

Approach to the study of International Relations

Introduction

There are many approaches to the study of international relations. The traditional or classical approach treated History as the laboratory from which meaningful conclusions could be drawn. Two of the main schools of the traditional approach are Realism and Idealism. Whereas the Realism School considers the struggle for power as the central point of all international relations, the Idealism School believes in the inherent goodness of man. Realists like Morgenthau do not attach much importance to means, or morality. For them national interest is the aim that must be served with the help of power. The idealists, on the other hand, feel that the ideal of world peace is attainable with the help of reason, education and science. In recent years, Neo-Realism has appeared as another approach to the study of international relations.

Traditional Approaches: Realism, Idealism and Neo-Realism

The two most important variants of the traditional approach of international relations are Realism and Idealism. Taking inspiration from Kautilya and Machiavelli, the leading twentieth century realists George Kennan and Hans Morgenthau argued that the struggle for power is the central point of all international relations. Individuals believe that others are always trying to attack and destroy them, and therefore, they must be continuously ready to kill others in order to protect themselves. This basic; human instinct guides the States as well. Thus, the realists argue that rivalry and strife among the nations in some form or the other are always present. Just as self-interest guides the individual's behaviour, similarly national interest also guides the foreign policy of nation-states. Continued conflict is the reality of international relations and realists attribute this to the struggle for power. Thus, national interest, as defined in terms of power, is the only reality of international relations. The realists do not attach much significance to means, for them national interest is the end, and it must be promoted at all costs.

Hans J. Morgenthau's influential book "Politics among Nations" (1972) carried the torch of realism far and wide. For the realists, distribution of powers among states is all that is there to explain in IR. Given a particular distribution of power, the realists claim that, it is possible to explain both the characteristics of the system and the - behaviour of the individual states. The idealists firmly believe that the essential goodness of human nature will eventually prevail and that a new world order would emerge which would be marked by the absence of war, inequality and tyranny. This new world order would be brought about by the use of reason, education and science. Idealism presents a picture of future international relations free from power politics, violence and immorality. Idealism argues that an international organisation commanding respect of nation-states would pave the way for a world free of conflicts and war. Thus, the crucial point on which the realists and idealists sharply differ is the problem of power. St. Simon, Aldous Huxley, Mahatma Gandhi and Woodrow Wilson are among the prominent idealists. Morality is vital for them as they aim at international peace and cooperation.

An analysis of Realism and Idealism will show that both have their validity provided they give up



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their extremism. The approach that takes a middle position between "idealistic utopianism" and "cynical realism" is called Eclecticism. It has been described as a sort of synthesis of the 'pessimism of realism' and 'optimism of idealism'. Eclecticism tries to use the best in both realism and idealism. The former has been described by Quincy Wright as a representative of short-run national policies whereas idealism represents long-term policies of internationalism. Realists have been called 'Children of darkness' and idealists the 'children of light'. Neibuhr regards the children of darkness as evil and wicked and the children of light as virtuous. But, on the basis of another criterion, he says, the realists are wise as they understand the power of self-will, and the idealists are foolish because they underestimate the risk of anarchy in the international community. Both have something to learn from this.

Neo-Realism, also known as 'Structural Realism' is one of the current approaches to the study of international relations. Waltz, Grieco, Keohane and Joseph Nye are among the prominent neo-realists. Neo-Realists believe that might is right in a system which is essentially Hobbesian (full of strife) in nature. The great powers are engaged in permanent rivalry. The structure has, more or less, remained one of anarchy though the prominent actors have been changing. The term 'structure' has been referred to "how the actors in a system stand in relation to each other." The present structure being anarchical (challenges to state domination are rampant), one finds powerful states are most interested in trying to prevent others from improving relative capabilities. Keohane and Nye add that with the increasing role of non-state actors, the structure has become even more complex and unpredictable. In short, neorealism believes that the nation-states still remain the most important actors in world politics: behaviour of the states can be explained rationally; states seek power and calculate their interests in terms of power. (All these they share with the scholars of realism). However, the neo-realists add, the international system is characterized by anarchy and emerging 'multi-centric' activities emanating from sources other than state. This complexity is further compounded by international terrorism, religious war-fares, increasing incidence of civil wars and emerging competitive multinational corporations.

