CHAPTER 7

Realism

TIM DUNNE • BRIAN C. SCHMIDT

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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 which 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 which will be critically examined in this chapter. The second section will ask whether there is one Realism or a variety of Realisms. The argument presented below suggests that despite important differences, particularly between classical and structural realism, it is possible to identify a shared core set of assumptions and ideas. Section three 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. Although there are many voices claiming that a new set of actors and forces are collectively challenging the Westphalian sovereign state system, realists are generally sceptical of these claims, arguing that the same basic patterns that have shaped international politics in the past remain just as relevant today.
Introduction: the timeless wisdom of Realism

The story of Realism most often begins with a mythical tale of the idealist or utopian writers of the interwar period (1919–39). Writing in the aftermath of the First World War, the ‘idealists’, a term that realist writers have retrospectively imposed on the interwar scholars, focused much of their attention on understanding the cause of war so as to find a remedy for its existence. Yet according to the realists, the inter-war scholars’ approach was flawed in a number of respects. They, for example, ignored the role of power, overestimated the degree to which human beings were rational, mistakenly believed that nation-states shared a set of common interests, and were overly passionate in their belief in the capacity of humankind to overcome the scourge of war. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 confirmed, for the realists at least, the inadequacies of the inter-war idealists’ approach to studying international politics.

A new approach, one based on the timeless insights of Realism, rose from the ashes of 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, which included E. H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, Frederick Schuman, George Kennan, and others, who all emphasized the ubiquity of power and the competitive nature of politics among nations. The standard account of the Great Debate is that the realists emerged victorious, and the rest of the International Relations story is, in many respects, a footnote to Realism. It is important to note, however, that at its inception, there was a need for Realism to define itself against an alleged ‘idealist’ position. From 1939 to the present, leading theorists and policymakers have continued to view the world through realist lenses. The prescriptions it offered were particularly well suited to the United States’ rise to become the global hegemon (or leader). Realism taught American leaders to focus on interests rather than 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 central tradition in the study of world politics’ (Keohane 1989a: 36). This also helps to explain why alternative perspectives (see Ch.12) must of necessity engage with, and attempt to go beyond, Realism.

The theory of Realism that became dominant after the Second World War is often claimed to rest on an older, classical tradition of thought. The very idea of the timeless wisdom of Realism suggests that modern versions of realism have a long history. 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), Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527), Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). The insights that these realists offered on 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. Together, writers associated with raison d’état are seen as providing a set of maxims to leaders on how to conduct their foreign affairs so as to ensure the security of the state. Many successful leaders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have claimed to follow the timeless principles of classical realism.

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’ (Meinecke 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. For realists of all stripes, 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 will see, the assumption that the state is the principal actor coupled with the view that the environment which
states inhabit is a perilous place help 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; that is, 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 morality which attaches a positive value to caution, piety, and the greater good of humankind as a whole. 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 to traditional Christian virtues but to 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. Justification for the two moral standards stems from the fact that the condition of international politics often make it necessary for state leaders to act in a manner (for example, cheating, lying, killing) that would be entirely unacceptable for the individual. 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. Preserving the life of the state and the ethical community it envelops becomes a moral duty of the statesperson. Thus it is not the case that realists are unethical, rather they find that sometimes ‘it is kind to be cruel’.  

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 older realists 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. We argue that these ‘three Ss’ constitute the corners of the realist triangle. While we will expand on the meaning of these ‘three Ss’ later in the chapter, it is important to be clear at the outset what these terms signify.

Realism identifies the group as the fundamental unit of political analysis. During earlier times, such as when Thucydides and Machiavelli were writing, the basic unit was the polis or city-state, but since the Treaty 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 internally as manifest, for example, in the making and enforcement of law. 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 complete 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. As we will see, realists draw a variety of conclusions about the effect that anarchy has on shaping the basic character of international politics.

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 demonstrate the qualitatively different result this struggle has on international politics as compared to domestic politics (Morgenthau [1948] 1955: 25). One major factor that realists argue sets international politics apart from domestic politics is that while the latter is able to constrain and channel the power-seeking ambitions of individuals in a less violent direction (for example, the pursuit of wealth), the former is much less able to do so. For realists, it is self-evident that the incidence of violence is greater at the international than the domestic level. 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 consider themselves to be their own highest authority and do not recognize a higher power above them. 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 resulted in other states losing their existence (for example, Poland has experienced this fate four times in the past three centuries). 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 traditionally has been defined narrowly in military strategic terms. It is the ability to get what you want either through the threat or use of force. Yet irrespective of how much power a state may possess, the core national interest of all states must be survival. While states obviously have various interests, such as economic, environmental, and humanitarian, if their existence was to be jeopardized, then these other interests would not stand a chance of ever being realized. Like the pursuit of power, the promotion of the national interest is an iron law of necessity.

