

A Comparative Analysis of Realism and Neo-Realism

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Realism is indeed an intellectual tradition within the field of international relations. It encompasses various concepts and arguments regarding the nature of governments, politics, and the international system. Realism posits that the international system is characterized by anarchy, meaning there is no central authority governing states. States are considered the primary actors in this system, and they are viewed as sovereign and rational entities that act in their own national interest. Security and survival are typically identified as the main interests of states, and they constantly seek to increase their power and influence.

Classical proponents of realism include names such as Hans Morgenthau, John Herz, Arnold Wolfers, Charles Beard, and Walter Lippmann. These scholars emphasized the importance of power and the role of the state in international relations. In the past few decades, a new form of realism known as neorealism or structural realism has emerged. This development was spurred by internal and external debates that challenged certain aspects of classical realism.

Prominent scholars associated with neorealism include Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt, Robert Jervis, Joseph Grieco, and Robert J. Art. They formulated neorealist theories that advocate for more systematic approaches to studying international relations. Neorealism focuses on the structural constraints of the international system, such as the distribution of power among states, rather than solely focusing on individual state behavior. This perspective aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of international relations and the dynamics between states.

Evolution of realism

The evolution of realism as a theoretical perspective in international relations can be traced back to various ancient scholars and their writings. One of the earliest examples is the Greek historian Thucydides, who focused on conflicts and competitions among Greek city-states in his work "History of the Peloponnesian War" (431-404 BC). Thucydides attributed the causes of the war to the rise of Athenian power and the fear it generated in Sparta.

Another influential figure in classical realism is the Italian writer Niccolò Machiavelli, known for his book "The Prince." Machiavelli emphasized the pragmatic use of power by rulers, urging them to be shrewd and ruthless in their pursuit of practical ends. Other notable works promoting realism include Thomas Hobbes' "Leviathan," which established the concept of anarchy and the war of all against all, suggesting that people live in a condition of insecurity and lawlessness.

Classical realists believed that while powerful sovereign states with strong governments could alter the condition of insecurity in domestic politics, the same problems of conflict and violence persisted in international relations. They emphasized the primary value of power in statecraft, and this belief in power was echoed in the writings of new classical realists of the 20th century, such as E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau. Carr, in his book "The Twenty Years' Crisis," called for a return to realism as an antidote to utopianism.

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Hans J. Morgenthau played a significant role in the development and popularization of realism. His book "Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace," first published in 1948, has been highly influential in shaping classical realism as a theoretical framework in international relations. Morgenthau's work emphasizes the importance of power in international politics and argues that the struggle for power is a central characteristic of international relations. He highlights the role of national interests, particularly security, as the primary motivators of state behaviour. According to Morgenthau, states are rational actors that seek to maximize their power and security in an anarchic international system. "Politics Among Nations" also discusses the concepts of balance of power, diplomacy, and the limitations of moral considerations in foreign policy. Morgenthau argues that international politics should be approached with a realist perspective, focusing on power dynamics and the pursuit of self-interest.

Hans J. Morgenthau's classical realism is often associated with six key principles or assumptions that he outlined in his book "Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace." These principles provide a framework for understanding international relations from a realist perspective. The six principles are as follows:

1. Politics is governed by objective laws based on human nature: Morgenthau argues that politics is rooted in the nature of human beings, specifically their self-interest, ambition, and desire for power. Realists believe that these characteristics are inherent and shape the behaviour of individuals and states in international relations.
2. The concept of interest defined in terms of power: Morgenthau asserts that the primary interest of states is power. Power is seen as the means through which states can secure their national interests, protect their security, and advance their goals. Realists consider power as the ultimate currency in international politics.
3. States as rational actors: Realists view states as rational actors that make calculated decisions to maximize their interests. States assess their options, analyze costs and benefits, and act in a manner that they perceive to be advantageous for their own survival and security.
4. Anarchy and the absence of a higher authority: Morgenthau emphasizes that the international system is characterized by anarchy, meaning there is no overarching authority or government to enforce order among states. This anarchical nature of the international system influences the behaviour of states and the dynamics of international relations.
5. The struggle for power and the balance of power: Morgenthau argues that states are engaged in a perpetual struggle for power and influence. This struggle leads to the formation of alliances and the balance of power, where states seek to prevent any one state from becoming too dominant. The balance of power is seen as a mechanism to maintain stability and prevent aggression.
6. The moral autonomy of politics: Realism asserts that politics operates based on its own principles, distinct from the realm of ethics or private morality. Morgenthau argues for a separation between political ethics and individual ethics, asserting that states must prioritize their own interests and security even if it means pursuing actions that might be considered morally questionable.

