

# Theories of International Relations

## ***Classical Realism***

Classical Realism, being a part of the broader paradigm of political Realism, has its roots in the work of Thucydides.

Classical Realism is concerned with the world as it is rather than how it is ought to be. In other words, it is an empirical paradigm. According to Classical Realism, international conflict and war exist because human nature is imperfect, and thus humans are inherently selfish.

Consequently, international politics are a struggle for power because every group, like every individual, has expansive desires rooted in survival instinct and soon extend beyond it. The will-to-live becomes the will-to-power.

Classical Realism is based on the following axioms: 1) states are the principal units in the international system, 2) the international system is anarchic and competitive, 3) states are rational actors that are called to survive in a context of uncertainty, 4) security ranks first among the states' interests, 5) security is ensured through the acquisition of power, 6) states resort to war to serve their interests and their political aims; thus war is a legitimate means to state's ends, 7) international law does not play any significant role and, even if it does, it just benefits the most powerful states, 8) international organizations are a tool that major powers use to serve their interests.

## ***Neorealism***

Neorealism subscribes to the principal axioms of Classical Realism. However, Neorealists further maintain that: 1) states are identical units (in regards to their functions) that exist inside an anarchic international system, 2) this system inherently creates constraints to states' actions and determines the kind of relations that they develop with each other, 3) international institutions reflect the power distribution inside the system, and thus they are a tool in the hands of the great powers, 4) the behavior of states does not derive from their internal characteristics and the political procedures that take place inside of them, but is determined by the systemic constraints.

According to Kenneth Waltz, the roots of war do not only exist in the imperfect and selfish human nature, but they can also be found in the level of state (war-prone states) and, most notably in the level of the international system (it provides the context inside of which war flourishes).

Self-help is necessarily the principle of action in an anarchic order. Due to the uncertainty that exists in the system, states cannot be sure of their neighbors' intentions or trust other states, and

thus they have to remain on standby. The determinant variable in the international system is the distribution of power.

### ***Offensive Realism***

For offensive realists, security is scarce. Uncertainty about the intentions of other states combined with the anarchical nature of the international system compels states to maximize their power relative to other states and seek superiority, rather than equality, to make themselves more secure and thereby increase their odds of survival.

That leads to great powers adopting competitive, offensive, and expansionist policies whenever the benefits exceed the costs. Specifically, since intentions are never evident and a state might become more aggressive in the future, all states adopt a worst-case scenario and, therefore, increase their power through expansion, leading to high levels of competition. There is no amount of power that a state can be content with. The ultimate goal of every big power is to become the global hegemon.

### ***Defensive Realism***

Defensive realism holds that the international system provides incentives for expansion only under certain conditions. For defensive realists, security is plentiful. Major powers seek to maximize their security by preserving the existing balance of power through mostly defensive strategies. States strive to maximize relative security, not relative power.

Defensive realists maintain that the international system encourages states to pursue moderate and restrained behavior to ensure their survival and safety. These scholars contend that states should acquire an appropriate amount of power necessary for them to thrive. They should, however, not maximize their relative power in a quest to become hegemons.

The rationale is that aggression, competition, and expansion to maximize power through primacy and preponderance are unproductive because they will provoke the security dilemma and the formation of an opposing coalition that will undermine their position, and thereby thwart the state's effort to increase its security.

Therefore, the theory predicts greater variation in internationally driven expansion and suggests that states ought to pursue moderate strategies as the best route to security generally. Cooperation is risky, but so is competition.

### ***Neoclassical Realism***

The central tenets of Neoclassical Realism are that foreign policy is the result of international structure, domestic influences, and also complex relations between the two. Opposing the Neorealists' assumption that the pressures from the system are immediately translated into units' actions, Neoclassical Realists point out that there is no immediate transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behavior.

Rather, they argue that the impact of power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. They suggest that there is a chain between a country's relative power in the anarchic system, the domestic-level variables that channel, mediate and redirect pressures from the system, and its foreign policy outcome.

Systemic pressures and incentives may shape the general direction of foreign policy without being strong or precise enough to determine the specific details of state behavior. That is because foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, and so it is their perceptions of relative power that matter, not simply relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being.

What systemic pressures can do, is to significantly limit the menu of foreign policy choices considered by a state's leaders at a particular time, rather than force the selection of one particular item on that menu over another.

### ***Liberalism***

According to liberalism, the international system consists of states, international governmental and non-governmental organizations, and regional forms of integration. Liberalism doubts the existence of purely antagonistic relations inside the international system due to the presence of various forms of economic and political cooperation, which increase the interdependence in the system.

Security can be achieved through interstate cooperation. Liberalism rejects the axiom of states' rational behavior and the abstract concept of national interest. Instead, it specifies the national interest of states as the result of inner processes.

For liberals, the state is a representative institution constantly subject to capture and recapture by domestic social coalitions. These social coalitions define state "preferences" in world politics at any point in time. Moreover, the notion of national interest is widened to encompass other state interests except for national security, for example, pure economic interests and wealth seeking.