Self-help is the principle of action in an anarchical system where there is no global government. According to Realism, each state actor is responsible for ensuring their 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 League of Nations or the United Nations. States, in short, should not depend on other states or institutions to ensure their own security. Unlike in domestic politics, there is no emergency number that states can dial when they are in mortal danger.

You may at this point be asking what options are available to states 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 capabilities by engaging, for example, in a military arms build-up. Yet this may prove to be insufficient for a number of smaller states that feel threatened by a much larger state. This brings us to one of the crucial mechanisms that realists throughout the ages have considered to be 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 or a number of weaker states 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 in which case 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.

The peaceful conclusion of the cold war caught many realists off guard. Given that realists claim a scientific basis to their causal account of the world, it is not surprising that their 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. Various scholars emphasized the importance of individuals and the role of ideational factors in changing the behaviour of the Soviet Union. If realism was in trouble explaining the dynamics of the inter-state system, it was in even deeper water in providing a persuasive account of new developments such as regional integration, humanitarian intervention, and the emergence of a security community in Western Europe. 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. The cumulative weight of these criticisms led many to question the analytical and moral 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, by the scientific approach in the 1960s and transnationalism in the 1970s, only to see the resurgence of a robust form of structural realism in the 1980s (commonly termed ‘neo-realism’). 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 upon one of its central claims, namely, that it is the embodiment of laws of international politics which remain true across time (history) and space (geopolitics). This argument is made by a leading contemporary realist, Robert Gilpin, who cast doubt on ‘whether or not twentieth-century students of international relations know anything that Thucydides and his fifth-century BC compatriots did not know about the behaviour of states’ (1981: 227–8).

The question whether Realism does embody ‘timeless truths’ about politics will be returned to in the conclusion of the chapter. Could a scholar who understood the history of international conflict in the fifth century BC really apply the same conceptual tools to global politics at the beginning of the third millennium? In the following section we will begin to unravel Realism in order to reveal the way in which the tradition has evolved over the last twenty-five centuries. After considering the main tributaries which flow into the realist stream of thinking, the third section will establish a core set of realist principles to which all realists could subscribe.

### Key points

- Realism has been the dominant theory of world politics since the beginning of academic International Relations.
- Outside of the academy, Realism has a much longer history. Skepticism about the capacity of human reason to deliver moral progress resonates through 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 with the result that their security cannot be taken for granted. In such circumstances, it is rational for states to compete for power and security.
- At the end of the second millennium, Realism continues to attract academicians and inform policymakers, although in the period since the end of the cold war we have seen heightened criticism of realist assumptions on the grounds that they are of declining relevance in a globalized world.

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### One Realism, or many?

The intellectual exercise of articulating a unified theory of Realism has been criticized by writers who are both sympathetic to and critical of the tradition (Doyle 1997; M. J. Smith 1986). The belief that there is not one realism, but many, leads logically to a delineation of different types of realism. In the last few years a number of alternative thematic classifications have been offered to differentiate realism into a variety of distinct categories. The most simple distinction is a form of periodization that commonly differentiates realism into three historical periods: classical realism (up to the twentieth century), which is frequently depicted as beginning with Thucydides’ text on the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta and incorporating the ideas of many of those included in the classic canon of Western political thought, modern realism (1939–79), which typically takes the so-called First Great Debate between the scholars of the inter-war period and a new wave of scholars who began to enter the field immediately before and after the Second World War as its point of departure; and structural or neo-realism (1979 onwards) that officially entered the picture following the publication of Kenneth Waltz’s landmark text, *Theory of International Politics*. While these different periods...
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<th>Type of Realism</th>
<th>Key thinkers</th>
<th>Key texts</th>
<th>‘Big idea’</th>
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<td><strong>Classical realism</strong></td>
<td>Thucydides (c.460–400 BC)</td>
<td><em>The Peloponnesian War</em></td>
<td>International politics is driven by an endless struggle for power which has its roots in human nature. Justice, law, and society either have no place or are circumscribed. 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.</td>
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<td>(Human nature)</td>
<td>Machiavelli (1532[1988])</td>
<td><em>The Prince</em></td>
<td>politics is governed by laws that are created by human nature. The mechanism we use to understand international politics is through the concept of interests, defined in terms of power.</td>
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<td>Morgenthau (1948)</td>
<td><em>Politics Among Nations</em></td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td><strong>Structural realism</strong></td>
<td>Rousseau (c.1750[1991])</td>
<td><em>The State of War</em></td>
<td>The anarchical, self-help system compels states to maximize their relative power position.</td>
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<td>(International system)</td>
<td>Waltz (1979)</td>
<td><em>Theory of International Politics</em></td>
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<td>Mearsheimer (2001)</td>
<td><em>Tragedy of Great Power Politics</em></td>
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<td><strong>Neoclassical realism</strong></td>
<td>Schweller (1997), Zakaria (1998)</td>
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<td>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.</td>
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<td><strong>Rational choice realism</strong></td>
<td>Greco (1993c), Krasner (1999)</td>
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<td>Advocates of this position claim that institutions matter although the problem of relative gains means that they exert less of a causal force than neo-liberals contend. Rational choice realists use advanced social science methodologies such as game theory in order to test realist hypotheses.</td>
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suggest a neat historical sequence, they are problematic in so far as they close down the important question about divergence within each historical phase. For example, not all classical, modern, or structural realists agree on the causes of war, on what the proper relationship between power and morality should be, or on whether states are primarily motivated by defensive or aggressive impulses. 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 7.1.

