Chapter 6

Realism

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Framing Questions

- **Is there a timeless wisdom of realism?**
- **How do realists conceptualize world politics?**
- **Do all of the different theories of realism share a similar set of assumptions?**

Reader's Guide

Realism is the dominant theory of international relations. Why? Because it provides the most powerful explanation for the state of war that is the regular condition of life in the international system. This is the bold claim that realists make in defence of their tradition, a claim that this chapter critically examines. After introducing the theory of realism, the second section asks whether there is one realism or a variety of realisms. The argument presented is that despite some important differences, all realist theories share a set of core assumptions and ideas. The third section outlines these common elements, identified as self-help, statism, and survival. The final section returns to the question of the extent to which realism is relevant for understanding the globalization of world politics.

Introduction

The theory of realism has significantly influenced both the practice of world politics and the academic study of International Relations (IR). Many claim that before there was even a distinguishable subject matter of IR, states' diplomatic and military practices conformed to the principles that would later be identified as realism. Some go so far as to argue that the power-seeking behaviour of human beings and their motives of fear, honour, and profit illustrate the universality of realism. The argument is that wherever and whenever groups of people have sought to survive and perpetuate their own political communities, they have had no choice but to pursue power and engage in struggle to defend themselves. The claim that realism possesses a timeless quality is based on such arguments. Although often deeply pessimistic, realists profess to describe the world the way it really is rather than how we wish it to be.

At the conclusion of the Second World War, a new group of self-identified realist scholars rose to prominence in the emergent field of IR. Many were German émigrés who fled Europe and sought refuge in the United States. These scholars were highly critical of the approach taken by those writing and teaching during the inter-war period, whom they dubbed 'idealists' and 'utopians'. These realists argued that idealists' search to find a cure for the disease of war resulted in their ignoring the role of power; overestimating the degree to which **nation-states** shared a set of common interests; and being overly optimistic that rational solutions could be found to settle disputes peacefully. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 confirmed, for the realists at least, the inadequacies of the idealists' approach to studying international politics.

A new approach, one based on the timeless insights of realism, replaced the discredited idealist approach. Histories of IR describe a Great Debate that took place in the 1940s between the inter-war idealists and a new generation of realist writers who all emphasized the ubiquity of power and the competitive nature of politics among **nations**. The standard account of the Great Debate is that the realists emerged victorious, and that idealism was relegated to the dustbin of history. Recently, however, a new body of revisionist history has challenged the story of the Great Debate by revealing that many of the realists completely misrepresented the inter-war scholars' views (Schmidt 2012). Robert Vitalis (2015) has suggested that by viewing this period in terms of a debate between idealists and realists, the roles of race, imperialism, and empire have been erased from the field's early development. Other disciplinary historians have noted that by retrospectively constructing an 'idealist tradition', the realists produced a caricature of several quite diverse (left, liberal, feminist) political and intellectual movements in the inter-war period (Wilson 1998). Yet, given the context of rising tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States immediately after the Second World War, the realists argued that idealism had to be banished from the policy-making process. Realists argued that the United States had to act on the basis of its core national interests, rather than on the basis of abstract universal interests. With the dawn of the nuclear age, the core national interest of state survival could no longer be taken for granted. Realism taught foreign policy officials to focus on interests rather than on ideology, to seek peace through strength, and to recognize that great powers can coexist even if they have antithetical values and beliefs. The fact that realism offers something of a 'manual' for decision-makers looking to maximize the interests of their **state** in a hostile environment helps explain why it gained such popularity in the late 1940s and 1950s, and why it remains the dominant tradition in the study of world politics.

Realism in context

The development of realism after the Second World War is often claimed to rest on an older tradition of realist thought. For the realists, tradition connects seminal texts with context. In other words, it is important to understand the political circumstances in which various realist thinkers were living. Contemporary realists are commonly portrayed as belonging to an ancient tradition of thought that includes such illustrious figures as Thucydides (*c.*460–406 bc), Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) (**see Table 6.1**). Despite the different time periods and political contexts in which

Table 6.1 The realist tradition

Thinker	Key text	Big idea	Context
Thucydides	*History of the Peloponnesian War*	International politics is driven by an endless struggle for power, which has its roots in human nature. Justice, law, and society either have no place or are circumscribed.	Greek city-state system
Machiavelli	*The Prince*	Political realism recognizes that principles are subordinated to policies; the ultimate skill of a state leader is to accept and adapt to changing political and power configurations in world politics.	Italian city-states
Hobbes	*Leviathan*	Human beings have an insatiable lust for power. Life in the state of nature, which is similar to the condition of world politics, is full of fear and worry about violent death.	English civil war
Rousseau	*The State of War*	It is not human nature but the anarchical system that fosters fear, jealousy, suspicion, and insecurity.	European state system

these theorists wrote, their place in the realist tradition is based on their shared recognition that international politics is a continuous struggle for power. Those in the realist tradition contend that the condition of international politics is analogous to a state of war in which political actors have little choice but to be concerned with their own security. The ever present possibility of war necessitates that political actors take appropriate measures, including the use of lethal force, to ensure their own survival.

