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# INTRODUCTION

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide provides summaries of all of the major theories covered during the IB Global Politics course

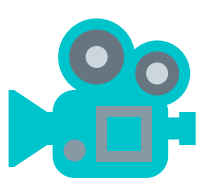
These theories are relevant regardless of whether you are studying Global Politics at HL or SL

It is essential that you are familiar with the key points relating to each theory and that you can make links between your theoretical knowledge and real world events. Suggestions for relevant case studies to explore in further depth are given in each section

In order to keep this guide brief and suitable as a quick reference resource, it is expected that you will develop your understanding through carrying out your own further reading and research. Suggestions of useful links and resources are provided for each theory discussed.



Whenever you see this symbol it provides a definition of a key concept from the course



By clicking on this icon throughout this booklet you will be able to view a YouTube clip that explains the concept or theory in more detail



Clicking on this symbol will take you to a useful internet resource for the theory or concept



Indicates a brief summary of key points from a particular section of the guide

# WHAT IS A THEORY?

## THE ROLE OF THEORIES IN GLOBAL POLITICS

We can all watch the news and see what is happening in the world. One state may have gone to war with another state. Perhaps there is a territorial dispute or a change of government has led to a change in a state's foreign policy. Maybe the UN Security Council has imposed sanctions on a rogue state. All of these are not uncommon.

However, what differs is the way in which different people react to and view these developments. What I see as a sensible decision by a particular state might seem to you to be reckless and dangerous.

Why do we see these things differently?

The reason is because our world view is influenced by our thoughts, prejudices and assumptions. We may see the same events taking place but we view them in different ways. This goes some way to beginning to explain what we mean by a theory. It is a lens; a way of viewing the world that is shaped by the assumptions we make.

Another way of defining a theory is to say that it is a set of connected ideas and assumptions that attempts to explain why something happens the way it does and to predict what may happen in a given situation or set of circumstances.

## A WORD OF WARNING

**1** When we talk about theories of international relations such as realism and liberalism, it is tempting to make statements such as 'The USA is realist' or 'The Netherlands use liberal theory'.

This is not correct.

It is important to understand that theories are developed by political scientists and those who study Global Politics and International Relations - people just like you, in fact - in an attempt to explain why states behave the way they do.

**2** Secondly, the majority of theories make no comment on whether the behaviour of states is moral or ethical. Rather, they tend to talk about events in terms of whether they make strategic sense or not.

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# R

REALISM

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# REALISM

"IN AN IDEAL WORLD, WHERE THERE ARE ONLY GOOD STATES, POWER WOULD BE IRRELEVANT"

JOHN MEARSHEIMER

Realism - and we will discuss the different strands of this theory shortly - is one of the most dominant theories of international relations of recent times. It is so called because supporters of realist theories suggest it is realist in its nature. By this they mean that realism attempts to explain the world as it is in reality - rather than describing the world as we would like it to be. This means that realism can sometimes be seen as ignoring the moral or ethnical implications of a particular event such as a territorial conflict.

The key focus for realist theoriest is power. For realists, Global Politics is Power Politics



Power is a central concept in the study of global politics and a key focus of the course. Power can be seen as ability to effect change and, rather than being viewed as a unitary or independent force, is as an aspect of relations among people functioning within a social organization. Contested relationships between people and groups of people dominate politics, particularly in this era of increased globalization, and so understanding the dynamics of power plays a prominent role in understanding global politics.

There are two main schools of thought in relaism and this can considered as classical realism (sometimes referred to as human nature realism) and structural realism. However, both strands of realist theory share two key assumptions upon which the theory is developed:

- 1 Humans are, by their nature, selfish and competition.
- 2 There is no higher authority than the state. We can describe this by saying states operate in an anarchic system



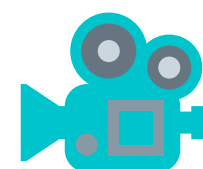
To a large extent, it makes sense to think of classical realists as more focused on human nature - they believe natural human selfishness and competitiveness is the primary driver of state behaviour - while structural realists focus more on what they see as the anarchic nature of the international system.