**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 merely a reflection of the characteristics of the people that comprise the state. It is human nature that explains why international politics is necessarily power politics. This reduction of Realism to a condition of human nature is one which frequently reappears in the leading works of the realist canon, most famously in the work of the high priest of post-war Realism, 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. Morgenthau notes, ‘politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature’ (Morgenthau [1948] 1955: 4). The important point for Morgenthau is, first, to recognize that these laws exist and second, to devise the most appropriate policies that are consistent with the basic fact that human beings are flawed creatures. 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, a virtue that long predates the emergence of sovereignty-based notions of community in the mid-seventeenth century. Classical realists therefore differ from contemporary realists in the sense that they engaged with moral philosophy and sought to reconstruct an understanding of virtue in light of practice and historical circumstance. Two paradigmatic 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) is considered to be a classic example of the impact that the anarchical structure of international politics 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.

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. Case study 1 (Box 7.1) 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
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. . . . And we ask you on your side not to imagine that you will influence us by saying that you, though a colony of Sparta, have not joined Sparta in the war, or that you have never done us any harm . . . 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. Then in our view (since you force us to leave justice out of account and to confine ourselves to self-interest) . . . 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. We do not want any trouble in bringing you into our empire, and we want you to be spared for the good both of yourselves and of ourselves.

Melians. And how could it be just as good for us to be the slaves as for you to be the masters?

Athenians. You, by giving in, would save yourselves from disaster; we by not destroying you, would be able to profit from you.

Melians. So you do not agree to our being neutral, friends instead of enemies, but allies of neither side?

Athenians. No . . . if we were on friendly terms with you, our subjects would regard that as a sign of weakness in us, whereas your hatred is evidence of our power . . . So that by conquering you shall increase not only the size but the security of our empire.

Melians. But do you think there is no security for you in what we suggest? For here again, since you will not let us mention justice, but tell us to give in to your interests, we, too, must tell you what our interests are and, if yours and ours happen to coincide, we must try to persuade you of the fact. Is it not certain that you will make enemies of all states who are at present neutral, when they see what is happening here and naturally conclude that in course of time you will attack them too? . . . Yet we know that in war, fortune sometimes makes the odds more level.

Athenians. Hope, that comforter in danger!

Melians. We trust that the gods will give us fortune as good as yours, because we are standing for what is right against what is wrong; and as for what we lack in power, we trust

that it will be made up for by our alliance with the Spartans, who are bound, if for no other reason, then for honour’s sake, and because we are their kinsmen, to come to our help.

Athenians. So far as the favour of the gods is concerned, we think we have as much right to that as you have . . . 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. And therefore, so far as the gods are concerned, we see no good reason why we should fear to be at a disadvantage. But with regard to your views about Sparta and your confidence that she, out of a sense of honour, will come to your aid, we must say that we do not envy your folly . . . of all people we know the Spartans are most conspicuous for believing that what they like doing is honourable and what suits their interests is just.

Melians. But this is the very point where we can feel most sure. Their own self-interest will make them refuse to betray their own colonists, the Melians.

Athenians. 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 . . . Do not be led astray by a false sense of honour. . . . You, if you take the right view, will be careful to avoid this. And, when you are allowed to choose between war and safety, you will not be so insensitively arrogant as to make the wrong choice. You will see that there is nothing disgraceful in giving way to the greatest city in Hellas when she is offering you such reasonable terms— allience on a tribute-paying basis and liberty to enjoy your own property. 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.

(This is an edited extract from Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin Classics, 1954), 360–5)
politics. Because of their vastly superior military force, they are able to present a \textit{fait accompli} to the Melians: either submit peacefully or be exterminated. The Melians for their part try and 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 ‘the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept’.

Later classical realists—notably Machiavelli and Morgenthau—would concur with Thucydides’ suggestion 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: for example, Nazi Germany and Czechoslovakia in 1939, and the Soviet Union and Hungary in 1956. The seemingly endless cycle of war and conflict confirmed in the minds of twentieth-century classical realists the essentially aggressive impulses in human nature. For Morgenthau, ‘the ‘drives to live, to propagate, and to dominate are common to all men’ (Morgenthau [1948] 1955: 30).

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. Mid-twentieth-century realists such as Butterfield, Carr, Morgenthau, and Wolfers believed that anarchy could be mitigated by wise leadership and the pursuit of the national interest in ways that are compatible with international order. Taking their lead from Thucydides, they recognized 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 the realist tenet of self-interest.