The insights these political theorists offered into the way in which state leaders should conduct themselves in the realm of international politics are often grouped under the doctrine of *raison d'état*, or **reason of state**. According to the historian Friedrich Meinecke (1957: 1), *raison d'état* is the fundamental principle of international conduct, the state's First Law of Motion: 'It tells the statesman what he must do to preserve the health and strength of the State.' Most importantly, the state, which is identified as the key actor in international politics, must pursue power, and it is the duty of the statesperson to calculate rationally the most appropriate steps that should be taken to perpetuate the life of the state in a hostile and threatening environment. The survival of the state can never be guaranteed, because the use of force culminating in war is a legitimate instrument of statecraft. As discussed later in this chapter, the assumption that the state is the principal actor, coupled with the view that the environment that states inhabit is a perilous place, helps to define the essential core of realism. There is, however, one issue in particular that theorists associated with *raison d'état*, and realism more generally, were concerned with: the role, if any, that morals and ethics play in international politics.

Realists are sceptical of the idea that universal moral principles exist, and therefore warn state leaders against sacrificing their own self-interests in order to adhere to some indeterminate notion of 'ethical' conduct. Moreover, realists argue that the need for survival requires state leaders to distance themselves from traditional notions of morality. Machiavelli argued that these principles were positively harmful if adhered to by state leaders. It was imperative that state leaders learned a different kind of morality, which accorded not with traditional Christian virtues but with political necessity and prudence. Proponents of *raison d'état* often speak of a **dual moral standard**: one moral standard for individual citizens living inside the state and a different standard for the state in its external relations with other states. But before one reaches the conclusion that realism is completely immoral, it is important to add that proponents of *raison d'état* argue that the state itself represents a moral force, for it is the existence of the state that creates the possibility for an ethical **political community** to exist domestically.

Some in the realist tradition attribute the war-like condition of international politics to certain propensities found in human nature, while others emphasize the unique environment in which international politics takes place. Still others combine these two levels

of analysis—human nature and the environment or structure of international politics—to account for the state of war. Machiavelli's moral scepticism derived from his analysis of human nature as well as from the observations he made while serving as a public official of the Florentine Republic. To be successful in politics, Machiavelli argued, one had to act on the basis of what human nature is really like, not how one wishes it to be. In his writings, Machiavelli provided a cynical and pessimistic description of human nature. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli wrote that men 'are ungrateful, fickle, simulators and deceivers, avoiders of danger, greedy for gain' (Bondanella and Musa 1979: 131). Based on this account of human nature, Machiavelli provided a set of 'realist' maxims such as: it is better to be feared than loved; a prince should act like both a lion and a fox; and it is sometimes necessary to learn how not to be good. According to Machiavelli, the necessities of politics, such as the need to ensure the survival of the state by any means, were derived from human nature.

Hobbes's place in the realist tradition is often said to rest on his description of human nature in a hypothetical state-of-nature condition. Like Machiavelli, Hobbes's account of human nature was deeply pessimistic. Some have argued that Hobbes's pessimism and profound sense of fear resulted from the fact that he was writing during the tumultuous English Civil War and that his own premature birth coincided with the threat posed by the Spanish Armada. While Hobbes's account of human nature incorporates a number of characteristics, perhaps most important is his claim that all men have a restless desire for power that ceases only in death. In the state of nature, where there is no higher authority to provide security, Hobbes argues that the condition resembles a state of war of every man against every man. The constant fear of violent death in the state of nature leads Hobbes to conclude that the life of man is 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short' (Hobbes 1985 [1651]: 186).

Although Hobbes acknowledges that a state of nature has never truly existed, he suggests that the condition of international politics closely resembles a state of war. In an important passage of Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), he writes: 'though there had never been any time, wherein particular men were in a condition of warre one against another; yet in all times, Kings, and Persons of Soveraigne authority, because of their independency, are in continuall jealousies, and in the state and posture of Gladiators; . . . which is a posture of War' (Hobbes 1985 [1651]: 188). The claim that world politics is analogous to the life of human beings in a hypothetical state of nature was developed further by Rousseau. Although Rousseau was critical of how Hobbes depicted human nature, he too recognized the necessity of human beings leaving the state of nature and forming a social contract. Unlike Hobbes, however, Rousseau was deeply concerned that the contract establishing sovereignty should reflect the general will of the people; he argued that this was the only way in which the exercise of authority could be deemed legitimate. The problem, however, was that even if the newly formed contract embodied the general will of its members, each state merely articulates a particular will vis-à-vis other states. In other words, while the formation of a social contract solves one set of problems, it creates another set of problems for international relations: namely, no higher power exists to help settle conflicts among independent sovereign states. Rousseau's insights are important for neorealists, who emphasize anarchy and the lack of central authority, rather than human nature, to explain international conflict.

Thucydides holds a prominent place in the realist tradition because his insights, in many ways, help to define the essence of realism. Thucydides was both an active participant in, and observer of, the Peloponnesian War, a conflict between Athens and Sparta, two great powers in the ancient Greek world. Subsequent generations of realists have admired Thucydides' work for the insights he raised about many of the perennial issues of world politics. The classical realist lineage begins with Thucydides' representation of power politics as a law of human behaviour. The desire for power and the need to follow self-interest are held to be fundamental aspects of human nature. The behaviour of the state as a self-seeking egoist is understood to be a reflection of the characteristics of human beings. It is human nature and the motivations of fear, honour, and self-interest that explain why international politics is necessarily power politics.

