

Chapter 6

Realism

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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 made by realists in defence of their tradition, a claim that will be critically examined in this chapter. After introducing the theory of realism, the second section will ask whether there is

one realism or a variety of realisms. The argument presented below is that despite important differences, particularly between classical and structural realism, it is possible to identify a shared set of core assumptions and ideas. The third section outlines these common elements, which we identify as self-help, statism, and survival. In the final section, we return to the question of how far realism is relevant for explaining or understanding the globalization of world politics.

Introduction: the timeless wisdom of realism

According to the conventional wisdom, **realism** emerged victorious over idealism in the field's first Great Debate. Writing in the aftermath of the First World War, the 'idealists' (a term that realist writers have retrospectively imposed on the inter-war scholars) focused much of their attention on understanding the cause of war so as to find a remedy for its existence. Yet the realists argued that the inter-war scholars' approach was flawed in a number of respects. For example, they ignored the role of power, overestimated the degree to which **nation-states** shared a set of common interests, and were overly optimistic that humankind could overcome the scourge of war. 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 the academic field of International Relations describe a Great Debate that took place in the late 1930s and early 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** (Schmidt 2012). The standard account of the Great Debate is that the realists emerged victorious, and from 1939 to the present many theorists and policy-makers have continued to view the world through realist lenses. 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 maximizing the interests of the **state** in a hostile environment explains in part why it remains the dominant tradition in the study of world politics. The theory of realism that prevailed after the Second World War is often claimed to rest on an older, classical tradition of thought. Indeed, many contemporary realist writers often claim to be part of 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).

The insights that 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, *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' (1957: 1). 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 so as 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 we shall see, 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 classical realism more generally, were concerned with: the role, if any, that morals and ethics occupy 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 we reach 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.

Although the advanced student might be able to detect some subtle differences, it is fair to say that there is a significant degree of continuity between classical

realism and modern variants. Indeed, the three core elements that we identify with realism—**statism**, **survival**, and **self-help**—are present in the work of a classical realist such as Thucydides and structural realists such as Kenneth Waltz.

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 since the Peace of Westphalia (1648) realists consider the sovereign state as the principal actor 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. By anarchy, what is most often meant is that international politics takes place in an arena that has no overarching central authority above the individual collection of sovereign states. Thus, rather than necessarily denoting chaos and lawlessness, the concept of anarchy is used by realists to emphasize the point that the international realm is distinguished by the lack of a central authority.

Following from this, realists draw a sharp distinction between domestic and international politics. Thus, while Hans J. Morgenthau argues that ‘international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power’, he goes to great lengths to illustrate the qualitatively different result this struggle has on international politics as compared to domestic politics ([1948] 1955: 25). A prominent explanation that realists provide for this difference in behaviour relates to the different organizational **structure** of domestic and international politics. Realists argue that the basic structure of international politics is one of anarchy, in that each of the independent sovereign states considers itself to be its own highest authority and does not recognize a higher power. Conversely, domestic politics is often described as a hierarchical structure in which different political actors stand in various relations of super- and subordination.

It is largely on the basis of how realists depict the international environment that they conclude that the first priority for state leaders is to ensure the survival of their state. 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 of some states have resulted in other states losing their existence. This is partly explained in light of the power differentials of states. Intuitively, states with more power stand 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 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 principle of action in an anarchical system. According to realism, each state actor is responsible for ensuring its own well-being and survival. Realists do not believe it is prudent for a state to entrust its safety and survival to another actor or 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. Yet this may prove to be insufficient for a number of smaller states who feel threatened by a much larger state. This brings us to one of the crucial mechanisms that realists throughout the ages have considered essential to preserving the liberty of states—the **balance of power**. Although various meanings have been attributed to the concept of the balance of power, the most common definition holds that if the survival of a state is threatened by a hegemonic state or coalition of stronger states, they should join forces, establish a formal alliance, and seek to preserve their own independence by checking the power of the opposing side. The mechanism of the balance of power seeks to ensure an equilibrium of power so that no one state or coalition of states is in a position 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. 4).