\section*{Structural realism}

Structural realists concur that international politics is essentially a struggle for power but they do not endorse the classical realist assumption that this is a result of human nature. Instead, structural realists attribute security competition and inter-state conflict to the lack of an overarching authority above states and the distribution of power in the international system. This form of realism is most commonly associated with Waltz’s \textit{Theory of International Politics}. 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 organising principles: anarchy, which corresponds to the decentralized reality 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 irrelevant in explaining international outcomes. It is the third tier, the distribution of capabilities across units, that is, according to Waltz, of fundamental importance to understanding crucial international outcomes. According to structural realists, the distribution of power in the international system is the key independent variable to 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 as to be able to differentiate and count the number of Great Powers that exist at any particular point in time. The number of Great Powers, in turn, determines the structure of the international system.

For example, during the cold war from 1945 to 1989 there were two Great Powers—the United States and the Soviet Union—that constituted the bipolar international system.

How does the international distribution of power impact on the behaviour of states, particularly their power-seeking behaviour? 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, states, according to Waltz, are security maximizers. Waltz argues that power maximization often proves to be dysfunctional because it triggers a counterbalancing coalition of states.

A different account of the power dynamics that operate in the anarchical system is provided by John Mearsheimer’s theory of offensive realism, which is another variant of structural realism. While sharing many of the same basic assumptions with 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 he also argues that not only do all states possess some offensive military capability, but there is a great deal of uncertainty about the intentions of other states. Consequently, Mearsheimer concludes that there are no satisfied or status quo states; rather all states are continuously searching for opportunities to gain power at the expense of other states. Contrary to Waltz, Mearsheimer argues that states recognize that the best path to peace is to accumulate more power than anyone else. Indeed the ideal position, although one that Mearsheimer argues is virtually impossible to achieve, is to be the global hegemon of the international system. Since he does not consider global hegemony to be feasible, primarily because of the difficulty of projecting power across large bodies of water, ‘the world is condemned to perpetual great-power competition’ (2001: 2).

**Contemporary realist challenges to structural realism**

While offensive realism does represent an important contribution to realism, some contemporary realists are sceptical of the notion that the international distribution of power alone can 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 level into their explanation of international politics. While systemic factors are 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 the motivation of states. 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 such important intervening variable is leaders themselves, namely how they perceive the international distribution of power. There is no objective, independent reading 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 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 neo-realism exhibiting a profoundly status quo basis (Schweller 1996). Schweller returns to the writings of realists such as Carr, Morgenthau, and Kissinger 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 and direct resources from the societies that they rule. Fareed Zakaria (1998) introduces the intervening variable of state strength into his theory of state-centred realism. State strength is defined as the ability of a state to mobilize and direct the resources at its disposal in the pursuit of particular interests. Neoclassical realists argue that different types of 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’.

There is still another group of realist thinkers who accept the basic assumptions of realism and yet are aware of the fact that the theory is incomplete. These figures—whom we call rational choice realists—recognize that anarchy does not prevent durable patterns of cooperation from occurring under certain specified conditions. The key difference between structural realists and rational choice realists turns on the role of international institutions. While Mearsheimer believes that institutions ‘have mattered rather little’ in international politics (Mearsheimer 1994/5: 49), rational choice realists see institutions playing an important role. Even for realists, institutions can fulfil several important functions such as binding weak states into the international order and providing a bargaining chip to encourage unstable states to give up dangerous military technologies for membership in a regime or institution. What is immediately apparent here is that rational choice realists are seeking to apply realism to all states rather than just the Great Powers.

Rational choice realists have much in common with neo-liberals. Both assume that units (whether individuals or states) are rational and that they seek to maximize their utility (see Ch.9). Both point to widespread evidence of cooperation across a range of economic and security issue-areas. Set against this overlap, key differences remain. Rational choice realists recognize that anarchy casts a permanent shadow over cooperative arrangements. Under anarchy, there is a continual fear of cheating, and a concern with uneven distributional gains. Even here, rational choice realists argue that relative gains problems can potentially be overcome. Joe Grieco argues, for example, that side payments can be made to disadvantaged states in order to alter their incentives to cooperate (Grieco 1993a). While rational choice realists are not a cohesive group of scholars with a clearly identified position, it is apparent that their method-driven approach to Realism is opening up a significant research programme that engages with neoliberalism without losing sight of enduring features of the realist tradition such as the primacy of state power and the problem of anarchy.

Given the varieties of Realism that exist, it is hardly surprising that the overall coherence of Realism as a tradition of inquiry into international relations has been questioned (Forde 1992: 62). The answer to the question of ‘coherence’ is, of course, contingent upon how strict the criteria are for judging the continuities which underpin a particular theory. Here it is perhaps a mistake to understand traditions as a single stream of thought, handed down in a neatly wrapped package from one generation of realists to another. Instead it is preferable to think of living traditions like Realism as the embodiment of both continuities and conflicts. For this reason it is important for students to read realists in their historical and political contexts, to try and understand the world they were speaking to and the forces they were reacting against.