At the same time, while Thucydides offered profound insights about human nature, he was equally cognizant of the international environment's impact on the behaviour of states. Thucydides' explanation of the underlying cause of the Peloponnesian War was 'the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta' (Thucydides 1972 [1954]: 1.23). This is considered to be a classic example of the impact that the distribution of power has on the behaviour of state actors. Thucydides emphasizes that Sparta's **national interest**, like that of all states, was survival, and the

changing distribution of power represented a direct threat to its existence. Sparta was, therefore, compelled by necessity to go to war in order to forestall the threat of being vanquished by Athens. Thucydides also makes it clear that Athens felt equally compelled to pursue power in order to preserve the **empire** it had acquired. The Athenian leader, Pericles, claimed to be acting on the basis of the most fundamental of human motivations: ambition, fear, and self-interest (**see Case Study 6.1**).

While the thinkers discussed above are commonly grouped together in the realist tradition, despite the different contexts in which they were writing, it is important to note that their ideas are open to rival interpretations (M. Williams 2005). Although often considered to be the quintessential realist, Thucydides did demonstrate that acting purely on the basis of power and self-interest without any consideration of moral and ethical principles frequently results in self-defeating policies. After all, as Thucydides showed, Athens suffered an epic defeat while attempting to follow its self-interest. Nevertheless, the three core elements that we identify with realism—**statism**, **survival**, and **self-help**—are present in the work of those who constitute the realist tradition, stretching from Thucydides to the present.

Realism identifies the group as the fundamental unit of political analysis. When Thucydides and Machiavelli were writing, the basic unit was the *polis* or city-state, but realists consider that since the **Peace of Westphalia** (1648), the sovereign state has been the principal actor

Case Study 6.1 The Melian dialogue—realism and the preparation for war

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The 'Melian dialogue', one of the most significant episodes of the war between Athens and Sparta, illustrates several key realist principles. This case study reconstructs the dialogue between the Athenian leaders who arrived on the island of Melos to assert their right of conquest over the islanders, and the response this provoked. In short, what the Athenians are asserting over the Melians is the logic of power politics. Because of their vastly superior military force, they present a fait accompli to the Melians: either submit peacefully or be exterminated. The Melians, for their part, try to buck the logic of power politics, responding with arguments invoking justice, the gods, and their allies the Spartans.

The following is a short excerpt from the dialogue (Thucydides 1972 [1954]: 401–7). Note that the symbol […] indicates where words from the original text have been omitted.

ATHENIANS: Then we on our side will use no fine phrases saying, for example, that we have a right to our empire because we defeated the Persians […] you know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.

MELIANS: […] you should not destroy a principle that is to the general good of all men—namely, that in the case of all who fall into danger there should be such a thing as fair play and just dealing […]

ATHENIANS: This is no fair fight, with honour on one side and shame on the other. It is rather a question of saving your lives and not resisting those who are far too strong for you.

MELIANS: It is difficult […] for us to oppose your power and fortune […] Nevertheless we trust that the gods will give us fortune as good as yours […]

ATHENIANS: Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it already in existence, and we shall leave it to exist forever among those who come after us. We are merely acting in accordance with it, and we know that you or anybody else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way […] You seem to forget that if one follows one's self-interest one wants to be safe, whereas the path of justice and honour involves one in danger […] This is the safe rule—to stand up to one's equals, to behave with deference to one's superiors, and to treat one's inferiors with moderation.

MELIANS: Our decision, Athenians, is just the same as it was at first. We are not prepared to give up in a short moment the liberty which our city has enjoyed from its foundation for 700 years.

ATHENIANS: […] you seem to us […] to see uncertainties as realities, simply because you would like them to be so.

Question 1: Are the Athenians correct that might makes right?

Question 2: Whose arguments, the Athenians' or Melians', do you find to be the most persuasive?

in international politics. This is often referred to as the state-centric assumption of realism. Statism is the term given to the idea of the state as the legitimate representative of the collective will of the people. The legitimacy of the state is what enables it to exercise authority within its domestic borders. Yet outside the boundaries of the state, realists argue that a condition of **anarchy** exists. Anarchy means that international politics takes place in an arena that has no overarching central authority above individual sovereign states. Thus, rather than necessarily denoting chaos and lawlessness, realists use the concept of anarchy to emphasize the point that the international realm is distinguished by its lack of a central authority.

Under anarchy, the survival of the state cannot be guaranteed. Realists correctly assume that all states wish to perpetuate their existence. Looking back at history, however, realists note that the actions some states have taken to ensure their survival has resulted in other states losing their existence. This is partly explained by the power differentials that exist among states. Intuitively, states with more power have a better chance of surviving than states with less power. **Power** is crucial to the realist lexicon and has traditionally been defined narrowly in military strategic terms. Yet irrespective of how much power a given state may possess, the core national interest of all states must be survival. Like the pursuit of power, the promotion of the national interest is, according to realists, an iron law of necessity.