## CLASSICAL REALISM

We could argue that the distinguishing feature of classical realism is the fact that its proponents - theorists like Hans Morganthau - claim to base the theory on a rather pessimistic but, they would argue, realistic view of human nature.



Niccolo Machiavelli, writing back in in the early 1500s in Florence, claimed that political life is inevitably characterized by strife which forces leaders to rule through cruelty, cunning and manipulation.



This view is supported by the work of Thomas Hobbes (see Lesson 9 Unit 1) who argued that the strongest of all human desires is the desire for power. The problem, as Hobbes pointed out, is that no single individual or group is in a strong enough position to dominate society and therefore establish a system of orderly rule over society. So, what is the result? Hobbes claimed that a situation would ensue that he termed 'a state of nature'



According to Hobbes, a state of nature could be compared to an ongoing civil war between members of society. In his words, life in a state nature is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' - you can see why realists are sometimes accused of being pessemistic!

Hobbes suggests that the only solution to this state of nature is the creation of a sovereign power - one that could not be challenged. Essentially, by this he means the creation of the state.

## CLASSICAL REALISM AND GLOBAL POLITICS

If thinkers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes were talking about how individuals and groups behave within a particular society then it is reasonable to ask what this has to do with Global Politics and international relations. What can it tell us about the way in which states interact with each other?

Let's go back to the second of the key assumptions underpinning realist theory (see Page 4) which assumes that states operate in an anarchic international system because there is no higher authority than the state. So, if we think of the international system as like Hobbes' state of nature but applied to states rather than individuals then it starts to make sense.



If we then accept the claim made by classical realists that, because we are human, we are ego driven and self seeking, it is reasonable to see conflict between and amongst ourselves as inevitable in all aspects of social life.

We can then develop this further - as theorists such as Morgenthau do - and claim that the inherent egoism that is part of our human nature creates what we might call state egoism, leading to an international system characterised by rivalry and the desire of each state to pursue its own national interests above all things.

## REALISM AT THE STATE AND SUB-STATE LEVEL

Realist thinkers tend not to be too concerned with what goes on at the sub-state level (any level of analysis below the state) and focus their attention on the ways in which states behave in, what realists claim is, an anarchic international system. So, they are concerned with the behaviour of states in a structure in which there is no higher authority than the state itself. This has led to some theorists to criticise the key assumptions of realism as incorrect, particularly supporters of the Liberalist Theory of International Relations (see Page ???)



1. Classical realism is built upon its assumption that human nature is intrinsically selfish and competitive
2. Builds on historical work by Machiavelli and Hobbes amongst others
3. This strand of realism assumes that states operate in an anarchic international system
4. Realist theory is concerned with the behaviour of states and largely ignores behaviour at the sub-state level

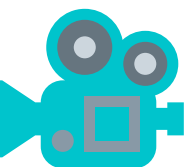
## STRUCTURAL REALISM

Structural realism, whilst still very much part of the wider realist school of thought, differs from classical realism in one very important aspect.

Unlike classical realists, who base their theory on the assumption that human beings are selfish and egoistic, structural realists, such as John Mearsheimer, argue strongly that it is the nature of the international system - the global political structure - that causes states to behave as they do and, like classical realists, base their theory on a set of key assumptions.

### ASSUMPTIONS OF STRUCTURAL REALISM

1. STATES OPERATE IN AN ANARCHIC GLOBAL SYSTEM
2. ALL STATES POSSESS AT LEAST SOME FORM OF OFFENSIVE MILITARY CAPABILITY
3. STATES CAN NEVER KNOW THE INTENTIONS OF OTHER STATES
4. THE PRIMARY GOAL OF ALL STATES IS SURVIVAL
5. STATES ARE RATIONAL ACTORS



### THE NATURE OF THE GLOBAL SYSTEM

To understand why structural realists places such importance on the fact that the international structure is anarchic you must understand the difference between anarchy and hierarchy. In this context, both are what we might call ordering principles.