While there is intellectual merit in dividing Realism into distinct categories, there are good pedagogical reasons for attempting to identify a shared core of propositions to which all realists subscribe (see section below, ‘The essential Realism’). In the first instance, there is virtue in simplicity; complex ideas can be filtered, leaving a residual substance which may not conform to any one of the ingredients but is nevertheless a virtual representation of all of them. A second reason for attempting to arrive at a composite Realism is that, despite the different strands running through the tradition, there is a sense in which all realists share a common set of propositions. These will be considered in the third section of this chapter.
The previous paragraphs have argued that Realism is a theoretical 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, self-help. Each of these elements is considered in more detail in the subsections below.

### 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. In terms of its internal dimension, to illustrate this relationship between violence and the state we need look no further than Max Weber’s famous definition of the state as ‘the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’. 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, then, for the realist is to organize power domestically. In this respect, ‘every state is fundamentally a Machstaat’ or power state (Donelan 1990: 25). Only after power has been organized, can community begin.

Realist international theory appears to operate according to the assumption that, domestically, the problem of order and security is solved. The presence of a sovereign authority domestically implies that individuals need not worry about their own security, since this is provided for them in the form of a system of law, police protection, prisons, and other coercive measures. This allows members of the political community living ‘inside’ the state to pursue the good life. However, on the ‘outside’, in the relations among independent sovereign states, insecurities, dangers, and threats to the very existence of the state loom large. Realists largely 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. Yet it is worthwhile to evaluate critically the assumptions that are being made here. In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, is it really the case that you always feel secure inside your own state? Is the inside/outside distinction that realists draw between peace and security on the one hand, and violence and insecurity on the other hand defensible?

Realists claim that in anarchy, states compete with other states for security, markets, influence, and so on. And 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. This international legal aspect of sovereignty functions as a ‘no trespass sign’ placed on the border between 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 United States 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 states is infinitely complex, and often is reduced to counting the number of troops, tanks, aircraft, and naval ships a country possesses in the belief that this translates to the ability to get other actors to do something they would not otherwise do.

There have been a number of criticisms of how realists define and measure power. Critics argue that Realism has been purchased at a discount precisely because its currency, power, has remained under-theorized and inconsistently used. Simply by asserting that states seek power provides no answer to crucial questions. Why do states struggle for power? Why is the accumulation of power, as Morgenthau argued, ‘always the immediate aim’? Surely power is a means to an end rather than an end in itself? How much power do states want? Is there not a difference between the mere possession of power and the ability to change the behaviour of others?

Contemporary structural realists have in recent years sought to bring more conceptual clarity to bear on the meaning of power in the realist discourse. 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 the relative economic success of Japan over China. 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 with the realist treatment of power concerns its exclusive focus upon state power. For realists, states are the only actors that really ‘count’. Transnational corporations, international organizations, and ideology-driven terrorist networks, such as Al Qaeda, rise and fall but the state is the one permanent feature in the landscape of modern global politics. The extent to which non-state actors bear the imprint of a statist identity is further endorsed by the fact that these actors have to make their way in an international system whose rules are made by states. There is no better example of this than the importance of American hegemonic power ‘underwriting’ the Bretton Woods trading system which has set the framework for international economic relations since 1945. The motivation for this was not altruism on the part of the USA but the rational calculation that it had more to gain from managing the international system than to lose by refusing to exercise leadership. Moreover, realists argue that an open, free-trade economic system, such as that which was established at Bretton Woods, depends on the existence of a hegemon who is willing to shoulder the financial burdens of managing
the system. This realist argument, popularly known as hegemonic stability theory, maintains that international economic order is dependent on the existence of a dominant state.

**Survival**

The second principle which unites realists of all persuasions is the assertion that, in international politics, the pre-eminent goal is **survival**. Although there is an 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 for security. Survival is held to be a precondition for attaining all other goals, whether these involve conquest or merely independence. According to Waltz, ‘beyond the survival motive, the aims of states may be endlessly varied’ (1979: 91). 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 and Joseph Grieco (1997) argue that states have security as their principal interest and therefore only seek 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. States, according to this view, always desire more power and are willing, if the opportunity arises, to alter the existing distribution of power even if such an action may jeopardize their own security. 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.

Niccolo 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 will enable leaders to maintain their hold on power. Machiavelli derived these maxims from his experience as a diplomat and his studies of ancient history. One of the most important maxims was that princes or sovereigns must be prepared to break their promises if it is in their interests, and to conquer neighbouring states before the letter (inevitably) attack them.