In the post-cold war years, international arena has assumed a new form. Nation-states are being threatened by divisive and secessionist movements. Many of the conflicts have assumed deadly proportions. According to John Stremlau "prevention has become a buzz word among diplomats seeking to stem anarchy in Africa, the Balkans, the new states of the former Soviet Union, and elsewhere." In 1992, for example, out of 30 conflicts across the world as many as 29 were military actions taking place inside states. One can refer to such examples to show that more military actions are being taken recourse to inside states rather than outside and among them. The ethnic conflict in erstwhile Yugoslavia (conflict between Serbs and Croats, and between Serbs and Bosnians), insurgency within Afghanistan, the conflict in Iraq regarding Kurds, chaotic conditions inside Somalia, the conflict in Sri Lanka, Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM) related conflict in Palestine and terrorist activities in northern Indian States of Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab, are some of the ongoing military or paramilitary actions within nation-states. In the post-cold war conflicts, 90 per cent of casualties have been of civilians, not of the



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soldiers. Thus, neo-realism stresses the struggle for power not only between states but also intra-state struggles in an 'anarchic' world.

It will not be out of place here to mention that at a socio-political level, domestic determination of foreign policy options was not an important consideration with the realists who preferred states to remain confined to diplomatic, military and strategic sources of power. (See the box below). The post-cold war realists believe that peace was made possible in the world during the cold war period (1945-89) owing to stable bipolarity, balance of terror and a belief that nuclear war could be suicidal. With the end of the cold war, the realists hope for lasting peace to result out of the rules of conduct (for international relations) to be enforced by the United States which has virtual monopoly of powers. Realism today recognizes the role of the United Nations, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation yet they are still considered to be subordinate to the wishes of the powerful states. The realists do not want proliferation of nuclear weapons so that monopoly of the American power is maintained in that sector. Thus, realists (and neo-realists) still believe in promotion of national interest as expressed through State power. Despite international organisations, regimes and non-state actors, power continues to dominate international relations, the realists still maintain.

It may be of interest to students to note that Realism and Neo realistic approaches are mostly confined to,\$ studies in USA and Europe. Both stress on state power systems and inter-state relations. An important difference between the two is, however, one of degree and focus.

Neorealism (which appeals more widely in USA and Europe) in IR differs from Realism by virtue of its lesser concern with the diplomatic, military and strategic sources which maintain or disturb the balance of power and more pre-occupation with the political and economic concerns which need to be addressed for a sustainable international system. Most of the neo-realists therefore have been students of international political economy. IR studies began focusing on the developing countries after neo-realistic approach came to vogue. They are more concerned with issues of dependence and development as against the state-centered why study approaches espousing the cause of "hegemonic stability" (that is to say, uneven distribution of power with one or a few states holding superior power to ensure stability in the world). As behaviouralist like Prof. James Rosenau often complained, concerned Third World students of IR often tend to be attracted to "dependency theory" (see below). This perspective posits that the Third World has been historically exploited by rich nations of the developed West.

Behavioural/Scientific Approaches of International Politics

Behavioural approaches to study of IR are often claimed by their western adherents to be scientific because they are based on quantitative calculations. They made us more aware of the complex nature of conflicts and provided many valuable insights into decision making. The ultimate objective of the behaviouralist scholars is to develop a general theory of international relations. The traditional approach was rooted largely in Political Science and drew heavily from Law, History and Philosophy. With the help of the behavioural approach, a discipline of



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international relations is at last beginning to emerge which is devoted to behavioural studies in International Relations.

There are several theories which may be lumped together under scientific/behavioural approach. Some like Systems Theory are more comprehensive than others like Bargaining and Game Theories. We will in this section briefly deal with only two of these behavioural scientific theories viz., the System Theory and the Game Theory.

System Theory

A system is defined as a set of elements interacting with each other. Another important feature of the system is that it has a boundary which separates it from the environment, the latter however, influences the system in its operations. Generally speaking, a system may be either natural (e.g. solar system), or mechanical (a car, a clock or a computer), or social (e.g. family). The social system itself may be related either to "society, or economy, or politics, or international systems."

The general concept of an international system, and of international systems, formed the basis of work for many 'major scholars, Karl W. Deutsch and Raymond Aron being among the most prominent. As Aron observed, there has never been an international system including the whole of the planet. But in the post-war period, "for the first time, humanity is living.(in) one and the same history, and there has emerged some kind of global system". It is greatly heterogeneous but not to an extent that scholars may fail to hold them together in a discipline. As a matter of fact, Stanley Hoffman's working definition of the discipline was sufficient. "An international system", according to Hoffman "is a pattern of relations between the basic units of world politics which is characterized by the scope of the objectives pursued by these units and of the tasks performed among them, as well as by the means used in order to achieve those goals and perform those tasks". (System and Process in International Politics, 1957).

