

# Realism

- Realism is a theoretical perspective in which power is seen as the currency of global politics.
- States are concerned with how much power they have and how much power they have relative to other states.
- Global Politics IS Power Politics
  - The question is: why do states want power?

## Classical realism:

- Human nature to want power
- States are led with by individuals with an innate need to dominate their rivals
- Leading theorist: Hans Morgenthau

## Structural realism: [often referred to as neorealism]

- States pursue power because of the nature of the international system
- 'States are trapped in an iron cage where they have little option but to compete with each other for power to ensure their own survival'
- Leading theorist: John Mearsheimer (see p.235 of Chapter 9 Power and 21<sup>st</sup> Century World Order)

## What is the key difference between classical and structural realists?

Classical: Power is an end '*sui generis*'

Structural: Power is a means to an end. The end is the survival of the state itself

## **Structural Realism:**

- A state's power comes from 2 sources:
- The material capabilities a state controls: military resources such as armoured divisions and nuclear weapons
- Latent power: based on a state's wealth and size of its overall population

## **5 Key Assumptions of Structural Realism:**

1. States operate in an anarchic global system
2. All states possess some offensive military capability
3. States can never know the intentions of other states
4. The main goal of states is survival
5. States are rational actors

### 1. States operate in an anarchic system:

- Anarchy is an ordering principle
- There is no central authority that stands above states in the system
- The opposite of anarchy is hierarchy which is the ordering principle of domestic politics

### 2. All states possess some offensive military capacity

- Each state has the power to inflict harm upon its neighbours
- Capacity varies massively between states

### 3. States can never know the intentions of other states

- States ultimately want to know whether other states are determined to use force to alter the balance of power (**revisionist** states), or whether they are satisfied enough with it that they have no interest in using force to change it (**status quo** states).
  - It is almost impossible to discern another state's intentions with a high degree of certainty.
  - Unlike military capabilities, intentions cannot be empirically verified. Intentions are in the minds of decision-makers
- 4. The primary goal of all states is survival
  - States also have other goals - e.g. prosperity, protecting human rights
  - Survival is primary goal – if a state does not survive it will not achieve **any** of its goals
- 5. States are rational actors
  - States are capable of coming up with sound strategies that maximize their prospects for survival.
  - They may miscalculate from time to time. Because states operate with imperfect information in a complicated world, they sometimes make serious mistakes.

But, then another major difference between defensive and offensive realism:  
[see page 234 of Chapter 9 Power and 21<sup>st</sup> Century World Order]

### **Offensive structural realism:**

- It makes sense for states to pursue as much as power as possible
- States should pursue hegemony where possible
- Key writer: John Mearsheimer

### **Defensive structural realism:**

- Unwise for states to maximise their share of power as the global political system will punish them if they attempt to gain too much
- Pursuit of hegemony is foolish
- Key writer: Kenneth Waltz

What is the key difference between offensive and defensive structural realists? = How much power is enough?

### Hegemony – Offensive Realism

- Offensive realists argue that states should always be looking for opportunities to gain more power and should do so whenever it seems feasible.
- States should maximize power, and their ultimate goal should be hegemony, because that is the best way to guarantee survival

### Hegemony – Defensive Realism

- While defensive realists recognize that the international system creates strong incentives to gain additional increments of power, they maintain that it is strategically foolish to pursue **hegemony**.
- States should not maximize power, but should instead strive for what Kenneth Waltz calls an 'appropriate amount of power'

### Why show restraint? Reason 1

- Defensive realists emphasize that if any state becomes too powerful, balancing will occur.
- E.g. Napoleonic France (1792–1815), Imperial Germany (1900–18), and Nazi Germany (1933–45)

- Otto von Bismarck's genius, according to the defensive realists, was that he understood that too much power was bad for Germany, because it would cause its neighbours to balance against it.
- So, he halted German expansion after winning stunning victories in the Austro-Prussian (1866) and Franco-Prussian (1870–1) Wars.

#### Why show restraint? Reason 2

- There is an offence–defence balance, which indicates how easy or difficult it is to conquer territory or defeat a defender in battle.
- The offence–defence balance is usually heavily weighted in the defender's favour.
- Any state that attempts to gain large amounts of additional power is likely to end up fighting a series of losing wars.
- Accordingly, states will recognize the futility of offence and concentrate instead on maintaining their position in the balance of power. If they do go on the offensive, their aims will be limited.

#### Why show restraint? Reason 3

- Even when conquest is feasible, it does not pay: the costs outweigh the benefits.
- Because of nationalism, it is especially difficult, sometimes impossible, for the conqueror to subdue the conquered.
- The ideology of nationalism is all about self-determination, which virtually guarantees that occupied populations will rise up against the occupier

=> Conquest is not only difficult but, when it is successful, leads to many difficulties and few benefits

#### How do Offensive Realists respond?

- Claim balancing is often inefficient, especially when it comes to forming balancing coalitions, and that this inefficiency provides opportunities for a clever aggressor to take advantage of its adversaries.
- take issue with the claim that the defender has a significant advantage over the attacker, and thus offence hardly ever pays.
- acknowledge that sometimes conquest does not pay but they also point out that sometimes it does.

#### What do Offensive and Defensive realism have in common?

- Both defensive and offensive realists agree, however, that nuclear weapons have little utility for offensive purposes, except where only one side in a conflict has them.
- The reason is simple: if both sides have a survivable retaliatory capability, neither gains an advantage from striking first.
- Moreover, both camps agree that conventional war between nuclear-armed states is possible but not likely, because of the danger of escalation to the nuclear level.