Hierarchy is the ordering principle in almost all domestic politics - by which we mean politics inside a state. The political structure is organised in a top-down manner meaning that if we, as citizens of a state, need help or protection we can, we hope, call upon the authorities to help us. So, if I am assaulted or robbed I can call upon the agents of the state, in the form of the police, to assist me.

But, the international system is anarchic which is the opposite of hierarchical. If a state needs help or protection then there is no higher authority upon which it can call. As John Mearsheimer puts it, 'there is no higher authority than the state, no night watchman upon whom states can call'.



CLASSICAL REALISTS BELIEVE STATES BEHAVIOUR IS THE RESULT OF HUMAN NATURE WHILE STRUCTURAL REALISTS ARGUE THAT STATES BEHAVE THE WAY THEY DO AS A RESULT OF THE STRUCTURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM IN WHICH THEY OPERATE

## ALL STATES POSSESS AT LEAST SOME FORM OF OFFENSIVE MILITARY CAPABILITY

If, as realists argue, all states possess offensive military capacity in some form or another, then it follows that all states are capable of inflicting harm upon their neighbours to some degree.

Of course, the degree to which they are capable of doing so will differ massively from state to state. For example, the USA, with its huge military capacity and nuclear capability, is capable of inflicting much more harm than a non-nuclear state with a relatively small military capability such as Ireland.

What about states without a military? After all, several states around the world do not possess a military including Costa Rica, Iceland and Andorra. It is important to distinguish between a military organisation, such as an army, and military capability. Whilst it is strictly true to say that Costa Rica, for example, does not have a military it clearly possesses military capability in the form of La Fuerza Publica.

## STATES CAN NEVER KNOW THE INTENTIONS OF OTHER STATES

Given that all states have the potential - to some extent - to pose a threat to other states, in an ideal world governments would be able to know the intentions of other states. Do they pose a threat or not?

However, whilst it is possible to know the military capability of another state is impossible, by definition, to ever know the intentions of another state. Intentions cannot be empirically verified simply because they reside in the minds of the state's leaders and decision makers.

The result of this is that states must always work on the basis that another state may choose to use force against it and be prepared to defend against that possibility - no matter how remote.