The peaceful conclusion of the cold war caught many realists off guard. The inability to foresee the dynamics that led to the end of the bipolar cold war system sparked the publication of several powerful critiques of realist theory. Critics also maintained that

Box 6.1 Realism and intra-state war

Since the end of the cold war, intra-state war (internal conflicts in one state) has become more prevalent than inter-state war. Since realists generally focus on the latter type of conflict, critics contend that realism is irrelevant to the predicament of the global South, which has been wracked by nationalist and ethnic wars. But this is not the case, and realists have turned their attention to analysing the causes of intra-state war and recommending solutions.

Structural realists maintain that when the sovereign authority of the state collapses, such as in Somalia and Haiti, internal wars happen for many of the same reasons that wars between states happen. In a fundamental sense, the dichotomy between domestic order and international disorder breaks down when the state loses the legitimate authority to rule. The resulting anarchy inside the state is analogous to the anarchy among states. In such a situation, realist theory contends that the different groups inside the state will vie for power in an attempt to gain a sense of security. Barry Posen (1993) has applied the key realist concept of the security dilemma to explain the political dynamics that result when different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups suddenly

find themselves responsible for their own security. He argues that it is natural to expect that security will be their first priority and that they will seek the means to perpetuate their own existence. Yet, just as for states, one group's attempt to enhance its security will create uncertainty in the minds of rival groups, which will in turn seek to augment their own power. Realists argue that this revolving spiral of distrust and uncertainty leads to intense security competition and often to military conflict among the various independent groups who were previously subject to the sovereign power of the state.

In addition to analysing the cause of intra-state wars, realists have prescribed solutions. Unlike many liberal solutions to civil and ethnic wars that rest on power-sharing agreements and the creation of multi-ethnic states, realists have advocated separation or partition. For realists, anarchy can be eliminated by creating a central government. And while the creation of multi-ethnic states might be a noble endeavour, realists argue that they do not have a very good success rate. Ethnically homogeneous states are held by realists to be more stable and less dependent on outside military occupation.

realism was unable to provide a persuasive account of new developments such as regional **integration**, humanitarian intervention, the emergence of a **security community** in Western Europe, and the growing importance of non-state actors (see Chs 7, 23, and 26). In addition, proponents of globalization argued that realism's privileged actor, the state, was in decline relative to **non-state actors** such as **transnational corporations** and powerful regional institutions (see Ch. 21). Critics also contend that realism is unable to explain the increasing incidence of intra-state wars plaguing the global South. As Box 6.1 discusses, realists claim that their theory does indeed explain the incidence of intra-state conflicts. The cumulative weight of these criticisms led many to question the analytical adequacy of realist thought.

By way of a response to the critics, it is worth reminding them that the death-knell of realism has been sounded a number of times already, only to see the resurgence of new forms of realism arise. In this respect, realism shares with conservatism (its ideological godfather) the recognition that a theory without the means to change is without the means of its own preservation. The question of realism's resilience touches on one of its central claims, namely that it is

the embodiment of laws of international politics that remain true across time (history) and space (geopolitics). Thus, while political conditions have changed since the end of the cold war, realists believe that the world continues to operate according to the logic of realism. The question of whether realism does embody 'timeless truths' about politics will be returned to in the conclusion of the chapter.

Key Points

- Realism has been the dominant theory of world politics since the beginning of academic International Relations.
- 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 shadow of anarchy such that their security cannot be taken for granted.
- At the start of the new millennium, realism continues to attract academicians and inform policy-makers, although in the period since the end of the cold war we have seen heightened criticism of realist assumptions.

One realism, or many?

The notion that there is a monolithic theory of realism is increasingly rejected both by those who are sympathetic to, and those who are critical 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 Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, and incorporates the ideas of many of those included in the classic canon of Western political thought; modern realism (1939–79), which typically takes as its point of departure the First Great Debate between the scholars of the inter-war period and a new group of scholars who began to enter the field immediately before and after the Second World War; and structural or neo-realism (1979 onwards), which officially entered the picture following the publication of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979).