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 which apply in domestic politics. The task of understanding the real nature of international politics, and the need to protect the state at all costs (even if this may mean the sacrifice of 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 up of consequences; the realization that individual acts of an immoral kind might have to be taken 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’. An ethic of responsibility is frequently used as a justification for breaking the laws of war, as in the case of the United States’ decision to drop nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The principal difficulty with the realist formulation of an ‘ethics of responsibility’ is that, while instructing leaders to consider the consequences of their actions, it does not provide a guide to how state leaders should weigh the consequences (M. J. Smith 1986: 51).

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. Without a common culture, and common institutions, the idea of an ‘international com-
munity’, so frequently articulated by journalists, is seriously premature. E. H. Carr turned scepticism about moral universals into a ‘critical weapon’ which he wielded in order to reveal how the supposedly universal principles adumbrated by the Great Powers (such as the virtue of free trade or self-determination) were really ‘unconscious reflexions of national policy’ (Carr 1946: 87). This moral relativism has generated a substantial body of criticism, particularly from liberal theorists who endorse the notion of universal human rights.

Self-help

Kenneth Waltz’s Theory of International Politics (1979) brought to the realist tradition a deeper understanding of the international system within which states coexist. Unlike many other realists, Waltz argued that international politics was not unique because of the regularity of war and conflict, since this was also familiar in domestic politics. The key difference between domestic and international orders lies in their structure. In the domestic polity, citizens do not have to defend themselves. In the international system, there is no higher authority to prevent and counter the use of force. Security can therefore only be realized through self-help. In an anarchic structure, ‘self-help is necessarily the principle of action’ (Waltz 1979: 111). 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 very difficult to trust one another and often view the intentions of others in a negative light. Thus the military preparations of one state are likely to be matched by neighbouring states. The irony is that in the end, 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 (i.e. prudent statecraft). Waltz argues that balances of power result irrespective of the intentions of any particular state. In an anarchical system populated by states that seek to perpetuate themselves, alliances will be formed that seek to check and balance the power against threatening states. A fortuitous balance will be established through the interactions of states in the same way that an equilibrium is established between firms and consumers in a free economic market (according to classical liberal economic theory). Classical realists are more likely to emphasize the crucial role 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.

There is a lively debate among realists concerning the stability of the balance of power system. This is especially the case today in that many argue that the balance of power has been replaced by an unbalanced unipolar order. It is questionable whether other countries will actively attempt to balance against the United States 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 not only a justification for the establishment of government, but 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 mitigates 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 freedom 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 provided other states do not respond in kind. 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.

The contemporary liberal solution to this problem of collective action in self-help systems is through the construction of regimes (see Ch.16). In other words, by establishing patterns of rules, norms and procedures, such as those embodied in the World Trade Organization (WTO), states are likely to be more confident that other states will comply with the rules and that defectors will be punished. Contemporary structural realists agree with liberals that regimes can facilitate cooperation under certain circumstances, although realists believe that in a self-help system cooperation is ‘harder to achieve, more difficult to maintain, and more dependent on state power’ (Grieco 1993b: 302). One reason for this is that structural realists argue that states are more concerned about relative than absolute gains. 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 (see Ch.9).

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**Key points**

- **Statism** is the centrepiece of Realism. This involves two claims. First, for the theorist, the state is the pre-eminent actor and all other actors in world politics are of lesser significance. Second, state ‘sovereignty’ signifies the existence of an independent political community, one which has juridical authority over its territory.

- **Key criticism:** statism is flawed both on empirical (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. All other goals such as economic prosperity are secondary (or ‘low politics’). In order to preserve the security of their state, leaders must adopt an ethical code which judges actions according to the outcome rather than in terms of a judgement about whether the individual act is right or wrong. If there are any moral universals for political realists, these can only be concretized in particular communities.

- **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 upon to guarantee your survival. In international politics, the structure of the system does not permit friendship, trust, and honour; only a perennial condition of uncertainty generated by the absence of a global government. Coexistence is achieved through the maintenance of the balance of power, and limited cooperation is possible in interactions where the realist state stands to gain more than other states.

- **Key criticism:** self-help is not an inevitable consequence of the absence of a world government; self-help is a logic that states have selected. Moreover, there are historical and contemporary 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 opened by considering the often repeated realist claim that the pattern of international politics—wars interrupted for periods characterized by the preparation for future wars—have 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. In the concluding paragraphs below, we will briefly argue that the importance of Realism has not been diminished by the dynamics of globalization. We will do so by initially challenging the argument that economic interdependence has made war less likely. We then argue that the state continues to be the dominant unit in world politics. Finally, we claim that globalization should not be seen as a process that is disconnected from the distribution of power in the international system; in this sense, this current phase of globalization is fundamentally tied to Westernization and, to be even more specific, Americanization.

One variant of the globalization thesis, propounded by Francis Fukuyama, was that the end of the cold war represented the logical triumph of Liberalism. According to this thesis, Realism was increasingly seen to be an anachronism—a cold war way of thinking whose time had passed. The fact that structural realists in particular believed the bipolar system would continue well into the twenty-first century (Waltz 1979: 210), further contributed to the sense that realism was in decay. Critics of structural realism were right in pointing to its inability to anticipate the great upheavals of 1989–91. Yet many realists have provided explanations to account for the end of the cold war and do not regard it to be a major anomaly for realism. For a more detailed discussion of this controversy, see Case study 2 (Box 7.2).