## THE PRIMARY GOAL OF THE STATE IS SURVIVAL

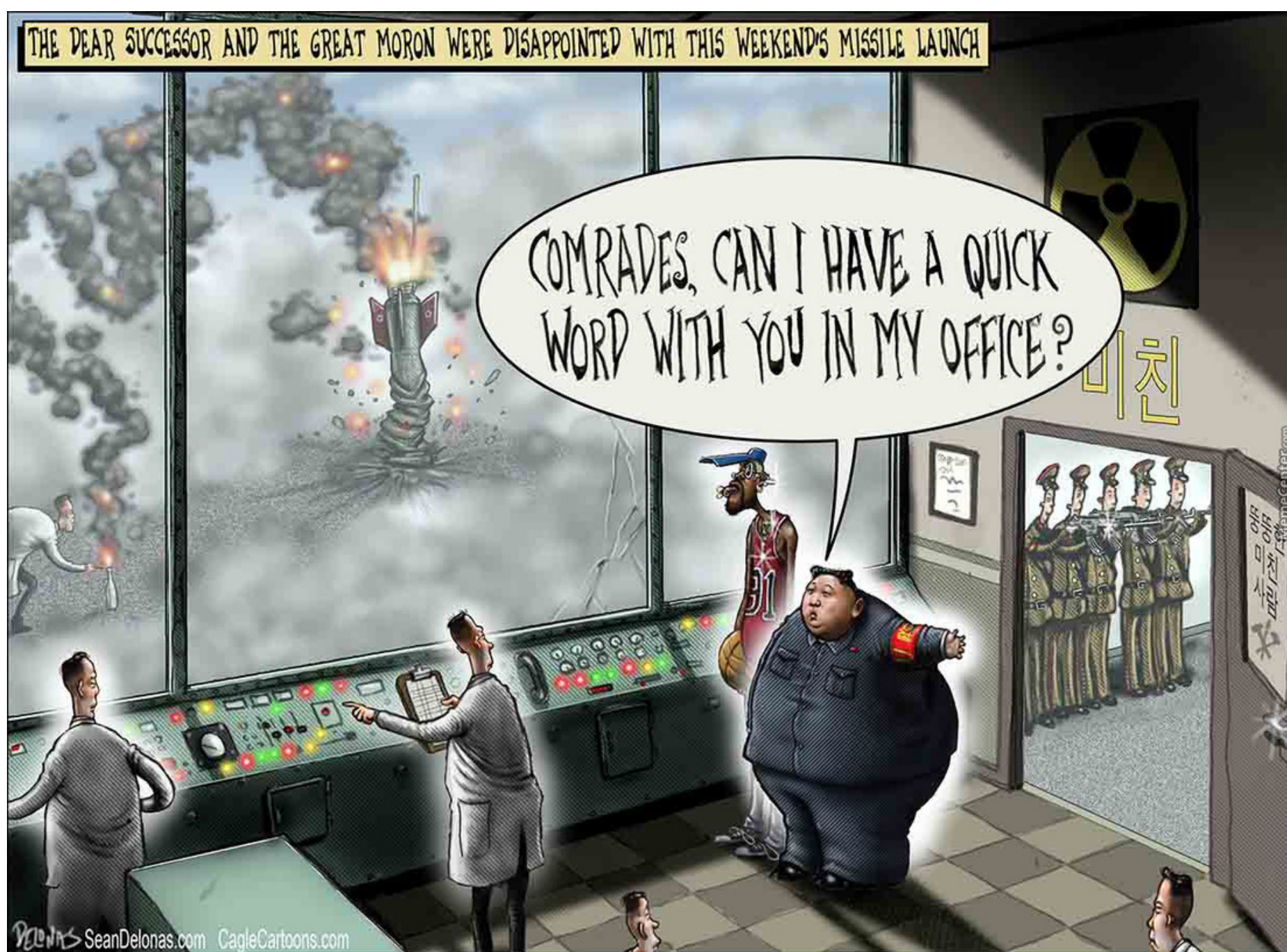
Whilst it is clear that different states around the world have different priorities, from military expansion to economic development, structural realists such as Mearsheimer argue, with justification, that the overriding goal of every state is survival. The simple reason for this is that survival of the state is a pre-requisite for all other goals a state may have.

Ultimately, the logic is that if there is no state then it cannot achieve any of its goals. It may help to compare it to your own life. Your over-riding priority is to stay alive, no matter what other ambitions you may have, on the basis that if you are dead you will not be able to achieve any of your other goals in life.

## STATES ARE RATIONAL ACTORS

In a world where world leaders are often mocked as being stupid or backward, it is important to remember that, given the previous 4 assumptions, states are rational actors.

By rational we mean that states are capable of developing strategies that maximise their prospects for survival.



Of course, because states can never know the intentions of other states they are operating with less than perfect information in an increasing complicated and interlinked world upon which to base their decision making, they can - and do - miscalculate. The key point here is to remember, states make decisions because they think it is the smartest decision to benefit them.



## HOW MUCH POWER SHOULD STATES SEEK?

We can see, then, that if we accept the five assumptions upon which structural realism is based, it makes sense for states to be more powerful than their neighbours. Put simply, in realist theory, power equals safety.

Actually, as with many things in Global Politics, it is a little more complicated than that. Structural realists can be divided into two major schools of thought when it comes to the question 'how much power is enough?'.

We have offensive structural realists - such as Mearsheimer - who argue that states should seek to maximise power wherever possible while, on the other hand, defensive structural realists - such as Kenneth Waltz - have argued that once a state amasses a certain amount of power, it can have negative consequences to amass power beyond that point.



OFFENSIVE AND DEFENSIVE STRUCTURAL REALISTS DISAGREE ON HOW MUCH POWER STATES SHOULD SEEK TO ACCUMULATE

## DEFENSIVE STRUCTURAL REALISM

Defensive structural realists, like their offensive counterparts, accept that it makes sense - in the contemporary international system - for states to be powerful. However, where they differ is in the defensive realist claim that it is foolish for states to pursue hegemony.