Self-help is the fundamental principle of state action in an anarchical system. According to realism, each state actor is responsible for ensuring its own survival. Realists do not believe it is prudent for a state to entrust its safety and survival to another actor or to an **international institution**, such as the United Nations. Unlike in domestic politics, there is no emergency number that states can dial when they are in mortal danger.

What options do states have to ensure their own security? Consistent with the principle of self-help, if a state feels threatened it should seek to augment its own power by increasing its military capabilities. However, this is not always possible. States have therefore pursued other options, such as forming military alliances and initiating preventive wars with the aim of ensuring their own survival. The fact that all of these options were discussed by Thucydides and continue to be relevant today is what gives realism its timeless quality. Despite all of the criticisms of realism, there is little doubt that the collective wisdom of the realist tradition is helpful in understanding some of the enduring patterns of world politics. The question of realism's resilience touches on one of its central claims, namely that it embodies laws of international politics that remain true across time (history) and space (geopolitics). Thus, while political contexts change, realists believe that the world continues to operate according to the logic of realism. The conclusion of the chapter returns to this question of whether realism does embody 'timeless truths' about politics.

Key Points

- Realism has significantly influenced both the theory and practice of world politics.
- Outside the academy, realism has a much longer history in the work of classical political theorists such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau.
- The unifying theme around which all realist thinking converges is that states find themselves in the condition of anarchy such that their security cannot be taken for granted.
- Statism, survival, and self-help are three core elements of the realist tradition.

One realism, or many?

The notion of a monolithic theory of realism is increasingly rejected by both proponents and critics of the realist tradition. The belief that there is not one realism, but many, leads logically to a delineation of different types of realism. The most simple distinction is a form of periodization that differentiates realism into three historical periods: **classical realism** (up to the twentieth century), which is frequently depicted as beginning with Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War; modern realism (1939–79), which typically takes as its point of departure the so-called First Great Debate between idealism and realism; and structural or neorealism (1979 onwards), which officially entered the picture following the publication of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979). But rather than opt for the neat but intellectually unsatisfactory system of historical periodization, this chapter outlines a taxonomy of realisms. A summary of the varieties of realism outlined here is contained in **Table 6.2**.

Table 6.2 Taxonomy of realisms

Type of realism	Key thinkers	Key texts	Big idea	Context
Twentieth-century classical realism (human nature)	Morgenthau (1948)	*Politics among Nations*	Politics is governed by laws that are created by human nature. The mechanism we use to understand international politics is the concept of interests, defined in terms of power.	End of the Second World War, onset of the cold war
Structural realism/ neorealism	Waltz (1979)	*Theory of International Politics*	Anarchy leads to a logic of self-help in which states seek to maximize their security. Balances of power recurrently form.	The cold war, end of the cold war
	Mearsheimer (2001)	*Tragedy of Great Power Politics*	The anarchical, self-help system compels states to maximize their relative power positions as they can never be sure of other states' intentions.	Post-cold war
Neoclassical realism	Zakaria (1998)	*From Wealth to Power*	The systemic account of world politics provided by structural realism is incomplete. It needs to be supplemented with better accounts of unit-level variables such as how power is perceived, and how leadership is exercised.	Post-cold war

Twentieth-century classical realism

Many of those originally advocating realism after the Second World War were émigré scholars who fled Nazi Germany and arrived in the United States where they sought positions at American universities. Hans J. Morgenthau (1904–80), who spent the majority of his career at the University of Chicago, was undoubtedly the most important of these realists. While ostensibly couching his realist theory in terms of objective laws, Morgenthau recognized that the study of politics was more of an art than a science. Nicolas Guilhot (2011) has recently argued that the turn to theory by Morgenthau and other like-minded scholars should be viewed as a realist gambit that was meant to limit the influence of behaviouralists who were championing a science of politics. Trying to shed what he took to be his adopted country's idealist thinking, Morgenthau never tired of repeating his main proposition that 'international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power', and that 'whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim' (Morgenthau 1955 [1948]: 25). For Morgenthau, human nature provided the best explanation for how states behave. Like some of the realist thinkers discussed in the previous section, Morgenthau argued that human beings were hard-wired to pursue power over others and were continually looking for opportunities to increase their own power. He claimed that the goal of every state, as of every individual, was to maximize its power. Morgenthau identified three basic patterns of the struggle for power among states—to keep power (status quo), to increase power (imperialism), and to demonstrate power (prestige)—which he argued were all rooted in humankind's lust for power.

One of realism's key concepts is interest defined in terms of power. In the realm of foreign policy, the most important interest is securing the physical survival of the state. Beyond this core national interest, countries have an abundance of other interests, but what was crucial for Morgenthau and the other post-Second World War realists was that the pursuit of any interest always had to be congruent with the power a state possessed. In this manner, the concept of the national interest imposed a measure of discipline on foreign policy officials to ensure that the interests they were pursuing were consistent with the power they possessed relative to other states. It is sometimes wrongly assumed that the concept of the national interest is devoid of any moral content. Morgenthau argued that choice between the national interest and morals was a false choice. Although he was sharply critical of the notion that states should act on the basis of so-called universal moral principles, Morgenthau recognized that the national interest

included a moral component that could only be realized through the medium of power. Morgenthau further recognized that there were fewer constraints on the struggle for power among nations compared to domestic politics. This is one of the reasons why he urged foreign policy officials to maintain a **balance of power**.

