

Summary Notes on Neorealism in International Relations (Kenneth Waltz)

Overview of Neorealism

Neorealism or structural realism is a theory of international relations that emphasizes the role of power politics in international relations

- **Definition:** Neorealism, also known as structural realism, is a theory that explains state behavior and interaction in international politics, focusing on overarching patterns rather than specific events.
- **Kenneth Waltz:** Central figure associated with Neorealism, articulated in *Theory of International Politics* (1979).
- **Core Focus:** Addresses major issues like war, power balancing, alliance formation, and security competition, without delving deeply into case-specific details.

Core Assumptions of Neorealism

1. **Anarchy as Ordering Principle:**
 - Absence of a world government; states operate in a self-help system.
 - Survival is the primary goal for all states under anarchy.
2. **Distribution of Capabilities:**
 - States vary in power, affecting their behavior and constraints.
 - Power distribution shapes the international system (e.g., bipolar, unipolar).
 - Larger greater power

Key Concepts in Neorealism

- **Structural Constraints:** States are influenced by the international system's structure, forcing rational behavior focused on survival and security.
- **Balance of Power:** Essential for maintaining order and preventing domination by a single state (USA and USSR).
- **Rational State Behavior:** States act to maximize security, often responding to changes in power distribution. That fail has risk of losing sovereignty.

International System Structure

- **State Similarity:** All states, regardless of power, operate similarly in an anarchic international system, prioritizing survival and security.
- **Power Dynamics:** Differences in state power shape their global influence; stronger states dominate, while weaker states face more limitations in their actions.

Historical Examples

1. **Cold War (Bipolar System):**
 - U.S. and USSR were the superpowers, limiting actions of weaker states like Germany, the UK, and France. They had to reside with alliances such as NATO.

- Europe relied on the U.S. for security (external balancing) due to their diminished power post-WWII (American influence in European affairs).
- 2. **Post-Cold War (Unipolar System):**
 - U.S. emerged as the sole superpower, expanding influence globally (e.g., NATO expansion, dominance in global institutions).
 - Unchecked U.S. power led to debates about overreach and overstretch.
 - Neorealism States no state can get hegemony

Dynamics of Power and Survival

- **Constraints on Expansion:**
 - States must recognize limits to avoid overstretching (e.g., Nazi Germany in WWII).
 - Balancing occurs when rival powers counteract expansion, as seen between the U.S. and USSR.
- **Current Unipolarity:**
 - U.S. commands unparalleled material and military resources but faces potential challenges from rising powers like China and resurgent Russia.

War and Peace in Neorealism

- **Permissive Causes of War:**
 - Anarchy allows conflicts due to lack of a central authority.
 - Miscalculations, conflicting interests, and unbalanced power can lead to wars.
- **Likelihood of War:**
 - Multipolar systems increase uncertainty and war risks, while bipolarity reduces them by clarifying power relations.

Future Considerations

- **Rise of China and Russia(Balancers):** Emerging balancing efforts against U.S. unipolarity are reshaping the international system.
- **Unchecked Power Risks:** Neorealists predict balancing efforts will intensify as other states seek to constrain U.S. dominance.
- **Grand Strategy Choices:** The U.S. faces decisions on isolationism versus global engagement, impacting future power dynamics.

Neorealism's Limitations

- **Scope:** Does not explain specific causes of events like the Iraq invasion or Cold War's end without supplementing other theories.
- **Criticisms:** Often faulted for inadequacies in addressing (nuanced) complex international phenomena

Conclusion:

- **Neorealism's Central Message:** Neorealism provides a structural explanation for how international politics operates, focusing on the absence of global authority (anarchy) and the distribution of power among states. While it doesn't predict specific events, it offers insight into the broader patterns of international relations, emphasizing that power must always be balanced to maintain security and stability

Neo-Liberalism

- Institutional Liberalism
- Importance of institutions, cooperation, and interdependence among states, while recognizing the anarchic structure of the international system. Accepted that world system is anarchic.
- Neoliberalism focuses on the potential for cooperation between states despite the absence of a global authority.