While these different periods suggest a neat historical sequence, they are problematic in so far as they close down the important question about divergence within each historical phase. Rather than opt for the neat but intellectually unsatisfactory system of historical periodization, we outline below our own representation of realisms that makes important connections with existing categories deployed by other thinkers in the field. A summary of the varieties of realism outlined below is contained in **Table 6.1**.

Classical realism

The classical realist lineage begins with Thucydides' representation of power politics as a law of human behaviour. The drive for power and the will to dominate 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 that explains why

Table 6.1 Taxonomy of realisms

Type of realism	Key thinkers	Key texts	'Big idea'
Classical realism (Human nature)	Thucydides (c. 430–406 BC) Machiavelli (1532)	<i>The Peloponnesian War</i> <i>The Prince</i>	International politics is driven by an endless struggle for power, which has its roots in human nature. Justice, law, and society have either no place or are circumscribed.
	Morgenthau (1948)	<i>Politics among Nations</i>	Political realism recognizes that principles are subordinated to policies; the ultimate skill of the state leader is to accept, and adapt to, the changing power political configurations in world politics.
	Rousseau (c. 1750)	<i>The State of War</i>	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.
Structural realism (international system)	Waltz (1979) Mearsheimer (2001)	<i>Theory of International Politics</i> <i>Tragedy of Great Power Politics</i>	It is not human nature but the anarchical system that fosters fear, jealousy, suspicion, and insecurity.
	Zakaria (1998)	<i>From Wealth to Power</i>	Anarchy leads to a logic of self-help in which states seek to maximize their security. The most stable distribution of power in the system is bipolarity.
Neoclassical realism			The anarchical, self-help system compels states to maximize their relative power positions.
			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.

international politics is necessarily power politics. This reduction of realism to a condition of human nature is one that frequently reappears in the leading works of the realist canon, particularly in the work of Hans J. Morgenthau. Classical realists argue that it is from the nature of man that the essential features of international politics, such as competition, fear, and war, can be explained. For both Thucydides and Morgenthau, the essential continuity of the power-seeking behaviour of states is rooted in the biological drives of human beings.

Another distinguishing characteristic of classical realism is its adherents' belief in the primordial character of power and ethics. Classical realism is fundamentally about the struggle for belonging, a struggle that is often violent. Patriotic virtue is required in order for communities to survive in this historic battle between good and evil. Two classical realists who wrestled with the degree to which state leaders could be guided by ethical considerations were Thucydides and Machiavelli.

Thucydides was the historian of the Peloponnesian War, a conflict between two great powers in the ancient Greek world, Athens and Sparta. Thucydides' work has been admired by subsequent generations of realists for the insights he raised about many of the perennial issues of international politics. Thucydides' explanation of the underlying cause of the war was 'the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta' (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. On this reading, Thucydides makes it clear 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 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 famous 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 1).

Classical realists concur with Thucydides' view that the logic of power politics has universal applicability. Instead of Athens and Melos, we could just as easily substitute the vulnerability of Machiavelli's beloved Florence to the expansionist policies of external great powers. In Morgenthau's era, there were many examples where the innate drive for more power and **territory** seemed to confirm the realist iron law. The seemingly endless cycle of war and conflict confirmed

in the minds of twentieth-century classical realists the essentially aggressive impulses in human nature. How is a leader supposed to act in a world animated by such dark forces? The answer given by Machiavelli is that all obligations and treaties with other states must be disregarded if the security of the community is under threat. Moreover, imperial expansion is legitimate as it is a means of gaining greater security. Other classical realists, however, advocate a more temperate understanding of moral conduct. Taking their lead from Thucydides, they recognize 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 following its self-interest (see Case Study 1).