Among others, Prof. Morton Kaplan is considered the most influential in the systems theorizing of IR. He presented a number of real and hypothetical models of global political organisation. His six well known models were (i) balance of power system, (ii) loose bipolar system, (iii) tight bipolar system, (iv) universal actor system, (v) hierarchical system, and (vi) Unit Veto system. The first two are historical realities; the remaining four are hypothetical models. Although Kaplan did not say that his six systems were likely to emerge in that order, yet it was expected that the Super Power being very powerful, non-aligned countries were Likely to lose their status and become parts of one or the other power blocs, leading to a tight bipolar world. With the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991, the erstwhile bipolarity phenomenon ended. While the United States emerged more powerful than other countries, many countries like Germany and Japan also merged as major economic powers. Thus, depending upon how one analyses the emerging global order, it may be characterized as a unipolar or a multipolar world. The present situation does not however fall strictly within any one of the six-models of Morton

Kaplan Model of System Theory:



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1. **The Balance of Power System:** This system prevailed in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this system some powerful states seek to maintain equilibrium of power individually or in alliance. Usually there is a 'balancer' - a state which assists anyone who is likely to become weaker than others so that balance is not disturbed.
2. **The Loose Bipolar System:** This was the situation during the days of cold war politics. Despite bipolar division of the global power scene, some countries refused to align with either block. They hang loose in an otherwise stratified global order. Examples: Non-aligned countries (NAM).
3. **The Tight Bipolar System:** Think of a situation where the international actors like NAM countries are forced to align with either block, the result is - one of the tight bipolar system.
4. **The Universal Actor System:** In this system, an international organisation or actor commanding universal allegiance becomes the center of power. Whether big or small, all states will accept the superiority of a universal actor like the United Nations. Thus, without giving up their sovereignty, nation-states will strengthen the United Nations and generally abide by its decisions. This may eventually pave the way for a world government.
5. **The Hierarchical International System:** In this system one country will become so powerful that all other states will be virtually dictated to by that one Supreme Power. This situation may be described as a 'Unipolar World Model'. The U.N. may still exist, but there will be no true non-aligned country and even the U.N. will not have enough power.
6. **The Unit Veto System:** Morton Kaplan's Unit Veto System in international context resembles the 'state of nature' as defined by Thomas Hobbes. Each state will be the enemy of every other state, because almost all the countries will possess nuclear weapons. Thus, all the international actors will be capable of using nuclear weapons against their enemies.

These six models were later supplemented by Kaplan himself by some other models. Meanwhile, other scholars have also suggested some other models. Thus, Couloumbis and Wolfe endorse Kaplan's six models, but add three more. These three are a) multi-bloc (or interregional) model, b) the national-fragmentation (or multipolar) model, and c) the post-nuclear war model.

The multi-bloc model portrays a world divided into five to seven mutually exclusive spheres of influence. Each of these spheres would be controlled by one major power, thus giving rise to a multipolar world.

The National Fragmentation Model will be the outcome of political and territorial disintegration.



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Ethnic, tribal or racial separatist movements may cause many of the large states to disintegrate into small fragmented units. Examples: the former Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia and former Czechoslovakia which have split into several sovereign states.

The Post-Nuclear War Model: is the world after a catastrophic nuclear war. If such a war takes place, its aftermath would be ghastly. In such a situation, only the most tyrannical regimes would be able to maintain orderly distribution of food, shelter and medicine. A new order will have to be found out to overcome such chaotic conditions.

Game Theory

Game theory attempts to provide models for studying world politics, especially in highly competitive situations when outcomes of the actions are difficult to anticipate. This has led scholars to create the game theory for a more scientific study of the calculation of probabilities in an uncertain situation. Game theory was created almost in one shot with the publication of Theory of Game and Economic Behaviour (Princeton, 1994) by the mathematician John von Neumann and the economist Oskar Morgenstern. Karl Deutsch and Martin Shubik are among influential theorists who followed them. Though the economists were the first to adapt it to their purpose in recent years it has been applied to many other fields with suitable modifications.

In its simplest version, the game theory is the model of a zero sum game which describes the situation of conflict/competition in which one party's total loss is exactly equal to the other adversary's total gain. This explains the name - the sum total of gain and loss is zero. For the study of IR, game theory model however is a multiparty non-zero-sum game. This is because as J.K. Zawodny reminds us, "we must recognize that some types of international conflicts today can be resolved only by situations in which neither side loses and in which sometimes both sides may win."

As you must have already understood, isolated, completely independent states are not affected by what other states do. They however are affected and interact through mutual dependence for some benefits. States play games to have maximum gains out of such a situation of inter-dependence.

