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Chapter 2

System Level International Relations Theories – Realism

In the preceding section, we introduced the levels of analysis methodology used in the study of international relations theory. In this section, as well as the sections that follow, we will take a closer look at each of these levels and provide some of the classic readings from the available literature.

We focus here on theories from the system level of analysis. System-level theorists assume that international relations is best understood by taking a broad, global perspective. They look at the nature of the system as a whole and at how states behave within that system. The system, then, sets the standard; it conditions and constrains the behavior of those who operate within it.

We present four major system-level theories in this section: realism, liberalism, class system, and postmodernism. Since each of these theories is discussed in detail in the following chapters, here we will merely summarize how they characterize the international system and the role of states and other major actors in that system.

Realist theory focuses on power. It looks at how the distribution of power, quest for power, and ability to preserve power within the system supercede other goals and dictate the behavior of states and organizations. Some realists argue that this situation is the result of the structure of the international system in which there are no overarching authorities to maintain order on a global scale. States arm themselves and form strategic military alliances for security and self-preservation. This sense of "everyone for him- or herself" tends to strengthen a system dominated by the drive for upward mobility in a hierarchy of power.

Our second theory, liberalism, does not dispute that the international system lacks a global authority to instill order and regulate the behavior of states. Liberals, though, argue that this does not necessarily have to be the case. There are a number of instances in which states have positive incentives to cooperate with one another—trade and other economic partnerships or environmental and conservation efforts, for example. Another aspect of liberal theory points out that international organizations, such as the United Nations, do exist to help bring order to the global community and could be strengthened and expanded.

The third system-level theory is what we have termed class system theory. As the name implies, this theory focuses on the distribution of wealth throughout the world and how that distribution—usually uneven—creates economic classes of people that transcend state boundaries. Essentially, the world is segregated by economics into "haves" and "have-nots." Under such conditions the wealthy classes in different countries have more in common with one another than with the poorer classes of their own nation. They also have a substantial stake in preserving the existing system. Conflict occurs along economic class lines on a global basis, cutting across state boundaries, as the poorer classes revolt against economic imperialism.

The final system-level theory falls under the label of postmodernism. Postmodernism encompasses a rather broad array of perspectives that are united by the contention that reality is shaped by perceptions. The postmodernist emphasis on the subjectivity of ideas, theories, and even social science methodology provides a highly useful counterweight to mainstream perspectives of international relations theory. The constructivist branch of postmodernism focuses on the identities and perceptions of elites and states and the ways in which these preferences are socially constructed. The feminist branch asserts that gender is the key to understanding world politics. Feminist postmodernists focus on the social construction of gender roles and its impact on the structure of society and international relations.

These theories all provide unique perspectives on the system and the behavior of states within it.

In the coming chapters, we will discuss the readings, highlight important terms and concepts, and look at some of the strengths and weaknesses of each paradigm. An effective theory of international relations—whether system, state, or individual level—provides not only a frame of reference for looking at past events but also a method for analyzing current conditions and making projections about our future.

Introduction to Realist Theory

Realism is the oldest theory for understanding and explaining international politics. The roots of this school of thought extend back nearly 2,500 years. The fundamental principles and implications of realism can be found in the writings of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides and the Italian Renaissance political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli. Many contemporary scholars, including Hans Morgenthau, Edward Hallett Carr, and Kenneth Waltz, have further explored and developed realist principles.

Indeed, the realist school of thought so dominated the study of international politics in the post-World War II era that it became the theoretical basis for U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. The list of practitioners includes some of the most influential people in the American foreign policy establishment. George Kennan, U.S. envoy to the Soviet Union during World War II and chief architect of the Containment Doctrine, used the realist balance-of-power concept in constructing the American policy to contain Soviet influence in the Cold War years. American presidents Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and Richard Nixon and Secretaries of State John Foster Dulles and Henry Kissinger relied to a significant extent on realist principles in shaping their foreign policy decisions.

Many scholars argue that realism's influence on political leaders is evidence of the strength and utility of its principles. They contend that leaders rely on realist theory because it presents a "realistic" view of international relations and focuses on how the world *is* rather than how it *ought* to be. They believe that a careful and objective assessment of world history is important because the fundamental characteristics and behavior of countries have remained essentially unchanged. Thus, realist scholars attempt to discern patterns of behavior among states in the past and then use these observations to analyze and predict the behavior and actions of nations in contemporary international politics.