HEGEMONY REFERS TO A STATE HAVING DOMINANCE OVER ANOTHER STATE OR STATES. THUS, A STATE THAT HAS POWER AND INFLUENCE OVER OTHER STATES IN A PARTICULAR AREA OR REGION IS KNOWN AS A REGIONAL HEGEMON. CHINA IS AN EXAMPLE OF A REGIONAL HEGEMON.

So, how much power should states pursue according to defensive realists? Well, it's difficult to answer that as it would depend on so many other factors such as the balance of power between states and the likely reaction of neighbouring states to an increase in the power of one particular state. However, in the words of Kenneth Waltz, states should seek to gain an 'appropriate amount of power'.

We are left with the challenge, however, of explaining why defensive realists believe states should exercise restraint - to varying degrees depending on circumstance - in their pursuit of power.

## WHY DEFENSIVE REALISTS BELIEVE STATES SHOULD SHOW RESTRAINT

There are three main reasons given by defensive realists to support their claim that states should show restraint in their pursuit of power:

### 1. OTHER STATES WILL 'BALANCE' AGAINST STATE WITH EXCESSIVE POWER

Defensive realists argue that if a state becomes too powerful then other states will attempt to balance that power through strategies such as forming alliances. This will then result in the original state having less relative power than before



A good example of a leader who understood this is Otto von Bismarck who, after victories in the Austro - Prussian war (1866) and Franco Prussian war (1870-1), realised that if Germany became more powerful then its neighbours would balance against it so he decided to call a halt to German expansion.

**BALANCING ENCOMPASSES THE ACTIONS THAT A PARTICULAR STATE OR GROUP OF STATES TAKE IN ORDER TO EQUALISE THE ODDS AGAINST MORE POWERFUL STATES**

### 2. OFFENCE | DEFENCE BALANCE FAVOURS DEFENDING RATHER THAN ATTACKING STATE

The offence | defence balance shows how easy or difficult it is to conquer a territory or defeat a defender in battle. This balance is usually weighted heavily in the defenders favour meaning that any state that attempts to gain large amounts of power is likely to end up fighting a series of losing wars.

For defensive realists, this means that states will realise that offence is a futile strategy and will instead concentrate on maintaining their current position in the balance of power.



### 3. COSTS OF CONQUEST

The third point made by defensive realists in support of their claim that there is an optimum level of power to seek is that even when conquest is feasible and possible, the costs of conquering another state very often will outweigh any benefits.

One of the reasons for this is because nationalism - a potent force in many circumstances - will often make it impossible for the conqueror to fully subdue the conquered. We can look at the heroic role played by the Verzet and Maquis in Holland and France, respectively, during WWII to see this, not to mention the difficulties occupying powers have encountered more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan.



THE IDEOLOGY OF NATIONALISM IS ALL ABOUT SELF-DETERMINATION, WHICH VIRTUALLY GUARANTEES THAT OCCUPIED POPULATIONS WILL RISE UP AGAINST THE OCCUPIER