Realists throughout the ages have considered a balance of power to be essential to preserving the liberty of states. Although various meanings have been attributed to the concept of a balance of power, the most common definition holds that if a state's survival is threatened by a hegemonic state or coalition of stronger states, it should join forces with other states, and they should establish a formal alliance and seek to preserve their own independence by checking the power of the opposing side. The balance of power is a mechanism that seeks to ensure an equilibrium of power, so that no one state or coalition of states is able to dominate all the others. The **cold war** competition between the East and West, as institutionalized through the formal alliance system of the **Warsaw Pact** and the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** (NATO), provides a prominent example of the balance of power mechanism in action (**see Ch. 3**).

Structural realism/neorealism

In 1979, the publication of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* established structural realism, or neorealism, as a dominant theory of world politics. Writing in the context of the cold war, Waltz concurred that international politics is a struggle for power, but he did not attribute this to human nature. Instead, Waltz argued that security competition, inter-state conflict, and the difficulties of achieving international cooperation resulted from the structure of the international system: namely, the lack of an overarching authority above sovereign states. Neorealists define the structure of the international system in terms of three elements: organizing principles, differentiation of units, and distribution of capabilities. Waltz identifies two different organizing principles: anarchy, which corresponds to the decentralized realm of international politics; and hierarchy, which is the basis of domestic order. He argues that the units of the international system are functionally similar sovereign states; hence unit-level variation, such as whether a state is a democracy or not, is inconsequential. It is the third element, the distribution of capabilities across units, that is, according to Waltz, of fundamental importance to understanding outcomes in international politics. According to structural realists, the relative distribution of power in the international system is the key independent variable in understanding war and peace, alliance politics, and the balance of power. Structural realists are interested in providing a rank-ordering of states so that they can discern the number of great powers that exist at any particular point in time. The number of great powers, in turn, determines the overall structure of the international system. For example, during the cold war from 1945 to 1989, there were two great powers—the United States and the Soviet Union—that constituted a bipolar international system, and since the end of the cold war most argue that the international system has been unipolar (**see Ch. 4**).

How does the relative distribution of power impact the behaviour of states? Waltz argues that states, especially the great powers, have to be concerned about the capabilities of other states. The possibility that any state may use force to advance its interests causes all states to worry about their survival. According to Waltz, power is a means to an end, the end being security. In a significant passage, Waltz writes: 'because power is a possibly useful means, sensible statesmen try to have an appropriate amount of it'. He adds, 'in crucial situations, however, the ultimate concern of states is not for power but for security' (Waltz 1989: 40). In other words, rather than being power maximizers, states are security maximizers according to neorealists. Waltz argues that power maximization often proves to be counter-productive because it triggers a counterbalancing coalition of states. Like Morgenthau, Waltz firmly believed that balances of power recurrently form.

John Mearsheimer's theory of **offensive realism**, which is another variant of structural realism, provides a different account of the power dynamics that operate in the anarchic international system. While sharing many of neorealism's basic assumptions, Mearsheimer differs from Waltz when it comes to describing the behaviour of states. Most fundamentally, offensive realism argues that states are power maximizers in that they 'understand that the best way to ensure their survival is to be the most powerful state in the system' (Mearsheimer 2001: 33). Under anarchy, Mearsheimer agrees that self-help is the basic principle of action, yet he argues that states can never be certain about the intentions of other states. Consequently, he concludes that all states are continuously searching for opportunities to gain more power at the expense of other states. Indeed, the ideal position, although one that Mearsheimer argues is impossible to achieve, is to be the global hegemon of the **international system**.

This has not, however, prevented states from trying to become the hegemon, which tragically leads to a world where states are primed for offence, periodically resulting in inter-state war.

Neoclassical realism

While structural realists attribute the drivers of state behaviour to the anarchical international system, some contemporary realists are sceptical of the notion that the distribution of power can sufficiently explain the behaviour of states. Since the end of the cold war, a group of scholars have attempted to move beyond the parsimonious assumptions of structural realism by adding a number of individual- and domestic-level factors into their explanations of world politics. While the relative distribution of power is recognized to be an important influence on the behaviour of states, so are factors such as the perceptions of state leaders, state–society relationships, and state identity. In attempting to build a bridge between structural and unit-level factors, this group of scholars has been characterized by Gideon Rose (1998) as 'neoclassical realists'. According to Stephen Walt, the causal logic of neoclassical realism 'places domestic politics as an intervening variable between the distribution of power and foreign policy behavior' (Walt 2002: 211).

One important intervening variable is leaders themselves, namely how they perceive the distribution of power. There is no single objective account of the distribution of power; rather, what matters is how state leaders derive an understanding of the distribution of power. While structural realists assume that all states have a similar set of interests, neoclassical realists such as Randall Schweller (1996) argue that historically this has not been the case. He argues that, with respect to Waltz, the assumption that all states have an interest in security results in realism exhibiting a profoundly status quo basis. Schweller returns to the writings of earlier realists to remind us of their key distinction between status quo and revisionist states. Neoclassical realists argue that the fact that Germany was a revisionist state in the 1930s, and has been a status quo state since the end of the Second World War, is of fundamental importance to understanding state behaviour in the international system. Not only do states differ in terms of their interests, but they also differ in terms of their abilities to extract resources from the societies they rule. Another intervening variable is state power; neoclassical realists argue that states possess different capacities to translate the various elements of national power into state power. Thus, contrary to Waltz, all states cannot be treated as 'like units'.