Furthermore, liberals argue that each state seeks to realize distinct preferences under constraints imposed by the different interests of other states. However, they do not assume these divergent

interests as uniformly zero-sum. At the same time, liberals reject the utopian notion of an automatic harmony of interest among individuals and groups in international society.

Although the international system is anarchic and competitive, it shows a certain level of order due to the developed forms of international cooperation and the influence of international law on state behavior

### ***Neoliberalism***

Neoliberalism is the evolution of Liberalism and a useful supplement to Realism. Neoliberalism and Neorealism assume similar positions regarding the international system: 1) states are the main actors, 2) they act rationally and 3) international anarchy shapes their behavior. Neoliberalists, however, maintain that international institutions play a decisive role in enhancing cooperation and stability in the system.

International institutions cannot eliminate the possibility of war because states still act in their interests. Moreover, cooperation should not be viewed as the absence of conflict or potential conflict. Without the ghost of conflict, there is no need to cooperate.

Nevertheless, international institutions can promote greater cooperation between states by offering a platform through which greater coordination and cooperation can be executed, benefitting both parties. That is because institutions provide an arbitrary body that can provide states with information preventing other states from cheating. According to Neoliberalism, states try to ensure, above all else, absolute gains and potential longer-term gains out of an agreement.

Lastly, it is argued that hegemonic leadership in the system can sustain a pattern of order, which is desired due to the hegemon's ability to preserve stability in the system. Hegemony depends on a certain kind of asymmetrical cooperation that successful hegemons support and maintain.

A hegemon's regime may contain norms and principles justified based on values extending beyond self-interest and regarded as obligatory on moral grounds by other governments. Principles, norms, rules, and procedures all contain injections about behavior. They imply obligation, even though these obligations are not enforceable through a hierarchical legal system.

### ***Constructivism***

Constructivism is a set of parallel scientific approaches that criticize the known paradigms, primarily those under the positivist tradition, because they do not sufficiently examine how the interests of the international politics' actors come into being and how these interests are linked to their identity.

Constructivism sees how international relations function as socially constructed, implying that they can be subject to reconstruction. In other words, meanings are not fixed but can change over time depending on actors' common beliefs.

Constructivists suggest the comprehension of international politics in terms of shared social norms, beliefs, ideas, perceptions, expectations, and knowledge and not in terms of power and material forces, which gain significance only within the structure embodied in and define the margins of their action.

Henceforth, international actors' understanding of the international system is not an independent variable since their identities and interests are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature. Accordingly, their foreign policy is being influenced because a society identifies itself determines its foreign policy.

For example, the security dilemma is a social structure in which states are suspicious about the intentions, which results in them arming themselves. Constructivists stress that self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy, because states gain knowledge regarding the importance of power and accept it as a basic rule of action.

### ***Marxism***

The marxist paradigm of international relations maintains that groups struggle for the distribution of resources. Within this struggle, the class that manages to control the means of production prevails and shapes the social construction in such a way so that it preserves its dominance upon them. Therefore, the state is a tool of the ruling class to maintain its dominance.

Hence, states are not the primary units because they are just the creation of the ruling classes and represent the existing relations of production. The core units are the classes that know no borders. The supreme national interest remains the security of the state and the security of the ruling class.

The international system is divided into two major parts accounted for the two existing classes, that of the capitalist class and that of the working class. The international system is inherently antagonistic in both the political and economic spheres, with the latter being the most important. However, it is not necessarily anarchic since the capitalist class has overall dominance. On the other hand, inside the socialist system, antagonism does not exist. Nonetheless, war between these two sides is inevitable.

As far as power is concerned, along with violence, they play a major role in the international system either by preserving and spreading the revolution of the working class or by expanding the capitalist spheres of influence. International law represents the result of these relations of power, and international organizations are the tools of the ruling class.

### ***Feminist Theory of War***

This theory is based on the notion that gender-based groups have diverging interests inside a given society. Gender: several socially constructed characteristics that define what we mean when we refer to masculinity and femininity.

The theory goes that males, trying to secure their place and interests, managed to legitimize masculinity in the context of society and the state through its coupling with strength, violence, aggressiveness, and antagonism. Males created a community that glorifies the notion of security, i.e. a "war state" based on patriarchal structures that promotes war along with fear and sexism. As a result, females became demoted in society because they were not considered "useful" in war.

Males took charge of society's administration, calling upon its security, and females remained on the sidelines, not having the opportunity to influence the collective decisions. In this way, a - unjustified from a biological point of view- a division of labour was established between males and females. Finally, the argument holds that the males' gender fears that if females participate in the sectors of decision-making and violence, they will be deprived of their primary role in social status.

### ***The "Clash of Civilizations"***

The "Clash of Civilizations" is a thesis formed by Samuel Huntington. It supports that the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of future conflict will be based on culture. Nation-states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. A civilization is a cultural entity that is the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.