### THE STRUCTURAL REALIST COUNTER-ARGUMENT

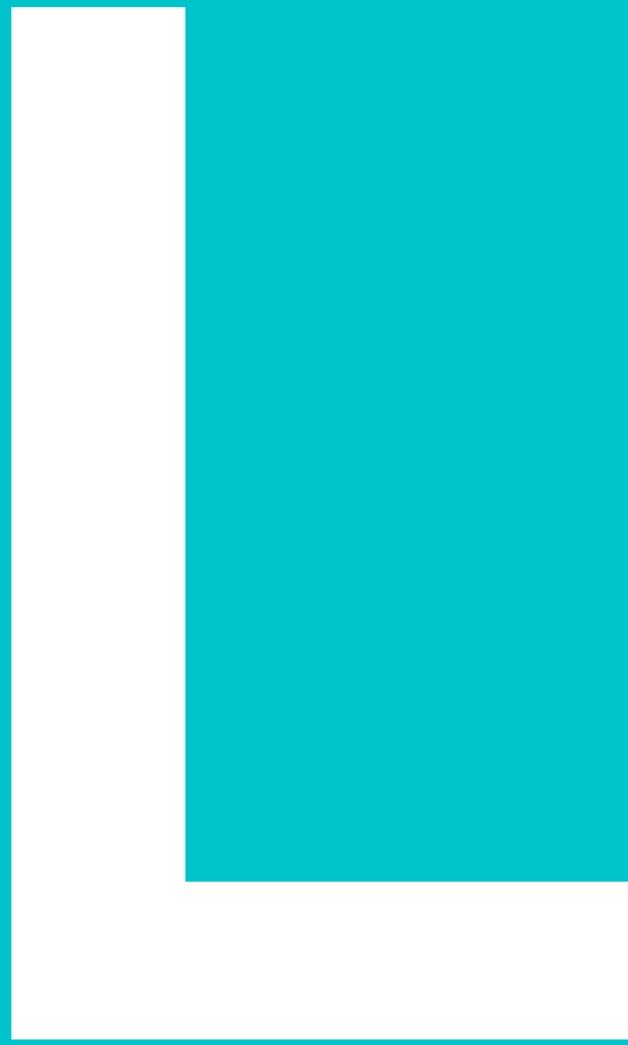
In response to the claims made by defensive realists, in support of their claim that states should seek only to achieve an 'appropriate amount of power', structural realists have responded with the following criticisms of the defensive realist position:

- Structural realists argue that balancing is often an inefficient process - especially when forming coalitions - and that a clever opposing state will be able to take advantage of its enemies as they attempt to balance against the aggressor.
- Secondly, structural realists take issue with the claim - made by defensive realists - that the defender always has a significant advantage over the attacking state. If the structural realists are correct then it follows that sometime aggression does pay dividends
- Finally, structural realists acknowledge the defensive realist claim that conquest does not always pay. However, as they point out, the flip side of this is that sometimes it does pay to pursue conquest of an adversary as a strategic goal.

### NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Both defensive and offensive realists agree, however, that nuclear weapons have little utility for offensive purposes, except where only one side in a conflict has them. The reason is simple: if both sides have a survivable retaliatory capability, neither gains an advantage from striking first.

Moreover, both camps agree that conventional war between nuclear-armed states is possible but not likely, because of the danger of escalation to the nuclear level.



**L I B E R A L I S M**

# LIBERALISM

"SEDUCTION IS ALWAYS MORE EFFECTIVE THAN COERCION, AND MANY VALUES LIKE DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND INDIVIDUAL OPPORTUNITIES ARE DEEPLY SEDUCTIVE"

JOSEPH NYE

Along with various Realist schools of thought, Liberalism is the other major theory of international relations you need to be familiar with as part of the course.

In fact, you may find it easiest to understand if you view Liberalism as a response to the theories put forward by the likes of Mearsheimer and Waltz.



LIBERALISM / LIBERAL - IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS - SHOULD NOT BE CONFUSED WITH THE WAY IN WHICH THEY ARE USED IN DOMESTIC POLITICS - MEANING LEFT OF CENTRE

While realists see the international systems as being largely characterised by conflict, Liberalism focuses on the way in which we live in a world characterised by interdependence between states. Where realists stress continuity international relations throughout the centuries, liberals see us as living in an era characterised by great change occurring at a rapid pace.