Given the varieties of realism that exist, it is hardly surprising that the coherence of the realist tradition has been questioned. The answer to the question of 'coherence' is, of course, contingent on how strict the criteria are for judging the continuities that underpin a particular tradition. It is a mistake to understand traditions as a single stream of thought, handed down in a neatly wrapped package from one generation to another. But despite the different strands running through the tradition over time, there is a sense in which all realists share a common set of propositions.

Key Points

- There is a lack of consensus as to whether we can meaningfully speak about realism as a single coherent theory.
- There are good reasons for delineating different types of realism.
- Classical realists attribute power-seeking behaviour to human nature.
- Structural realism divides into two camps: those who argue that states are security maximizers (neorealism), and those who argue that states are power maximizers (offensive realism).
- Neoclassical realists bring individual and unit variation back into the theory.

The essential realism

The previous paragraphs argued that realism is a theoretically broad church, embracing a variety of thinkers and texts. Despite the numerous denominations, this chapter argues that all realists subscribe to the following 'three *S*s': statism, survival, and self-help. The next three subsections consider each of these elements in more detail.

Statism

For realists, the state is the main actor in international politics and sovereignty is its distinguishing trait. The meaning of the sovereign state is inextricably bound up with the use of force. Realists concur with Max Weber's famous definition of the state as 'the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'

(M. Smith 1986: 23). Within this territorial space, **sovereignty** means that the state has supreme authority to make and enforce laws. This is the basis of the unwritten contract between individuals and the state. According to Hobbes, for example, we trade our liberty in return for a guarantee of security. Once security has been established, **civil society** can begin.

Realist theory operates according to the assumption that, domestically, the problems of order and security are largely solved. However, in the external relations among independent sovereign states, insecurities, dangers, and threats to the very existence of the state loom large. Realists attempt to explain this by pointing to the fact that the very condition for order and security—namely, the existence of a sovereign—is missing from the international realm.

Realists claim that, in anarchy, states compete with other states for power and security. The nature of this competition is viewed in zero-sum terms; in other words, more for one actor means less for another. This competitive logic of power politics confounds agreement on universal principles, apart from the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other sovereign states. But even this principle, designed to facilitate **coexistence**, is not accepted by realists, who argue that in practice non-intervention does not apply in relations between great powers and their 'near abroad'. As evidenced by the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, powerful states believe they are able to suspend the non-intervention principle on the grounds of national security and international order.

Given that the state's first move is to organize power domestically, and the second is to accumulate power internationally, it is important to consider in more depth what realists mean by their ubiquitous fusion of politics with power. It is one thing to say that international politics is a struggle for power, but this merely begs the question of what realists mean by power. Realists make two important points about the concept of power. First, power is a relational concept: one does not exercise power in a vacuum, but in relation to another entity. Second, power is a relative concept: calculations need to be made not only about one's own power capabilities, but also about the power that other state actors possess. Yet the task of accurately assessing the power of other states is infinitely complex, and is often reduced to lumping a number of factors together, such as gross national product (GNP), military spending, and population size.

A number of criticisms have been made about how realists define and measure power (Schmidt 2005), many of which are discussed in later chapters in this book. Critics argue that realism has been purchased at a discount precisely because its currency, power, has remained under-theorized and inconsistently used. Simply asserting that states seek power provides no answer to multiple crucial questions. Why do states struggle for power? Surely power is a means to an end rather than an end in itself? Is there not a difference between the mere possession of power and the ability to change the behaviour of others?

Structural realists have attempted to define the meaning of power with more conceptual clarity. Waltz tries to overcome the problem by shifting the focus from power to capabilities. He suggests that states' capabilities can be ranked according to their strength in the following areas: 'size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence' (Waltz 1979: 131). The difficulty here is that resource strength does not always lead to military victory. For example, in the 1967 Six Day War between Israel and Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, the distribution of resources clearly favoured the Arab coalition and yet the supposedly weaker side annihilated its enemies' forces and seized their territory. The definition of power as capabilities is even less successful at explaining how states have used economic leverage to achieve their goals. A more sophisticated understanding of power would focus on the ability of a state to control or influence its environment in situations that are not necessarily conflictual.

An additional weakness of the realist treatment of power concerns its exclusive focus on state power. For realists, states are the only actors that really 'count'. Transnational corporations, **international organizations**, and ideologically driven terrorist **networks** such as the so-called Islamic State and Al Qaeda do not figure very prominently in realists' analysis of power. Yet given the influence that non-state actors exercise in world politics today, many question the adequacy of realism's state-centric assumption.