Realism's strongest riposte lies not so much in challenging a liberal interpretation of the end of the cold war as in questioning the extent to which liberals' optimism in the spread of democracy, in the growth of free trade, and the general pacification of world politics will have traction in the future. The crucial moment that brought the post-cold war era to an end was of course that fateful Tuesday morning in September 2001 when Al Qaeda terrorists flew hijacked planes into the World Trade Center and the
Pentagon. In the days immediately after the attack, President George W. Bush and a coalition of leaders from other states declared themselves to be fighting a war against terrorism. The two US-led wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, and the general climate of fear and insecurity caused by acts of terror, suggests a serious flaw in the liberal argument that war had become obsolescent.

Not surprisingly, leading realist thinkers have been quick to seize on the apparent convergence between our experience since 11 September 2001 (‘9/11’) and the cycle of violence predicted by the theory. There were, however, some apparent contradictions in the realist account of the conflict. To begin with, the attacks on the US homeland were committed by a non-state actor. Had one of the significant norms of the Westphalian order become unhinged, namely, that war happens between sovereign states? Not only was the enemy a global network of Al Qaeda operatives, their goal was unconventional in that they did not seek to conquer territory but to challenge by force the ideological supremacy of the West. Set against these anomalies, the leading states in the system were quick to identify the network with certain territorial states—the Taliban Government of Afghanistan being the most immediate example, but also other pariah states which allegedly harboured terrorists. The United States was quick to link the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq with its global war on terror. Moreover, rather than identifying the terrorists as transnational criminals and using police enforcement methods to counter their threat, the USA and its allies defined them as enemies of the state who had to be targeted and defeated using conventional military means.

For realists such as John Gray and Kenneth Waltz, 9/11 was not the beginning of a new era in world politics so much as a case of ‘business as usual’ (see their essays in Booth and Dunne 2002). What matters most, argues Waltz, are the continuities in the structural imbalance of power in the system and the distribution of nuclear weapons. Crises are to be expected because the logic of self-help generates periodic crises. Their analysis is a stark rejoinder to the more idealist defenders of globalization who see a new pacific world order emerging out of the ashes of the previous order. According to realists, 9/11 was never going to trigger a new era in governance: the coalition of the willing that was forged in the immediate aftermath was, in Waltz’s terms, ‘a mile wide’, but only ‘an inch deep’. How prophetic those words have proven to be. The war against Iraq was executed by the USA with the UK being the only significant diplomatic and military ally. Not only did most states in the world oppose the war, leading American realists were public in their condemnation (see Box 7.3). Iraq, they argued, could have been
Box 7.4  Key concepts in realist thought

**Anarchy**  Does not imply chaos, but the absence of political authority.

**Anarchical system**  The ‘ordering principle’ of international politics, and that which defines its structure.

**Balance of power**  Refers to an equilibrium between states; historical realists regard it as the product of diplomacy (contrived balance) whereas structural realists regard the system as having a tendency towards a natural equilibrium (fortuitous balance).

**Capabilities**  Population and size of territory, resources, economic strength, military capability, and competence (Waltz 1979: 131).

**Defensive realism**  A structural theory of realism that views states as security maximizers.

**Dual moral standards**  The idea that there are two principles or standards of right and wrong; one for the individual citizen and a different one for the state.

**Ethic of responsibility**  For historical realists, an ethic of responsibility is the limits of ethics in international politics; it involves the weighing up of consequences and the realization that positive outcomes may result from amoral actions.

**Idealism**  Holds that ideas have important causal effect on events in international politics, and that ideas can change. Referred to by realists as utopianism since it underestimates the logic of power politics and the constraints this imposes upon political action.

**Inter-dependence**  A condition where the actions of one state impact upon other states (can be strategic interdependence or economic). Realists equate interdependence with vulnerability.

**Hegemony**  The influence a great power is able to establish on other states in the system; extent of influence ranges from leadership to dominance.

**Hegemonic stability theory**  A realist-based explanation for cooperation that argues that a dominant state is required to ensure a liberal, free-trade international political economy.

**International system**  A set of interrelated parts connected to form a whole. Systems have defining principles such as hierarchy (in domestic politics) and anarchy (in international politics).

**National interest**  Invoked by realists and state leaders to signify that which is most important to the state—survival being at the top of the list.

**Neoclassical realism**  A version of realism that combines both structural factors such as the distribution of power and unit-level factors such as the interests of states (status quo or revisionist).

**Offensive realism**  A structural theory of realism that views states as security maximizers.

**Power**  Defined by most realists in terms of the important resources such as size of armed forces, gross national product, and population that a state possesses. There is the implicit belief that material resources translate into influence.