It is defined by language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and the self-identification of people. As people define their identity in ethnic and religious terms, they are likely to see an "us" versus "them" relation existing between themselves and people of different ethnicity or religion. Huntington suggests that there are 9 major civilizations: Western, Sinic, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Orthodox, Latin American, and African.

According to Huntington, the clash of civilizations is going to occur because 1) civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most importantly, religions; 2) the interactions between peoples of different civilizations are increasing resulting in civilization consciousness being intensified; 3) economic modernization weakens the nation-state as a source of identity; 4) the growth of civilization-consciousness is enhanced because a) the West is at the peak of its power and b) a return to the roots phenomenon is occurring among non-Western civilizations; 5) cultural characteristics and differences are less easily compromised and resolved than political and economic ones 6) economic regionalism is increasing. Moreover, the clash of civilizations occurs at two levels.

At the micro-level, adjacent groups along the fault lines between civilizations struggle over the control of territory. At the macro-level, states from different civilizations compete for relative power, struggle over the control of international institutions, and competitively promote their particular political and religious values.

However, Huntington does not argue that civilization identities will replace all other identities, that each civilization will become a single coherent political entity, or that groups within a civilization will not fight each other. He claims rather, that conflicts between groups in different civilizations will be more frequent, more sustained, and more violent than conflicts between groups in the same civilization. Even though many parts of Huntington's thesis have been criticized, for example, his categorization of certain countries, it contributes to the understanding of international relations by reminding the role that culture and cultural differences play in the international system.

### ***Martin Wight's traditions: Realists/Machiavellian***

Martin Wight has categorized international politics into three traditions: Machiavellian, Grotian, and Kantian. Realists/Machiavellian:

- 1) Human nature is evil.
- 2) The international system is anarchic.
- 3) As a result of these two, war is inevitable
- 4) There is no international community; international relations are equal to the state of nature. In other words, it is a war arena.
- 5) Power is self-justifying, and politics are conducted just for the sake of politics.
- 6) Politics is the source of ethics and justice. Morality is restricted to interpersonal relations. Thus foreign policy is the field of immorality.
- 7) "Rebus sic stantibus": international treaties ought to be respected as long as the circumstances that led to them have not changed.

### ***Martin Wight's traditions: Rationalism/ Grotian***

- 1) Humans are not only bloodthirsty creatures, but they are also reasonable.
- 2) Even though the international system is anarchic, there is also an institutionalized international community.

- 3) Peace is the rule and war the exception, a necessary evil to be minimized. It must be just and declared of a competent authority.
- 4) Power is not an end in itself, but it has to be justified by a principle, in which case it transforms into authority.
- 5) There is an underlying law of nations that exists before them, although it's often violated.
- 6) "Pacta sunt servanda": international treaties and obligations resulting from international law must always be respected.

### ***Martin Wight's traditions: Revolutionism/Kantian***

- 1) They are optimistic and perfectionists regarding human nature, which they believe can be reshaped.
- 2) They pursue the creation of a society of states based on specific values.
- 3) War is just a means, but it is necessary to establish future peace based on a new homogenous international state of affairs.
- 4) Humanity is divided into good and evil; that is why war is also sacred.
- 5) Politics are conducted for the sake of the dogma
- 6) "Cum haereticis fides non servanda": you do not owe to respect the treaties agreed upon with "heretics" or states with different dogma.

### ***Regional security complex theory***

The Regional security complex theory (RSCT) suggests that substantial parts of the securitisation and desecuritisation processes in the international system manifest themselves in regional clusters.

RSCT implies that if one listed all the world's security concerns, drew a map connecting each actor with its threats and with the other actors positively and negatively involved in handling them, the resulting picture would show varying degrees of intensity. Some clusters of nodes would be intensely connected, while other zones would be crossed by only few lines. Of the groups that formed, RSCT predicts that most would be territorially based.

A Regional security complex is a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another.

### ***Sources:***



Ilias Kouskouvelis (2004) Εισαγωγή στις Διεθνείς Σχέσεις

Georgios Spyropoulos (2010) Διεθνείς Σχέσεις

John Baylis, Steve Smith, Patricia Owens (1997) The Globalization of World Politics

Kenneth Watz (1959) Man, the State, and War

Kenneth Waltz (1979) Theory of International Politics

John Mearsheimer (1995): The False Promise of International Institutions

John Mearsheimer (2001): The Tragedy of Great Power Politics

Martin Wight (1991) International Theory: The Three Traditions

Jeffrey Taliaferro (2000): Security Seeking under Anarchy

Gideon Rose (1998): Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy

Steven Lobell (2010): Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism

<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/02/13/is-there-anything-new-in-neoclassical-realism/>

Samuel Huntington (1993) The Clash of Civilizations?

In Conversation- Late Samuel P. Huntington <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-tgVEz5xMU>

Barry Buzan & Ole Waever (2003) Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security