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International Relations Theory: Realism Vs. Liberalism

Realism in international relations is a hardline philosophy that assumes every nation is working to increase its political and economic influence. The idea is to manifest as much power as possible while maintaining order among constituents. Those countries that do so most successfully will have superiority over those who've failed to prioritize political, cultural, and economic dominance. Self-preservation is simultaneously at the top of the priority list for practitioners of Realism, which, like most things in this philosophy, is believed to be achieved through maintaining as much power over their country as possible. Two of the world's top five superpowers, China and Russia, operate with realist philosophies and are allies.

Governments that function under realism often prioritize their domestic policy over international policy and do so confidently with strong militaries to fall back on. When realist governments do cooperate with international organizations, it's often in the interest of advancing some national goal that will expand its influence or economic strength. Often, realist governments acknowledge that a moral high ground isn't always in the best interest of their country. For example, purchasing a resource from an ethically suspicious country, kingdom, or group could be cheaper than purchasing the same resource from an internationally legitimate vendor. Trading with an ethically suspicious group, like a known terrorist organization, looks questionable on the international stage. Still, realist governments don't care as long as their military, cultural, and economic influence grows.

The opposite of realism, on the spectrum of international relations theories, is liberalism. Liberalism is based on the belief that our modern world can use communication to achieve its mutual goals. Under liberalism, sovereign entities openly trade their resources and goods to better strengthen all parties involved. Instead of military force, liberalism uses political pressure, treaties, trade agreements, and other forms of non-violence to reach a compromise on issues, typically resulting in a mutual benefit for all involved. Sometimes liberalism requires heavier sacrifices for one party so that another party can succeed, but this is typically only done in times of emergency, such as when there is a risk of economic collapse. Unlike realism, a liberalistic government will expend its resources to assist in global humanitarian efforts so long as it has the resources to offer. If one sovereign entity doesn't want to afford the total cost of aid, in liberalism, that entity can reach out to an ally and discuss combining resources for an aid package to the people in need. The aid rendered to those places would not be seen as a loss of resources but as a symbol of unity and kinship.

Liberalism was quick to take on global popularity once more and more sovereign governments saw the potential good that came with mass cooperation. On a timeline provided by ourworldindata.org, you can see that global political ideologies over the past 246 years (as of the date of the data) have largely shifted toward liberalism. In doing so, many national organizations, such as the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations, have been created to support liberalism and democracies worldwide. The overarching goal of liberalism is world peace through communication. Still, even with the many international organizations in place to ensure fairness and openness, some groups in the world wish to remain independent of the collective global institutions and focus on building their own strength.

When a sovereign entity that doesn't cooperate with global liberalistic behaviors, like Russia, decides to impose its force on another sovereign entity, like Ukraine, the national organizations in place have a duty to react. Recently, on Friday, February 2nd, 2024, the United Nations stated that it had jurisdiction to rule over the war in Ukraine and seems to have sided with Ukraine by demanding that Russia stop military operations in the region. Russia has released its own statement, disagreeing with the UN, saying the UN only has jurisdiction over states and has no say in what happens between Ukraine and Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin started his war on claims of stopping the genocide of pro-Russian Ukrainians. No Genocide was taking place, and now the Russian regime is faced with a meaningless war seemingly over territory lines drawn after World War II and aggression against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization encroaching on Russian territory. Members of the United Nations, like the United States and France, have given aid to Ukraine in the form of money and weapons to defend themselves. No actual troops from outside countries have been deployed to help either Ukraine or Russia directly. This conflict is particularly meaningful because some of the most powerful nations in the world are duty-bound to help those in need, and Russia doesn't seem to acknowledge international organizations affiliated with Western political ideologies. As Russia continues its assault on Ukraine, threatening to topple its very new democracy, the international community is likely to intervene to set a precedent for its ability to enforce Global order.

Realism can be used to explain the war in Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin was said to have been very cooped up during the 2020 pandemic and allegedly alienated himself from others for quite some time. According to the New York Times, U.S. Intelligence speculates that the Russian President's mindset could have been altered during his two-year isolation and that Putin, now seventy-one, could be at war strictly for his legacy. U.S. Intelligence is speculating

that the only rational reason for President Putin's invasion was an attempt to rebuild Russia's sphere of influence and to secure his legacy in world history. If true, this would qualify as a realist regime. Putin is making decisions that would expand Russia's sphere of influence, uninterested in the morality of their actions so long as they garner results on the world stage. Putin has been unable to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine legitimately, and faced with unknown consequences, he will only withdraw his troops with the guarantee of a favorable outcome for himself and Russia. President Putin's ideology is genuinely one of power, paranoia, and self-interest. He's a true realist in the modern era.

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