Structural realism

Structural realists concur that international politics is essentially a struggle for power, but they do not attribute this to human nature. Instead, structural realists ascribe security competition and inter-state conflict to the lack of an overarching authority above states. Waltz defined the structure of the international system in terms of three elements—organizing principle, 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 is inconsequential. It is the third element, the distribution of capabilities across units, that is, according to Waltz, of fundamental importance to understanding crucial international outcomes. According to structural realists, the relative distribution of power in the international system is the key independent variable in understanding important international outcomes such as 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 USA and the Soviet Union—that constituted the bipolar international system, and since the end of the cold war the international system has been unipolar.

Case Study 1 The Melian dialogue—realism and the preparation for war



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One of the significant episodes of the war between Athens and Sparta is known as the 'Melian dialogue', and represents a fascinating illustration of a number of 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 are able to 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, appealing in turn with arguments grounded in justice, God, and their allies the Spartans. As the dialogue makes clear, the Melians were forced to submit to the realist iron law that power politics prevails in human affairs.

A short excerpt from the dialogue appears below (Thucydides [1954] 1972: 401–7). Note that the symbol [...] indicates where words have been omitted from the original text.

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.

Theory applied



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How does the international distribution of power impact the behaviour of states? In the most general sense, Waltz argues that states, especially the great powers, have to be sensitive to the capabilities of other states. The possibility that any state may use force to advance its interests results in all states being worried about their survival. According to Waltz, power is a means to the end of 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, according to Waltz, states are security maximizers. Waltz argues that power maximization often proves to be sub-optimal because it triggers a counter-balancing coalition of states.

A different account of the power dynamics that operate in the anarchic system is provided by John Mearsheimer's theory of **offensive realism**, which is another variant of structural realism. While sharing many of the basic assumptions of Waltz's structural realist theory (which is frequently termed **defensive realism**), Mearsheimer differs from Waltz when

it comes to describing the behaviour of states. Most fundamentally, ‘offensive realism parts company with defensive realism over the question of how much power states want’ (Mearsheimer 2001: 21). According to Mearsheimer, the structure of the international system compels states to maximize their relative power position. Under anarchy, he agrees that self-help is the basic principle of action, yet Mearsheimer 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 power at the expense of other states. Indeed, the ideal position, although one that Mearsheimer argues is virtually impossible to achieve, is to be the global hegemon of the **international system**. Yet because global **hegemony** is impossible, he concludes that the world is condemned to perpetual great power competition.

Contemporary realist challenges to structural realism

While structural realists attribute 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 and incorporated a number of additional factors, located at the individual and domestic levels, into their explanation of international 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 (which many classical realists emphasized), 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 is not 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 classical realists to remind us of the key distinction that they made between status quo and revisionist states. Neoclassical realists would argue that the fact that Germany was a revisionist state in the 1930s and a status quo state since the end of the Second World War is of fundamental importance to understanding its role in the international system. Not only do states differ in terms of their interests, but they also differ in terms of their ability to extract resources from the societies they rule. 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. Instead, it is preferable to think of living traditions like realism as the embodiment of both continuities and conflicts. Despite the different strands running through the tradition, there is a sense in which all realists have 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.
- Structural realism divides into two camps: those who argue that states are security maximizers (defensive realism), 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 have argued that realism is a theoretically broad church, embracing a variety of authors and texts. Despite the numerous denominations, we argue that all realists subscribe to the following ‘three Ss’: statism, survival, and self-help. Each of these elements is considered in more detail in the next three subsections.

Statism

For realists, the state is the main actor 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. J. 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. But in the absence of security, there can be no art, no culture, no society. The first move for the realist, then, is to organize power domestically.

Realist theory operates according to the assumption that, domestically, the problem of order and security is largely solved. However, on the ‘outside’, 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 on the basis 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 the competition is viewed in zero-sum terms; in other words, more for one actor means less for another. This competitive logic of power politics makes agreement on universal principles difficult, apart from the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other sovereign states. But even this principle, designed to facilitate **coexistence**, is suspended 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 most recent behaviour of the USA in

Afghanistan and Iraq, powerful states are able to overturn the non-intervention principle on the grounds of national security and international order.

