international cooperation, the construction of international organizations, and even the emergence of international norms. These works challenge the deductive logic of realism, arguing that the premises are insufficient to lead to realist conclusions.

Realists have had some difficulty in recent years in explaining significant international developments, as, for example, the disjuncture between military and economic power. Realists argue that economic power is invariably translated into military power relatively quickly. Yet the global disjuncture between the two has been sustained for an extended period of time. During the later stages of the Cold War, the world remained militarily bipolar, dominated by the might of the United States and the Soviet Union. Yet economically the world was multipolar, with Germany (and the EU more broadly) and Japan as significant economic powers that did not translate their economic prowess into military strength. Since the end of the Cold War, the world has been militarily unipolar (US defense spending being greater than the combined spending of the next 15 powers for much of the period) and yet the global economy was distinctly multipolar. Such sustained disjunctures between the distribution of economic and military power is problematic for realism.

As noted earlier, most realists assumed that the unipolarity of the post-Cold War world would be a short-lived phenomenon, that balancing behavior would react to imperious US power. Yet multipolarity has not emerged and most of the other rich and powerful states in the system remain aligned with the US. Some have argued that opposition to US policy by its allies constitutes a new form of soft balancing behavior, thus both conforming to realist expectations and yet constituting a new and distinct phenomenon not adequately conceptualized in realist thought.

Realists also have problems explaining the emergence of a zone of peace in central and western Europe. War is now unthinkable between states that have fought many wars over centuries. Despite remaining sovereign and autonomous, the states of Europe are no longer engaged in a security competition, and their peaceful relationships transcend the mere temporary cooperation envisaged by realism.

Modifications and Varieties of Realism

Realist thought continues to develop, in part to deal with such anomalies. One variant now posits that it is the perception of power rather than the actual distribution of power that matters. Another decouples changes in the distribution of power from the perception of threat, and holds that states respond to threats and not just shifts in power.

Some see realism as characterizing particular eras rather than international politics generally. Eras in which territorial acquisition brings greater rewards than does commercial exchange are ones to which the logic of realism is more applicable. In contrast, eras in which territorial expansion provides little wealth and great cost and in which commercial exchange is the basis for wealth and power are eras in which a realist logic is less applicable. Eras in which the nature of warfare gives the offense an edge are ones in which a realist logic is more likely to prevail, eras in which defensive weapons are superior are more stable and peaceful and not characterized by security competitions.

Realism has a core point with which no international relations scholars will argue: the international system consists of states that are sovereign and independent and there is no power

to enforce norms or law and that therefore power is a central consideration in analyzing international politics. No scholar denies the importance of states, power, and interests. Scholars of all stripes give this central core of realism its due, but then depart from other elements. The resulting desire both to amend realism and to appropriate it for important modifications has resulted in a variety of realisms. Although liberalism (and liberal institutionalism) have been proffered as conceptual alternatives, there are those suggesting a hybrid of democratic realism or liberal realism. Similarly, constructivism, critical theory, and cultural perspectives have been proffered as alternatives to realism, and here too amalgams have been proposed with the labels cultural realism, critical realism, and constructivist realism. Finally, realism is seen as quintessentially immoral, a cynical view of international life that makes war and military necessity an ethical virtue. Yet, here too, some have proposed arguments they have dubbed ethical realism and moral realism.

These varieties of realism (which many realists would deny as realist arguments) attest to the continuing centrality of power and interests in any discussion of foreign policy and international politics. Yet the resulting transmogrifications bib18 have raised the question, "is anyone still a realist?" (Legro and Moravcsik, 1999).

Realism has a core strength: its emphasis on power and interest and an unregulated international system. Yet its most pristine formulation is rejected by many, if not most, scholars who nevertheless articulate their positions relative to a core realist argument. Realism is akin to Greenwich Mean Time: more live outside than inside that time zone, but everyone measures themselves by their distance from it.

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