Survival

The second principle that unites realists is the assertion that, in world politics, all states have a vital interest in survival. Although realists disagree on whether the accumulation of power is an end in itself, few would dissent from the argument that states' ultimate concern is survival, which is held to be a precondition for attaining all other goals. However, as the previous section mentioned, controversy among structural realists has arisen over the question of whether states are principally security maximizers or power maximizers. Neorealists such as Waltz argue that states have security as their principal interest and therefore seek only the requisite amount of power to

ensure their own survival. According to this view, states are profoundly defensive actors and will not seek greater power if that means jeopardizing their own security. In contrast, offensive realists such as Mearsheimer argue that the ultimate goal of all states is to achieve a hegemonic position in the international system. According to this view, states always desire more power and, if the opportunity arises, will seek to alter the existing distribution of power in their favour. Moreover, offensive realists point out that sometimes states bandwagon with, rather than balance against, dominant powers.

Machiavelli tried to make a 'science' out of his reflections on the art of survival. He wrote *The Prince* with the explicit intention of codifying a set of maxims that would enable leaders to maintain the survival of their states. Two related Machiavellian themes recur in the writings of modern realists, both of which derive from the idea that the realm of international politics requires different moral and political rules from those that apply in domestic politics. The task of protecting the state at all costs (even if this requires sacrificing one's own citizens) places a heavy burden on state leaders' shoulders. In the words of Henry Kissinger, the academic realist who became Secretary of State during the Nixon presidency, 'a nation's survival is its first and ultimate responsibility; it cannot be compromised or put to risk' (Kissinger 1977: 204). State leaders' guide must be an **ethic of responsibility**: the careful weighing of consequences and the realization that individual acts of an immoral kind might have to be performed for the greater good. For example, think of the ways in which governments frequently suspend the legal and political rights of 'suspected terrorists' in view of the threat they pose to **national security**.

Self-help

In the international system, there is no higher authority to counter the use of force. War is always a possibility because there is nothing that can prevent a state from using force against another state. Security can therefore only be realized through self-help. Waltz explains that in an anarchic structure, 'self-help is necessarily the principle of action' (Waltz 1979: 111). States must ultimately rely on themselves to achieve security. But in the course of providing for one's own security, the state in question will automatically be fuelling the insecurity of other states.

The term given to this spiral of insecurity is the security dilemma. According to Wheeler and Booth, security dilemmas exist 'when the military preparations of one state create an unresolvable uncertainty in the mind of another as to whether those preparations are for "defensive" purposes only (to enhance its security in an uncertain world) or whether they are for offensive purposes (to change the status quo to its advantage)' (Wheeler and Booth 1992: 30). This scenario suggests that one state's quest for security is often another state's source of insecurity. States find it difficult to trust one another and are often suspicious of other states' intentions. Thus the military preparations of one state are likely to be matched by those of neighbouring states. The irony is that, at the end of the day, states often feel no more secure than before they undertook measures to enhance their own security.

In a self-help system, neorealists argue that the balance of power will emerge even in the absence of a conscious policy to maintain the balance. Waltz argues that balances of power result irrespective of the intentions of any particular state. In an anarchic system populated by states that seek to perpetuate themselves, alliances will be formed that seek to balance against the power of threatening states. Classical realists, however, are more likely to emphasize the crucial role that state leaders and diplomats play in maintaining the balance of power. In other words, the balance of power is not natural or inevitable; it must be constructed.

For example, the US sought to maintain a balance of power between Egypt and Israel—a policy that has been called into question by the transformation that has been under way since 2010 when mass demonstrations in Tahrir Square brought an end to President Mubarak's 40-year rule over Egypt.

Realists and their critics have always debated the balance of power system. This is especially the case today, as some critics argue that the unipolar position of the United States has made the balance of power inoperative (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008). The question of whether balance of power politics continues to be relevant in the contemporary globalized era is closely related to the debate about American hegemony.

It is questionable whether other countries are willing to balance against the US, as neorealism would predict. Whether it is the contrived balance of the Concert of Europe in the early nineteenth century or the more fortuitous balance of the cold war, balances of power are broken—either through war or through peaceful change—and new balances emerge. What the perennial collapsing of the balance of power demonstrates is that states are at best able to mitigate the worst consequences of the security dilemma but are not able to escape it. The reason for this terminal condition is the absence of trust in international relations.

Realists have illustrated the lack of trust among states by reference to the parable of the 'stag hunt'. In *Man, the State and War*, Waltz revisits Rousseau's parable:

> Assume that five men who have acquired a rudimentary ability to speak and to understand each other happen to come together at a time when all of them suffer from hunger. The hunger of each will be satisfied by the fifth part of a stag, so they 'agree' to cooperate in a project to trap one. But also the hunger of any one of them will be satisfied by a hare, so, as a hare comes within reach, one of them grabs it. The defector obtains the means of satisfying his hunger but in doing so permits the stag to escape. His immediate interest prevails over consideration for his fellows.
>
> *(Waltz 1959: 167–8)*

Waltz argues that the metaphor of the stag hunt provides a basis for understanding the problem of coordinating the interests of the individual versus the interests of the common good, and the pay-off between short-term interests and long-term interests. In the self-help system of international politics, the logic of self-interest militates against the provision of collective goods, such as 'security' or 'free trade'. In the case of the latter, according to the theory of **comparative advantage**, all states would be wealthier in a world that allowed free movement of goods and services across borders. But individual states, or groups of states like the European Union, can increase their wealth by pursuing protectionist policies. Of course the logical outcome is that the remaining states become protectionist, international trade collapses, and a world recession reduces the wealth of each state. Thus the question is not whether all will be better off through **cooperation**, but rather who is likely to gain more than another. It is because of this concern with **relative gains** that realists argue that cooperation is difficult to achieve in a self-help system.