For realists, power is the key factor in understanding international relations. Global politics is considered a contest for power among states. A state's power is measured primarily in terms of its military capabilities. International diplomacy is based on **power politics**, in which force or the threat of force is the primary method states use to further their interests. According to realists, international relations is a struggle for power and security among competing states. It is the responsibility of each nation-state to provide for its own defense and security. Thus, states are compelled to base foreign policy decisions on considerations of power and security, rather than morality or ideals.

Classical Realism

In his work *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, the Greek scholar and historian Thucydides was one of the first to distinguish these realist principles. He used the war between the city-states of Athens and Sparta as a case study for his analysis. Thucydides described the underlying cause of war between Athens and Sparta in clear terms: "What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta." Sparta was wary of the innovative and dynamic nature of Athenian society, which was growing and modernizing both economically and militarily. The Spartans perceived a shift in the balance of power between the two states. The **balance of power** principle contends that if two or more states, or coalitions of states, maintain an even distribution of power, neither side can be confident of victory should conflict arise. Under such

conditions, we would presume that states are reluctant to initiate or pursue a military resolution to their differences with other states. In this way, balance and stability in the system are preserved.

Returning to Thucydides' example, Sparta began to strengthen its position militarily in response to the vitality of Athens. The Athenians then grew fearful of their rival's arms build-up and responded in a similar fashion. War between Athens and Sparta erupted shortly thereafter. Thucydides recorded and analyzed these events to provide a background on the nature of war for future historians and scholars.

One of those who followed was the Italian philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli. Machiavelli is considered the first modern political theorist because, in traditional realist fashion, he sought to describe politics as it is, not as it ought to be. In his book *The Prince*, Machiavelli sought to separate politics from ethics because he wished to provide a practical and objective account of the political process.

In addition, Machiavelli made two other notable contributions to realism. First, his view that humans are "wicked" became one of the central tenets of classical realism. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli wrote that the "gulf between how one should live and how one does live is so wide that a man who neglects what is done for what should be done learns the way to self-destruction rather than self-preservation." Second, this pessimistic assessment of human nature led Machiavelli to emphasize the importance of military power and national security. The survival of the state, as represented figuratively by the prince, is the most important goal in politics. Machiavelli argued that "it is unreasonable to expect that an armed man should obey one who is not or that an unarmed man should remain safe and secure when his servants are armed." Certainly, this statement demonstrates his conviction that those who hold the reins of power must be prepared to contend with threats to their rule. That is, leaders who neglect national security not only do so at their own peril but also jeopardize the security of the state as a whole.

In his book *Politics Among Nations*, Hans Morgenthau used the principles of classical realism to both analyze and shape geopolitics of 1948. In doing so, Morgenthau created a more scientific approach to the study and practice of foreign affairs in our contemporary age.

Morgenthau, like Machiavelli, maintained that insecurity, aggression, and war are recurring themes of international politics and that these themes are ultimately rooted in human nature. Morgenthau, again like his realist predecessors, recognized that on a fundamental level, conflict was driven not by political or ideological differences as much as by human desire to dominate other humans. He suggested that "statesmen think and act in terms of power."¹ One common characteristic of all states, Morgenthau assumed, was their tendency to behave as rational actors. According to the **rational actor** assumption, states pursue prudent goals that are within their power (capability) to achieve. Likewise, a state's foreign policy is based on prudent calculations of national interest.

Morgenthau's prescription for a "rational theory of international politics" was based on the notion of "interest defined as power." That is, in a system consisting of individual states or blocs of states struggling for power, Morgenthau suggested that the "ever present threat of large-scale violence" had in the past, and could in the future, be contained by pursuing a balance-of-power strategy. As discussed earlier, this strategy contends that if two or more coalitions of states maintain a roughly equal distribution of power, no single state can be confident in its ability to win a war. Consequently, all states would be reluctant to initiate conflict, and balance, order, and peace would, in theory, be preserved.

The selection by George Kennan provides an excellent example of the application of realist principles to the formulation of American foreign policy. In 1946, Kennan, an American diplomat then serving in Moscow, sent his now-famous "long telegram" to Washington. The telegram was a detailed assessment of the sources of Soviet conduct. One year later, using the pseudonym of X, Kennan's argument was published in the highly respected journal *Foreign Affairs*. His ideas provided the intellectual and geopolitical foundation for the United States postwar policy of "containment," aimed at curbing Soviet expansionism. Kennan's analysis and policy recommendations relied upon the realist concepts of both power politics and balance of power.