Given that the first move of the state is to organize power domestically, and the second is to accumulate power internationally, it is self-evidently 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. Morgenthau offers the following definition of power: ‘man’s control over the minds and actions of other men’ ([1948] 1955: 26). There are two important points that realists make about the elusive 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 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 counting the number of troops, tanks, aircraft, and naval ships a country possesses in the belief that this translates into the ability to get other actors to do something they would not otherwise do.

A number of criticisms have been made as to how realists define and measure power (Schmidt 2005), many of which are discussed in later chapters. 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 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 bring more conceptual clarity to bear on the meaning of power. Waltz tries to overcome the problem by shifting the focus from power to capabilities. He suggests that 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’ (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 Al Qaeda do not figure very prominently in the realists' analysis of power. Yet, given the influence that non-state actors exercise in world politics today, many question the adequacy of the state-centric assumption of realism.

Survival

The second principle that unites realists is the assertion that, in world politics, the pre-eminent goal is survival. Although there is ambiguity in the works of the realists as to whether the accumulation of power is an end in itself, one would think that there is no dissenting from the argument that the ultimate concern of states is security. Survival is held to be a precondition for attaining all other goals, whether these involve conquest or merely independence. Yet, as we mentioned in the previous section, a recent controversy among structural realists has arisen over the question of whether states are, in fact, principally security or power maximizers. Defensive realists 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 to gain greater amounts of power if that means jeopardizing their own security. 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 are willing, if the opportunity arises, to alter the existing distribution of power in their favour. In terms of survival, defensive realists hold that the existence of status quo powers lessens the competition for power, while offensive realists argue that the competition is always

keen because revisionist states and aspiring hegemons are always willing to take risks with the aim of improving their position in the international system.

Niccolò Machiavelli tried to make a 'science' out of his reflections on the art of survival. His short and engaging book, *The Prince*, was written with the explicit intention of codifying a set of maxims that would enable leaders to maintain their hold on power. In important respects, we find two related Machiavellian themes recurring 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 the shoulders of state leaders. 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' (1977: 204). Their guide must be an **ethic of responsibility**: the careful weighing of consequences; the realization that individual acts of an immoral kind might have to be performed for the greater good. By way of an 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**.

Not only does realism provide an alternative moral code for state leaders, it suggests a wider objection to the whole enterprise of bringing ethics into international politics. Starting from the assumption that each state has its own particular values and beliefs, realists argue that the state is the supreme good and there can be no community beyond borders. This moral relativism has generated a substantial body of criticism, particularly from liberal theorists who endorse the notion of universal human rights. For a fuller discussion see Chapter 7.

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 (1979: 111) explains that in an anarchic structure, 'self-help is necessarily the principle of action'. 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)' (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, structural realists 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 the power against 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. **Case Study 2** shows how the USA 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 forty-year rule over Egypt.

Case Study 2 Strategic partnerships with 'friendly' dictators



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Unflinching American support for Israel has been one of the most remarkable features of the post-1945 order. What shaped this partnership was America's empathy with a people who had experienced genocide at the hands of the Nazis but who had gone on to build a democratic society in a region of authoritarian states. As an aside, influential contemporary realists have questioned whether the near unconditional support for Israel has become an impediment to the realization of American economic and strategic interests in the region (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007).

What is less well known is the strong support that successive US governments have given to Egypt, particularly since the Israeli–Egyptian peace treaty of 1979. In addition to providing material rewards for this 'cold peace', successive American administrations took the view that stability in the Middle East was more likely to be achieved by propping up a stable Egyptian dictatorship.

The case for building and maintaining close ties with friendly dictators was made by Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, who rose to prominence as a fierce critic of President Jimmy Carter's foreign policy. She castigated Carter for collaborating in the social revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua, which had the consequence of replacing 'moderate autocrats' who were friendly to American interests with 'less friendly autocrats of an extremist persuasion'. Not grasping this distinction showed 'a lack of realism' and was the main failing of the Carter administration—according to Kirkpatrick (1979).