These principles form the foundation of classical realism and have had a significant impact on the study of international relations. It's important to note that these principles are not universally

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accepted, and other theoretical perspectives offer different interpretations and critiques of realism.

Based on the previous discussions and Hans J. Morgenthau's principles of realism, the key concepts of realism can be summarized as follows:

1. Anarchy: The international system is characterized by an absence of a central authority, where states exist in a self-help environment, leading to a state of anarchy.
2. State-centric view: States are the primary actors in international relations, possessing sovereignty and acting in pursuit of their national interests.
3. Power: Power is a central concept in realism. States strive to acquire and maintain power to safeguard their security, advance their interests, and maximize their influence in the international system.
4. National interests: States have specific goals and interests that they seek to protect and promote. These interests primarily revolve around security and survival.
5. Rationality: States are viewed as rational actors that weigh costs and benefits and make calculated decisions to maximize their interests.
6. Balance of power: The balance of power is a mechanism through which states seek to prevent any one state from becoming too dominant. It involves forming alliances and coalitions to maintain stability and deter potential aggression.
7. Self-help: In an anarchic system, states rely on their own capabilities and resources to ensure their security rather than depending on external actors or institutions.
8. Realpolitik: Realism emphasizes a pragmatic approach to international politics, where considerations of power and national interests take precedence over moral or ethical concerns.
9. Conflict and war: Realists acknowledge that conflicts and wars are inherent features of international relations. The competition for power and conflicting interests among states often lead to confrontations and the use of force.
10. Human nature: Realism is rooted in an understanding of human nature, which is seen as self-interested, ambitious, and driven by the pursuit of power.

These key concepts provide a framework for understanding the realist perspective in international relations, emphasizing the role of power, state behaviour, and the dynamics of the international system.

Evolution of Neo- Realism

In the early 20th century, classical realism dominated the field of international relations theory. However, the events of the 1970s challenged traditional concepts of realism. Widespread opposition to the Vietnam War, the diminishing importance of nuclear competition, the growth of international trade and transnational corporations, the decline of US economic predominance, and the oil crisis of 1973 all contributed to the emergence of a multipolar international system. These current events, along with internal debates and alternative political theories, led to a questioning of classical realism.

During the late 1970s, there was a growing movement towards more scientific and positivist approaches. The integration of theory with specific empirical behaviour became a central challenge. Classical realism faced criticism for not keeping up with the rise of alternative political theories

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during the 1960s and 1970s, which marked a decline in its evolution.

However, in 1979, Kenneth Waltz sought to reinvigorate realism by presenting a new development known as neorealism or structural realism. In his book "Theory of International Politics," Waltz aimed to steer classical realism towards a more scientific and positivist direction. He emphasized the need for a system theory of international politics, focusing on the structure of the international system and its impact on the interactions among its units. This system theory would consider forces at both the international and national levels and would have both explanatory and predictive power. Importantly, neorealism shifted the focus from the characteristics and interactions of individual states to the international system itself as the primary unit of analysis. This departure from the traditional realism view of international politics represented a fundamental shift in thinking.

The basic features of Neo-Realism

The basic features of neorealism, or structural realism, involve understanding the international system as a structured entity that shapes state behaviour. It seeks to develop a more scientific and systematic approach to international relations theory, considering the forces and dynamics at the systemic level rather than solely focusing on state attributes and interactions. This new direction opened up a new page in the evolution of realism and provided a fresh perspective on international politics.

The basic features of Neo-Realism, also known as Structural Realism are as follows-

- **Emphasis on the international system:** Neo-Realism places significant importance on the structure and dynamics of the international system as the primary focus of analysis.
- **System-level analysis:** Neo-Realism shifts the analysis from the individual state level to the systemic level. It examines how the distribution of power and the structure of the international system influence state behaviour and outcomes.
- **Anarchy and self-help:** Neo-Realism maintains the assumption of an anarchic international system, where states exist in a self-help environment. States are driven by their own self-interests and seek to ensure their security and survival.
- **Balance of power:** Neo-Realism recognizes the role of the balance of power in maintaining stability. It suggests that states form alliances and engage in power-balancing strategies to prevent the dominance of one state and deter aggression.
- **Rational actors:** Neo-Realism views states as rational actors that make calculated decisions based on their perceived interests and the relative power dynamics within the international system.
- **Importance of power:** Power is a central concept in Neo-Realism. States strive to acquire and maintain power to safeguard their security, advance their interests, and maximize their influence in the international system.
- **Structural constraints:** Neo-Realism highlights how the structure of the international system places constraints on state behaviour. States' actions and interactions are influenced by the distribution of power and the systemic incentives and constraints.
- **Systemic explanations:** Neo-Realism seeks to explain state behaviour and outcomes primarily through systemic factors rather than individual or domestic-level variables. It emphasizes how the structure of the international system shapes state behaviour.