Neo-Realism

Some contemporary proponents of realist theory, known as neo-realists, suggest that it is not just the uneven development or distribution of power among states—like that between Athens and Sparta—that leads to conflict. **Neo-realism** differs from classical realism on one basic point: Neo-realists believe that the struggle for power is the result of the structure of the international system as a whole rather than a fundament of human nature. Specifically, the problem is found in the anarchic nature of the international system. The term **anarchy** refers to the lack of a central authority or government to enforce law and order between states and throughout the globe.

Kenneth Waltz, founder of neo-realist theory, suggests that this lack of central authority is key to understanding the international system and international relations theory. According to Waltz, states are compelled to base their foreign policy on national security considerations because they are ultimately responsible for their own survival. Since there is no overarching world government to enforce peace, states exist in a **self-help system**. Like the call on a sinking ship, the anarchic nature of the international system leaves "every state for itself."

This type of self-help situation leads to a security dilemma. A **security dilemma** is the result of fear, insecurity, and lack of trust among states living in an anarchic international system. States arm themselves in order to pursue the rational goal of self-preservation. But by arming themselves, more fear and insecurity is created among other states. These states, in turn, also increase their armaments. Even though a state may be arming itself for purely defensive purposes, this process makes all states within the system less secure and fuels an arms race. We see that each state may be acting rationally on an individual basis, but, collectively, their actions lead to unintended consequences. At the very least, these consequences can include an expensive and wasteful arms race, and, in the end, such actions can even lead to war.

Many of the assumptions of neo-realism outlined above can be found in Kenneth Waltz's piece, in which he discusses the relevance of structural realism in the post-Cold War era. Waltz defends the key concepts of structural realism and argues that the demise of the Cold War has not changed the essential behavior of states. Waltz analyzes alternative explanations for the transformation of international politics including the spread of democracy, interdependence, and the role of international institutions and finds that all three lack the insights and explanatory power of structural realism.

The excerpt from Robert Gilpin's book *War and Change in World Politics* highlights the realist principle of hegemony. A **hegemon** is a preponderant power that dominates other states within its sphere of influence. Gilpin discusses the realist view of how change occurs in international politics and identifies a pattern by which hegemonic states both rise and fall from power. Gilpin distinguishes three structural causes of a decline in power. First is the economic and military burdens of maintaining dominance over other states. Second, hegemons tend to gradually lose their economic and military vitality because domestic consumption rises as the public enjoys the benefits of world preeminence. Third, the inevitable spread of technology tends to weaken a hegemon's economic and military advantages over its competitors. In the end, the hegemon's weakness is increasingly evident and it becomes vulnerable to challenges from potential rivals.

In the final reading, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger presents a realist interpretation of the global war on terrorism. The author discusses the impact of the events of September 11, 2001, on the course and conduct of American foreign policy. He argues for a strong response to the events of September 11 because the "whole structure of the security of the post-war world will disintegrate" if the United States fails to respond to an attack on its own territory. Finally, Dr. Kissinger offers some insights into how the war on terrorism is likely to affect U.S. relations with its traditional European allies as well as with Russia, China, and South Asia.

A Critique of Realist Theory

As we have discussed, classical realism and the more contemporary neo-realism offer important and unique insights into the essential characteristics of international relations. Like any theory of international relations, however, the realist paradigm has both strengths and weaknesses. From a practical standpoint, realist theory offers a set of simple, straightforward principles that have guided political leaders in their decision making for many years. These pragmatic guidelines strip away moral and idealistic notions of how states *should* act or how international dialogue is to be conducted. Rather, the focus is on how nations actually *do* behave within the international system, both individually and collectively.

Realism also has some valid strengths from a historical, scholarly standpoint. From the ancient Greek historian Thucydides to contemporary scholars like Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, there is certainly a wide body of historical evidence to support the realists' supposition that states are locked in a struggle for power that can, and often does, lead to war.

Realists contend, as well, that history tends to favor their approach to international relations theory. The conflict between Athens and Sparta, the conditions that led to the Cold War, and even the U.S. war with Iraq in 2003 all serve as case studies and provide data to support an argument for realism.