The two most important kinds of game that have been suggested are the "Chicken Game" and the game of "Prisoner's Dilemma". In the chicken game situation two car drivers are going in the middle of the road towards each other from the opposite sides. Unless one of them stops on the side and gives way to the other, there is a possibility of serious accident which may even result in the death of one or both the drivers anyone who gives, way to the other will suffer a loss of reputation but accident will be avoided. Nations often face such a situation. Generally, none wants to suffer loss of reputation. The underlying idea of chicken game is that Inspite of not being able to know the intention of its opponent, a country's foreign policy – makers can adopt such a course as would ensure its own interest only if it does not mind the other country also benefiting from that course of action. A country standing on its prestige may suffer heavy losses.



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The situation in prisoner's dilemma is different. A nation, like a prisoner, often faces dilemma without having the slightest idea of its opponent's intentions. In this model two persons, charged with murder, are kept in two cells and they can neither see nor talk to each other. The prison-in-charge tells both of them separately that if one of them confesses to murder, and the other does not, the one who confesses will not only be set free but rewarded, and the other prisoner will be hanged. If none of them confesses, both will be freed but without reward. But if both of them confess, they both would be given serious punishment. The game suggests that everyone wants reward or advantage, but may land in serious situation as it does not know the mind of the other.

Integration Theory

The theory is associated with the names of Charles Kegley and Wittkopf. In an essay published in 1993, they rejected the realist view of human nature. They argue that human beings have diverse make-ups, and that human action is based on voluntary choice influenced by environment. The liberals reject the view that international relations are anarchic. They argue that the international system today is based on transnational interactions which create areas of interdependence. Societies and governments are being knit together by growing cultural homogeneity and economic and social interdependence. Various international agencies and regimes like the World Trade Organisation promote integration: The Liberals emphasize the growing role of non-State actors like NGOs, regional organisations etc., in promoting regional and global interdependence.

The liberals do not accept the view that the world has become unipolar. They feel in the post-cold war years the world is moving in the direction of multi-polarity. At the same time there is increasing inter-state cooperation to reduce mistrust and tension in order to promote peace. Global interdependence has led to a growing concern among all governments about nuclear proliferation, global recession, ozone depletion, climatic changes and AIDS. These common concerns indicate: interdependence and need for the scholars to examine these problems in the context of integration. The liberals, therefore, insist on the study of these and other organisations. They believe that expanding the U.N. System promotes interdependence. To sum up the liberal concern for interdependence is related to multi-polarity in the post-cold war period. Increasing the role of UN and other non-governmental and regional organisations and consequent integration under the influence of western industrialized countries.

Dependency Approach

Where, the realists argued for 'hegemonic stability' and the liberals for interdependence among the states, concerned scholars of the Third World however always argued that the main basis for the contemporary, international relationships should be found in their 'under-development'. It has not been a big formal theory but the 'dependency approach' which originated from Latin America challenged the dominant myth that the solutions for the ills of the underdevelopment in the Third world lay in following the modern, realist prescriptions from the West. In the field of



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international relations, scholars from the Dependency School argued that (i) the present conditions of dependence in the periphery largely are due to the past exploitation by developed countries that form in the 'core' now, (ii) relations among nations therefore are essentially asymmetrical and (iii) such an asymmetry is not merely confined to State-to-State relationships (because international relations/ transactions involve a host of ties among groups and classes between, within and across the nations). Arguments centred around 'structures of dependence' both of the past and the present and emphasis was laid on factors and forces which were not of primary concern for either the realists or the neo-realists or even the liberals. Inspired largely by Marxian influences, politics among nations has been considered largely as an expression of global forces and currents of development in all their unevenness throughout history that continues through the present also. Profs. F.H. Cardoso (later the President of Brazil), Raul Prebisch and his colleague, Andre Gunder Frank are some of the well-known names associated with this approach 9: which is enjoying widespread appeal even among the Western scholars.

The Feminist Approach

As the name suggests, this is a recent but influential approach which believes that international relations are competitive, power-oriented and exploitative mainly because of male domination in politics. The argument is that international relations would be more balanced and effective if women were given their due share in politics through several ways. Liberal feminists believe that education, political mobilization and pressure to change will bring about the desired results. But radical feminists feel that capitalism is the main cause of gender inequality and therefore, adoption of socialism will hasten the process of gender equality, which in turn will ensure peace in the world. It is argued that it is man's gender bias imposed by western philosophy also which needs to be overcome. Thus, the feminist theory traces all problems of international relations to gender inequality and domination by men. Critics however point out that gender differences are natural, rooted in biology, and it is not men but the society in which we grow which is to be addressed for remedies. Cynthia Enloe and Spike Peterson are among some important names associated with the Feminist Approach.



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