**Relative gains**  One of the factors that realists argue constrains the willingness of states to cooperate. States are less concerned about whether everyone benefits (absolute gains) and more concerned about whether anyone may benefit more than someone else.

**Self-help**  In an anarchical environment, states cannot assume other states will come to their defence even if they are allies. Each state must take care of itself.

**Sovereignty**  The state has supreme authority domestically and independence internationally.

**State**  A legal territorial entity composed of a stable population and a government; it possesses a monopoly over the legitimate use of force; its sovereignty is recognized by other states in the international system.

**Statism**  The ideology which supports the organization of humankind into particular communities; the values and beliefs of that community are protected and sustained by the state.

**State of war**  The conditions (often described by classical realists) where there is no actual conflict, but a permanent cold war that could become a “hot” war at any time.

**Structure**  In the philosophy of the social sciences a structure is something which exists independently of the actor (e.g., social class) but is an important determinant in the nature of the action (e.g., revolution). For contemporary structural realists, the number of Great Powers in the international system constitutes the structure.

**Survival**  The first priority for state leaders, emphasized by historical realists such as Machiavelli, Meinecke, and Weber.
deterring both the security of the United States and its neighbours in the Middle East. Furthermore, a costly military intervention followed by a lengthy occupation in the Middle East has weakened the USA’s ability to contain the rising threat from China. In short, the Bush presidency has not exercised power in a responsible and sensible manner.

The above is not to suggest that Realism is only useful as a guide to understanding seemingly enduring patterns of war and conflict. It will continue to serve as a critical weapon for revealing the interplay of national interests beneath the rhetoric of universalist sentiments. There is no better example of this in contemporary world politics than the foreign policy of the USA. The war on terror is frequently defended in universalist terms—in his State of the Union address in the run-up to the Iraq war, President George W. Bush described the gathering storm as a fight between the forces of good versus evil. Behind the rhetoric of universal values, the USA has used the war to justify a wide range of policy positions that strengthen its economic and military power while undermining various multilateral agreements on arms control, the environment, human rights, and trade.

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. What is important about a realist view of globalization is the claim that rudimentary transnational governance is possible but at the same time it is entirely dependent on the distribution of power. 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 United States. 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 any 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 of federalists to rekindle the idealist flame, Europe continues to be as divided by different national interests as it is united by a common good. As Jacques Chirac put it in 2000, a ‘united Europe of states’ was much more likely than a ‘United States of Europe’. Outside of Europe and North America, many of the assumptions which underpinned the post-war international order, particularly those associated with human rights, are increasingly being seen as nothing more than a Western idea backed by economic dollars and military ‘divisions’. If China continues its rate of economic growth, it will be more economically powerful than the USA by 2020 (Mearsheimer 1991: 398). By then, realism leads us to predict, Western norms of individual rights and responsibilities will be under threat. Rather than transforming global politics in its own image, as Liberalism has sought to do in the twentieth century, the West may need to become more realist in order for its traditions and values to survive the twenty-first.

For further information and case studies on this subject, please visit the companion web site at www.oup.com/uk/booksites/politics.
**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 than an Athenian student during the time of *The Peloponnesian War*?
4. Do realists confuse a *description* of war and conflict with an *explanation* of why it occurs?
5. Is Realism anything more than the ideology of powerful, satisfied states?
6. How would a realist explain the war on terrorism?
7. Will the West have to learn to be more realist, and not less, if its civilization is 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?
11. Were realists right to oppose the 2003 war against Iraq?
12. Do the foreign policies of states conform to realist prescriptions?

**GUIDE TO FURTHER READING**

For a general survey of the realist tradition


Classical Realism

Original sources

Twentieth-century classical realism

Structural realism
Waltz, Kenneth (1979), *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley). This the exemplar for structural Realism.
Mearsheimer, John (2001), *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton). This is the definitive account of offensive 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’.
1. Realism, *realpolitik*, and *raison d’état* are broadly interchangeable. In this chapter, Realism with an upper case ‘R’ will be used to signify the general tradition. When discussing particular realists, or types of realism (such as historical realism), lower case ‘r’ will be used.

2. A number of critical histories of the *eld* of International Relations have recently challenged the notion that the inter-war period was essentially ‘idealistic’ in character. Both Peter Wilson (1998) and Brian C. Schmidt (1998) argue that it is simply a myth that an idealist paradigm dominated the study of international relations during the inter-war period of the *eld’s* history.


4. There are a number of similar versions of this idea of a ‘shared core’ to Realism in the literature. Keohane distills the core into: state as actor, state as rational, state as power maximizer. Keohane (1989b: 39) and Gilpin (1986: 304–5) are two examples among many.

5. M. J. Smith (1986: 23). Weber is rightly regarded by Smith as the theorist who has shaped twentieth-century realist thought, principally because of his fusion of politics with power.

6. It is important to note that not all conicts results from the security dilemma (since both parties have benign intent); historically, more conicts have been caused through predator states.