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- Explanatory and predictive power: Neo-Realism aims to develop theories that explain and predict state behaviour based on systemic factors and power dynamics within the international system.

Realism VS Neo Realism

Realism and Neo-Realism (also known as Structural Realism) are two related but distinct perspectives within the field of international relations. While both share certain fundamental principles, they also differ in their emphasis and approach. Here are the key points of comparison between Realism and Neo-Realism:

1. Focus:

Realism: Realism places emphasis on the individual state as the primary actor in international relations. It focuses on state behaviour, national interests, and the balance of power.

Neo-Realism: Neo-Realism shifts the focus to the international system itself. It examines the structure of the system, the distribution of power, and the systemic factors that shape state behaviour.

2. Level of Analysis:

Realism: Realism primarily operates at the state level of analysis, considering factors such as state capabilities, national interests, and power dynamics between states.

Neo-Realism: Neo-Realism operates at the systemic level of analysis. It looks at how the structure of the international system and the distribution of power among states influence state behaviour.

3. Nature of Anarchy:

Realism: Realism views anarchy as a condition of the international system, where there is no central authority governing states. This leads to competition and conflict among states.

Neo-Realism: Neo-Realism sees anarchy as a systemic feature that shapes state behaviour. It emphasizes the self-help nature of states in an anarchic system and the role of power dynamics in shaping state interactions.

4. Unitary vs. Structural Focus:

Realism: Realism emphasizes the individual state as the primary unit of analysis. It examines state behaviour, interests, and power struggles.

Neo-Realism: Neo-Realism shifts the focus to the structure of the international system. It looks at how the distribution of power and systemic factors influence state behaviour.

5. Explanatory Power:

Realism: Realism seeks to explain state behaviour based on individual state characteristics, national interests, and power struggles between states.

Neo-Realism: Neo-Realism aims to explain state behavior based on systemic factors, such as the distribution of power, systemic incentives, and constraints.

6. Normative Concerns:

Realism: Realism tends to be more value-neutral and focuses on describing and explaining the international system as it is, rather than prescribing how it should be.

Neo-Realism: Neo-Realism is primarily focused on explaining and understanding state behaviour in terms of systemic factors, and it is less concerned with prescribing normative solutions.

While Realism and Neo-Realism share a common foundation in emphasizing power, national interests, and state behaviour, Neo-Realism introduces a systemic perspective that places greater emphasis on the structure of the international system and its impact on state interactions. It aims to

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provide a more systematic and structural understanding of international relations, building upon the insights of classical Realism.

Evaluation of Realist Theory

Realist theory has made significant contributions to the field of international relations and has shaped our understanding of global politics. It provides valuable insights into the dynamics of power, state behaviour, and the anarchic nature of the international system. Realism's emphasis on self-interest, the pursuit of power, and the primacy of the state as the main actor has helped shed light on various aspects of international relations.

One of the strengths of realist theory is its realistic assessment of the inherent competition and conflict that exists among states. It recognizes that states prioritize their own security and survival, often leading to power struggles and the use of force. Realism's focus on power and security provides a useful lens for analysing state behaviour, alliances, and the balance of power.

However, realist theory also has its limitations. Critics argue that it overlooks important factors such as ideology, non-state actors, and the role of institutions in shaping international relations. Realism's emphasis on power and self-interest can lead to a pessimistic view of international cooperation and downplay the potential for collective action to address global challenges.

Furthermore, realist theory's narrow focus on state behaviour and systemic factors can limit our understanding of other important aspects of international relations, such as the role of ideas, norms, and identity. It can also neglect the significance of economic interdependence, cultural factors, and the impacts of globalization.

In conclusion, realist theory has played a crucial role in shaping our understanding of international relations, particularly in highlighting the centrality of power, self-interest, and the anarchic nature of the international system. While it provides valuable insights, it is important to complement realist perspectives with other theoretical approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of global politics. Incorporating insights from liberalism, constructivism, and other perspectives can help provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities and nuances of international relations.

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