## KEY PRINCIPLES OF LIBERALISM

- Liberalism argue that, by the second half of the twentieth century, states had become so interdependent that the way in which they relate to each other had fundamentally changed



INTERDEPENDENCE IS THE IDEA THAT STATES AND THEIR FORTUNES ARE CONNECTED TO EACH OTHER

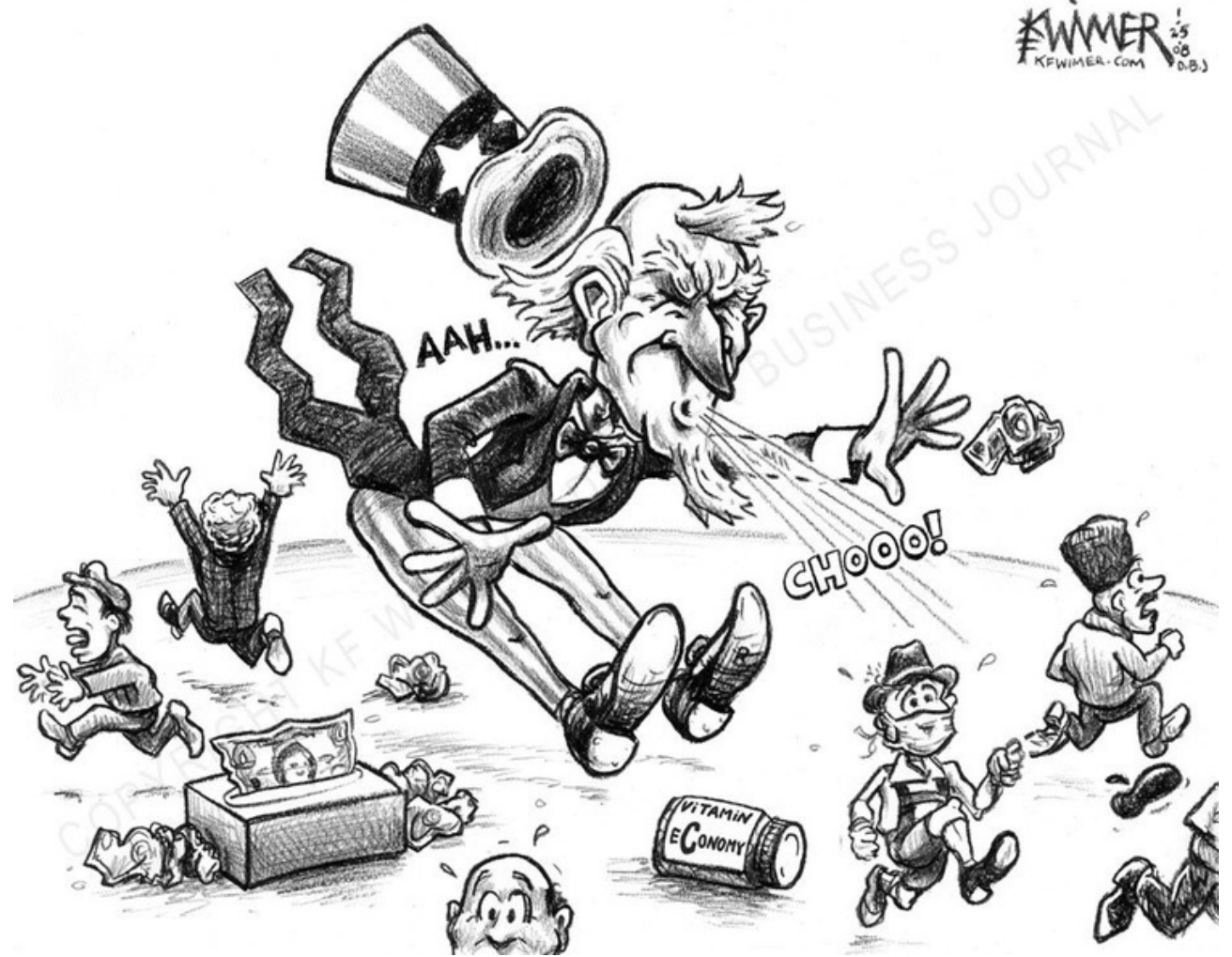
- What happens in one state can have affects on another state
- Relations between two states can greatly affect the relations between other states



Of course, it could reasonably be argued that states have always been interdependent and, to a certain extent, this is true. However, Liberals such as Joseph Nye, suggest that the form of interdependence that developed from WW11 onwards - and was largely in place by the 1970s - the now the defining characteristic of the international system,

Liberals refer to this as complex interdependence and suggest it is made up of three main elements.