In the case of Egypt, successive American administrations, from Reagan onwards, have operationalized this distinction between a 'moderate friendly autocrat' and an unfriendly revolutionary regime. President Mubarak profited from this policy, as did his clique of Army generals, party apparatchiks, and military police. During the post-9/11 decade, when the USA was looking for allies in the global war on terror, the Egyptian leadership showed itself to be a valuable ally—not least in suppressing alleged jihadist terrorist groups in that country. Yet, by the time of the Arab Spring, the Egyptian people had come to despise Washington for colluding with the hated dictator. This dynamic shows that Kirkpatrick's distinction between friendly and unfriendly tyrants might just be in the eye of the beholder: for the hundreds of thousands of Egyptians who took to the streets and marched on Tahrir Square, the Mubarak era was anything but friendly. It is too soon to tell whether the realist argument for aligning American foreign policy with unpopular dictators across the Middle East will prove costly in the long run as civil wars and social revolutions sweep away the old regional order.

Theory applied



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Realists and their critics have always debated the stability of the balance of power system. This is especially the case today, as many argue that the unipolar position of the USA has made the balance of power inoperative (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008). It is questionable whether other countries are willing to balance against the USA, as structural realism 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.

Historically, realists have illustrated the lack of trust among states by reference to the parable of the 'stag hunt'. In *Man, the State and War*, Kenneth 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.

(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 for the remaining states to 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** issues 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: the primary objective of all states is survival; 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 institution can be relied on to guarantee your 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: realism and the globalization of world politics

The 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 twenty-five centuries. Realists have consistently held that the continuities in international

relations are more important than the changes, but many find this to be increasingly problematic in the present age of globalization (see Ch. 1). But the importance of realism has not been diminished by the dynamics of globalization. It is not clear that economic **interdependence** has made war less likely. The state continues to be the dominant unit in world politics. And globalization should not be seen as a process that is disconnected from the distribution of power in the international system.

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 USA holds, it should not be a surprise that it has been one of the foremost proponents of globalization. The core values of globalization—liberalism, capitalism, and consumerism—are exactly those espoused by the USA. 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, protagonists 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 a common good. 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 USA: according to the influential *Economist* magazine, it will be more economically powerful than the USA by 2019. 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 represent key 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 Is realism anything more than the ideology of powerful, satisfied states?
- 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 the behaviour of states?
- 10 Can realism help us to understand the globalization of world politics?

Further Reading



For a general survey of the realist tradition

- Guzzini, S.** (1998), *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy* (London: Routledge). Provides an understanding of the evolution of the realist tradition.
- Smith, M. J.** (1986), *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press). An excellent discussion of many of the seminal realist thinkers.
- Walt, S. M.** (2002), 'The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition', in I. Katznelson and H. V. Milner (eds), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (New York: W. W. Norton). An exposition of the realist tradition from one of its leading proponents.

Twentieth-century classical realism

- Carr, E. H.** (2001), *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Palgrave). An important critique of liberal idealism.
- Morgenthau, H. J.** (1948), *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf). A foundational text for the discipline of international relations.

Structural realism

- Keohane, R.** (ed.) (1986), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press). This collection of essays includes key chapters by Waltz, an interesting defence of realism by Robert Gilpin, and powerful critiques by Richard Ashley, Robert Cox, and J. G. Ruggie.
- Mearsheimer, J.** (2001), *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton). This is the definitive account of offensive realism.
- Waltz, K.** (1979), *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley). This is the exemplar for structural realism.

Neoclassical realism

- Rose, G.** (1998), 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy', *World Politics*, 51: 144–72. An important review article that is credited with coining the term 'neoclassical realism'.
- Lobell, S. E., Ripsman, N. M., and Taliaferro, J. W.** (eds) (2009), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). A comprehensive survey of neoclassical realism.
- Zakaria, F.** (1998), *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). Puts forth his theory of state-centric realism.

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