Key Points

- Statism is a central assumption of realism. This involves two claims. First, the state is the pre-eminent actor in world politics. Second, state sovereignty signifies the existence of an independent political community, one that has juridical authority over its territory.
- Key criticism: statism is flawed on both empirical grounds (challenges to state power from 'above' and 'below') and normative grounds (the inability of sovereign states to respond to collective global problems such as famine, environmental degradation, and human rights abuses).
- Survival is the primary objective of all states; this is the supreme national interest to which all political leaders must adhere.
- Key criticism: are there no limits to what actions a state can take in the name of necessity?
- Self-help: no other state or international institution can be relied on to guarantee a state's survival.
- Key criticism: self-help is not an inevitable consequence of the absence of a world government; it is a logic that states have selected. Moreover, there are examples where states have preferred collective security systems, or forms of regional security communities, in preference to self-help.

Conclusion

This chapter began by considering the repeated realist claim that the pattern of international politics—wars interrupted by periods characterized by the preparation for future wars—has remained constant over the preceding 25 centuries. Realists have consistently held that the continuities in international relations are more important than the changes, but critics find this claim to be increasingly problematic in the present age of globalization (**see Ch. 1**). Recent critics such as John Hobson (2012) have challenged the alleged universalism of realism on the grounds of a pervasive Eurocentric conception of world politics. But critics should recall that the death-knell of realism has been sounded a number of times already, only to see the resurgence of new forms of realism. Although the conclusion of the cold war caught many realists off guard, they, unlike liberal scholars, did not predict that the post-cold war era would necessarily be peaceful. While proponents of globalization highlight new developments in world politics, such as regional integration, global interconnectedness, and the growth of transnational and non-state actors, especially terrorist organizations (**see Chs 18** and **27**), realists point out that we are increasingly witnessing a return to great power politics as China and Russia continue to challenge the position of the United States. The United States, in turn, appears to recognize this, as President Trump has launched a trade war with China, withdrawn from a number of multilateral treaties on the grounds

of protecting state sovereignty, and taken measures to increase the military's capabilities. The rise and fall of great powers is deeply rooted in history, and many realists are concerned about how this dynamic will unfold in the coming years (**see Ch. 5**). Trump's nationalist rhetoric has resulted in a great deal of trepidation among scholars of all stripes about the durability of the liberal order that has both underpinned so-called globalization and facilitated peace among the great powers. If the United States abandons the liberal order that it helped to create after the Second World War, it is not clear what comes next. Will the globalization project continue unabated, perhaps under the leadership of China, or will nativism and nationalism derail globalism (**see Ch. 4**)?

Realists do not have to situate their theory of world politics in opposition to globalization per se; rather, what they offer is a very different conceptualization of the process. Given the preponderance of power that the US held at the end of the cold war, it should not be a surprise that it was one of the foremost proponents of globalization. The core values of globalization—liberalism, capitalism, and consumerism—are exactly those espoused by the US. At a deeper cultural level, realists argue that modernity is not, as liberals hope, dissolving the boundaries of difference among the peoples of the world. From classical realists such as Rousseau to structural realists such as Waltz, realist thinkers have argued that **interdependence** is as likely to breed 'mutual vulnerability' as peace and prosperity. And while questioning the extent to which the world has become more interdependent in relative terms, realists insist that the state is not going to be eclipsed by global forces operating either below or above the nation-state. Nationalism, realists have continuously reminded us, remains a potent force in world politics.

There are good reasons for thinking that the twenty-first century will be a realist century. Despite efforts to rekindle the idealist flame, Europe continues to be as divided by different national interests as it is united by common goals. In the Middle East, the slow and painful process of regime change is generating significant instability across the region, as external powers fuel proxy wars to safeguard their own vital interests. China continues to emerge as a serious economic and strategic competitor to the US and, if current trends continue, will eventually replace the US as the leading economic power. At that point, realism leads us to predict that Western norms of individual rights and responsibilities will be under threat. Rather than transforming global politics in its own image, as liberalism sought to do in the twentieth century, realism has the intellectual resources to assert itself as a defensive doctrine which recognizes that international relations is a realm of value conflicts, and that responsible statecraft involves careful calibrations of interests. Above all, realism demands that states' leaders act prudently—a quality that has been in short supply in the early part of the twenty-first century.

Questions

1. How does the Melian dialogue illustrate key realist concepts such as self-interest, the balance of power, alliances, capabilities, empires, and justice?
2. Do you think there is one realism, or many?
3. Do you know more about international relations now than an Athenian student did during the Peloponnesian War?
4. Do realists confuse a description of war and conflict for an explanation of why they occur?
5. Does the return of great power politics once again vindicate realism?
6. How would a realist explain the 9/11 wars?
7. Will Western governments and their institutions (such as NATO) have to become more realist if the ideas associated with Western civilization are to survive in the twenty-first century?
8. What is at stake in the debate between defensive and offensive realism?
9. Is structural realism sufficient to account for the variation in states' behaviour?
10. How can realism help us to understand the globalization of world politics?

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