That so much of history can be used to support the realist perspective and that so many leaders and policymakers have relied on realist principles are valid, if somewhat self-serving, testaments to the strength of the theory. We must also acknowledge, however, some problems in applying realism to conditions in our world today. As we shall see in the next chapter, liberal theorists argue that realism places too great an emphasis on conflict while underestimating the role of international institutions in promoting cooperation. The nature of international competition has changed, and war is no longer considered a natural extension of politics among major powers. Perhaps most dramatically, nuclear weapons have made the pursuit of power using war or armed conflict dangerous and costly. It is fairly safe to assume that war between two nuclear powers would be unwinnable.

Aside from the devastating consequences, the use of force—under most conditions—is less acceptable in today's increasingly interdependent world. In its emphasis on conflict, realist theory tends to ignore the current expansion of cooperation between states. Further, the international conditions that allow for, indeed even promote, cooperation between nations challenge the neo-realist notion of anarchy. Certain generally accepted rules and norms—as well as the institutions that establish and uphold them—play an important role in facilitating and promoting an appropriate climate for cooperation. Anarchy, even anarchy ordered by a specific power structure as neo-realists describe, does not offer an adequate explanation for the kind of cooperation and transnational linkages so common in our contemporary world.

With this idea of extended cooperation, we can see some other weaknesses of realist theory. States are no longer the only important actors on the international stage. International organizations, like the United Nations, and nongovernmental organizations, such as multinational corporations and environmental organizations, perform important functions in maintaining stability and expanding cooperation worldwide.

Another problem confronting realism is the increasing relevance of substate actors such as terrorists. Realists contend that states are the primary actors on the international stage and that all other identities are less important to our understanding of global affairs. Surely the events of September 11 and the current global war on terrorism highlight the significant security threat posed by global terrorist networks like Al Qaeda.

And we must question, too, whether states, particularly under these more complex global conditions, can be considered truly unitary actors in the realist sense. Can a nation be viewed monolithically, able to make coherent decisions based strictly on considerations of the national interest? The politics of a state, both internal and external, are more likely a messy business, full of compromise and competing interests. That the actions of a state reflect rational, consistent cost-benefit calculations based purely on self-interest, as realist theory suggests, is, at the very least, difficult to prove.

One final weakness in the case for realism is the theory's inability to account for peaceful change. According to realists, change in the international system can only come about from, and is often the catalyst for, war. In the wake of the Cold War and peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union, we might say that realism is left holding the theoretical bag on the phenomenon of peaceful change.

Twenty-first century society is more and more characterized by the spread of consumerism and the free exchange of ideas and technology, by expanded economic and political ties, and by growth through cooperation and conflict resolution through peaceful means. Without some sort of modification, proponents of realist theory might be put in a difficult position if these trends continue well into the next decade.

In response, realists would question whether the international politics of today are, indeed, so different from the past. The latest war with Iraq certainly demonstrates that war between nations is not an obsolete concept. Moreover, the continuing tension between India and Pakistan offers almost daily reminders of the realist principles of power politics and the utility of nuclear deterrence. Finally, the contemporary tragedies in Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda, to name just a few examples, provide ample evidence that violence and conflict are still very much a part of our world.

Key Concepts

Anarchy refers to the lack of a central authority or government to enforce law and order between states and throughout the globe.

Balance of power is a policy aimed at maintaining the international status quo. According to this theory, peace and stability are best preserved when power is distributed among five or more states and no single state has a preponderance of military power.

Hegemon A state with overwhelming military, economic, and political power that has the ability to maintain its dominant position in the international system.

Neo-realism is a variant of realism that contends that the struggle for power among states is the result of the anarchic structure of the international system as a whole, rather than a fundament of human nature.

Power politics are policies in which force, or the threat of force, is the primary method used to further a state's interests. According to realists, international relations is a struggle for power and security among competing states.

Rational actor refers to the realist assumption that states generally pursue attainable, prudent goals that are commensurate with their power (capability) to achieve.

Security dilemma is the result of fear, insecurity, and lack of trust among states living in an anarchic international system. States arm themselves in order to pursue the rational goal of self-preservation. But by arming themselves, more fear and insecurity is created among other states. These states, in turn, also increase their armaments. Even though a state may be arming itself for purely defensive purposes, this process makes all states within the system less secure and fuels an arms race.

Self-help system is the neo-realist concept that, in an anarchic international system where there is no overarching global authority (like a world government) to enforce peace and stability, each state is responsible for its own survival and cannot rely on the help of other states.

¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), p. 5.