- Multiple Channels
- Multiple Issues
- Decline in effectiveness of military power



## 1. MULTIPLE CHANNELS

One of the most important differences between Realism and Liberalism is that realists see states as, by far, the most important actors in the international system. Liberals do not dispute the importance of states as political actors but argue that non-state actors play a much more important role in global politics than realists assume. Non-state actors including multinational corporations (MNCs), Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and International Organisations or Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) all play their part in creating important and meaningful links across state boundaries.

Liberal theorists also make the point that substate actors play an important role developing and maintaining multiple channels in our complex, interdependent world. For example, non-multinational business import goods from other countries; provincial governments set up trade missions abroad; and we, as individuals, have friendships with others in different countries as well as travelling abroad ourselves. In the Liberal story these are all important multiple channels in our increasingly interconnected global system.

**FOCUSING ON ONLY STATE-TO-STATE RELATIONS MISSES AN IMPORTANT PART OF GLOBAL POLITICS BECAUSE STATES ARE NOT THE ONLY ACTORS TO HAVE INTERESTS THAT DRIVE THEIR ACTIONS AND NON-STATE ACTORS HAVE OWN GOALS AND INTERESTS THAT MAY DIFFERENT TO THOSE OF THE STATE**

## 2. MULTIPLE ISSUES

Whilst realists tend to focus on power as the currency of international politics, liberal theorists point out that economic, ideological, religious and cultural issues all form part of the contemporary global agenda.

This means that some issues that may be seen by realists as purely domestic in nature do, in fact, have an important international dimension. For example, a state may choose to adopt certain environmental regulations but this would likely have an effect on trading partners if imports had to meet the new standards.

We can see, therefore, that domestic policy can become foreign policy as a direct result of these connections between different states in the international system.

## 3. DECLINE IN EFFECTIVENESS OF MILITARY POWER

Finally liberal theorists argue that, as a result of increasing interdependence, the use of military power as a means of achieving foreign policy objectives has become less common and less effective. One of the main reasons for this is because many of the issues of most concern to contemporary states do not lend themselves to military action such as climate change for example. Secondly, complex interdependence means that, inevitably, states are constrained in their use of military power as this will damage the multiple interests of multiple state and non-state actors.



THE THREE COMPONENTS OF COMPLEX INTERDEPENDENCE LEAD LIBERALISM TO EXPECT MUCH MORE COOPERATION IN GLOBAL POLITICS THAN REALISM DOES

### REALISM

- International system characterised by conflict
- All states have some military capacity
- Foreign relations dominated by military alliances and rivalries

### LIBERALISM

- Liberals do not deny the existence of conflict but argue cooperation is the norm.
- States trade peacefully; sign nonaggression pacts; share military responsibilities
- Some states have small/no militaries
- Some centuries old military rivalries have been transformed into military/economic partnerships

## WHY DO STATES COOPERATE?

Given the liberal focus on cooperation as the defining feature of the international system, the obvious question is 'why, if the international system is as anarchic and dangerous as realists claim, then why do states cooperate with each other in the way liberals suggest?'

According to Liberalism the answer is simple. States cooperate because it is in their own interest to do so.

1. States realize that hostile actions are likely to harm their interests as much as those of any potential rival
2. The multiple channels that connect non-state actors constrain states. Even if leaders recognize security threats and want to employ conflictual means, they often face resistance from public or powerful interest groups
3. In democracies, where opposition is legal and citizens can hold their leaders to account, multiple channels are more likely to constrain leaders from conflict



ACCORDING TO LIBERAL THEORY, THE EFFECTS OF COMPLEX INTERDEPENDENCE WILL BE MORE SIGNIFICANT IN A MORE DEMOCRATIC WORLD

4. Due to the development of nuclear weapons, force – at least all out war – is less of an option for major powers. Using the major weapon in the arsenal risks significant damage to all humanity
5. Technological developments associated with globalisation, such as mobile phones, internet, falling cost of air travel have resulted in a more connected world