Key Differences and Debates Between Neorealism and Neoliberalism

Aspect	Neorealism	Neoliberalism
Anarchy	Agreed, but viewed as limiting cooperation.	Agreed, but institutions mitigate effects.
State Goals	Focus on power and security.	Broader goals, including economic welfare.
Relative vs. Absolute Gains	Prioritizes relative gains, wary of others' advantages.	Focuses on absolute gains, benefiting all parties.
Institutions	Secondary to power politics; reflect state power.	Key to fostering trust and stability.
Economic Interdependence	Downplayed as secondary to power concerns.	Highlighted as reducing conflict.
Intentions vs. Capabilities	Focus on military/economic capabilities.	Considers intentions, norms, and shared values.

International Institutions and Regimes

- Neoliberalism argues that **international institutions** (like the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and the European Union) play a central role in fostering cooperation

among states. These institutions help to create **norms, rules, and procedures** that reduce uncertainty and promote predictable behavior among states.

- Institutions act as mediators and provide frameworks for resolving conflicts, thus encouraging cooperation rather than competition.

Complex Interdependence

Neoliberalism challenges the traditional realist notion that the international system is dominated solely by military power and conflict. Instead, it emphasizes **complex interdependence**—the idea that states and non-state actors are interconnected through multiple channels, including economic, social, and environmental ties.

Personal Interest

- **Realists** prioritize **relative gains**, meaning states are more concerned with how much they gain relative to their rivals. Neoliberals argue that states will cooperate as long as they are making absolute gains, even if some states benefit more than others. States have personal or self-interest.

Mutual cooperation and trust

Neoliberals believe that states will cooperate when **reciprocity** is institutionalized.

- **Reciprocity** is the concept that states cooperate because they expect others to do the same in return. This mutual expectation of cooperation creates a **positive-sum** game, where all states benefit over time.

Democratic Institutions in Neoliberalism

- **Democratic institutions** refer to the political structures, processes, and norms that operate in democracies, such as free elections, checks and balances, rule of law, and political accountability. Neoliberalism posits that democratic institutions promote **peaceful cooperation** and **mutual benefits** among states.
- **Democratic Peace Theory**: A major idea associated with neoliberalism is **Democratic Peace Theory**, which suggests that **democracies are less likely to go to war with each other**. This theory argues that democratic institutions create transparency, accountability, and peaceful resolution mechanisms, reducing the likelihood of conflict between democratic states.
- Neoliberalism views **international institutions**, like the **EU** or **NATO**, as facilitators of democratic cooperation. These institutions help democracies align their interests and address common challenges such as security, human rights, and economic integration.

Low Politics in Neoliberalism

In the field of International Relations, **low politics** refers to issues that are **not directly related to military or national security concerns**, focusing instead on **economic, social, environmental, and human welfare issues**. In contrast, **high politics** refers to matters of military power, national security, and survival. Neoliberalism places significant emphasis on **low politics**, seeing them as areas where states can cooperate for mutual benefit.

Historical Roots

- **Realism's Ancestors:** Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes emphasized anarchy, self-help, and power dynamics.
- **Gained prominence after WWI**
- **Liberalism's Legacy:** Enlightenment thinkers (Locke), Woodrow Wilson, and others advocated free trade, international law, and institutions to promote peace and cooperation.
- **20th Century Evolution:**
 - Realism dominated post-WWII international relations.
 - Resurged in the 1970s-80s during debates over global interdependence and institutional cooperation.

Key Concepts and Challenges

1. **Power and Capabilities:**
 - Neorealists define power through capabilities (military, economic) and the balance of power.
 - Neoliberals are more focused on the context and outcomes of power, emphasizing mutual benefits.
 2. **Zero-Sum vs. Win-Win Dynamics:**
 - Neorealists often see power as zero-sum; one state's gain is another's loss.
 - Neoliberals highlight the potential for win-win scenarios through cooperation and shared benefits.
- **Free Trade and Global Cooperation:**
 - Rooted in Adam Smith's economic liberalism, neoliberalism highlights the importance of free markets in promoting peace and prosperity.
 - Institutions like the WTO and regional trade agreements (e.g., EU) demonstrate how economic interdependence aligns state interests.
 - **Critiques:**
 - Critics argue that neoliberalism is overly idealistic, assuming states prioritize cooperation over power politics.
 - Overlooks the power dynamics inherent in the creation and functioning of international institutions.

Conclusion

- The debate between neoliberalism and neorealism represents a broader struggle to define the mechanisms of international relations.
- While neorealism prioritizes state-centric survival strategies under anarchy, neoliberalism focuses on how institutions and interdependence can alter outcomes.
- Both approaches contribute unique insights into the dynamics of power, cooperation, and governance in the global system.