

Lecture:

Realism, in comparison to idealism, represents a much more "hard-headed" approach to international relations. After the end of the Second World War, the leading exponent of realism was Hans J. Morgenthau. His work, Politics Among Nations, which first appeared in 1948, focuses upon the behavior of states as they pursue their interests in the international arena. Realism tends to view the state as the source of evil in the international system, but offers no viable alternative to it. Realism is based on a rather pessimistic view of human nature. (see the table in Goldstein, p.59).

The realist views the state as the individual writ large, as a larger version of the individual. Classic realists believe that human beings will always lust after power therefore states will always seek to expand or maximize their power at the expense of other states. Other realists believe that states merely seek survival rather than maximization of power, a sort of defensive realism as opposed to an offensive realism.

But, according to the classic realist perspective of world politics, war and conflict are the natural order of things in world society. War is a legitimate means of settling differences between states. International relations can be seen as a constant struggle for power between revisionist or revolutionary states which wish to change the existing distribution of power in world society and status quo or satisfied powers which wish to maintain the existing balance of power.

Revisionist states can be motivated by religion (Islamic Fundamentalists) or ideology (Marxist-Leninists) with the desire to promote their version of a just world order. Ideas may make a difference in international relations, contrary to what the realists say.

Nonetheless, according to the philosophy of realism, as states pursue their interests in their foreign policies, not very much value is placed upon international morality and ethics as constraints on state behavior. Realists place less emphasis on the moral values that lie behind the motivations of state behavior, and more emphasis is associated with the morality of the effects of state action. The realist argues that this approach saves more lives in the long run, through the skillful practice by experienced statesmen of prudent diplomacy and balance of power politics, as opposed to misplaced ideological crusades.

In connection with this, realists discount the effects of international institutions as a constraint on state behavior, since they argue that states focus on the pursuit of their national interest as opposed to international cooperation. The realist approach to international relations is sometimes identified as the power politics approach, whereby power constitutes the essence of interstate relationships in the international system.

Realism focuses on the assessments of threats and intentions and capabilities of states to one another. The classic realist places a great deal of emphasis on learning how states behave in the international system by studying diplomatic history and the application of the concept of the balance of power.

The National Interest

Moreover, realists argue that states invariably pursue their national interest in the realm of foreign policy behavior. Above all, this means ensuring the survival of the nation, and protecting its physical security, economy, and way of life. For example, the terrorist attack of 9/11 posed a serious threat to these essential aspects of the national interest of the United States. The idea of the national interest itself may be rather ambiguous depending on who is defining the concept, whether it is the ruling elites of a state or the mass public, but following 9/11, the country seemed to unite behind the necessity to wage a determined war against terrorists, even if it meant giving up some liberties in order to ensure homeland security, as the war dragged on, it became evident that a real threat to civil liberties was posed to the rights of citizens.



The concept of national interest for a state can change over time and also vary with the particular circumstances associated with a specific crisis. But in any event, it seems that states will always pursue their national interest, even if it means violating international law, if a state feels that its vital interests are at stake. Consequently, states should have a clear conception and understanding of what falls within the scope of its vital interests. For example, in the case of the United States, vital interests could be viewed as including access to oil in the Persian Gulf or ensuring that the Panama Canal does not fall into the hands of a real or potential adversary.

Power

According to the classic version of realism, power in the international system is still concentrated in the hands of states. But the distribution of power in the international system is not fixed. Power relationships between states are subject to change. Empires and great powers rise and fall. Hegemons or dominant powers in the international system may decline. The power and influence of states in the international system are based upon a number of different elements.

It is said that state A has power over state B, if it can persuade it to do C. Power translates into influence, although it is important to try and figure out why a state does or does not comply with the will of a state that is exerting pressure on it. For example, in September 2001, the US demanded that the Taliban government turn over Osama Bin Laden, but the Taliban regime refused to comply. So therefore, as Kenneth Waltz points out in his classic study *Theory of International Politics*, power must also be viewed as a process, and must be analyzed on a case-by-case basis.

Tangible and intangible elements of national power

Elements of national power can usually be divided into two categories: tangible and intangible. For example, an important element of national power consists of geography.

Geography

Russia is generally considered a land power while the United States is viewed as a seapower. According to Halford MacKinder, a Scottish geographer around the turn of the 20th century, whoever controlled the heartland (roughly equal to Eastern Europe and European Russia) of the Eurasian land mass could dominate the world. On the other hand, the U.S. Admiral Mahan argued that seapower was the key to world domination, and therefore it has been in the national interest of the U.S. to maintain the freedom of the seas, especially in the Atlantic Ocean, and to ensure that a hostile power does not gain control of the European seaboard of the Atlantic.

The geographical location and topography of a country is important. For example, Poland a country consisting mostly of flat plains has a history of being divided into spheres of influence by its more powerful neighbors. [Afghanistan](#), on the other hand, contains a forbidding topography, which makes its conquest very difficult.

Population

[Population](#) is also another important tangible element of national power. A huge population if fed, educated, and possessing skills valued in an industrial society is an asset. A large population is also a critical factor in providing manpower for armies, as France discovered during the Napoleonic wars. A huge population may be an essential condition for great power status, but is no guarantee of it, as in the case of India and China.



Consequently, a ranking of the ten most populous states in the world, would not correspond to the ten most powerful states in the world. For example, Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous state, but is not considered the world's fourth most powerful state.

Natural Resources

A third important tangible element of national power consists of natural resources, such as oil. A group of oil producing countries have joined together to form a cartel known as [OPEC](#), which in the 1970s attempted to use oil as a weapon to influence U.S. policy in the Middle East. The possibility that the Caspian Sea may contain vast new deposits of energy has resulted in renewed U.S. interest in the area, in an effort to reduce its dependence on Middle Eastern oil. The United States would also like to increase the amount of energy which it imports from Canada.

Resource wars

Furthermore, in the post Cold War era, resource wars over the control of diamonds and such minerals as cobalt have erupted in several African states (such as Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

Another important element of national power is economic power, which is usually measured in terms of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of a state. Gross domestic product equals the total amount of goods and services produced in a state in a given year. Economic wealth is important, because it is fungible. That is, gold, can be used to purchase tanks or other weapons. In the past, states pursued mercantilist policies, which were designed to acquire as much wealth as possible.

Intangible elements of national power

Intangible elements of national power such as national morale, the quality of government, will and character can also be quite important, and can compensate for the lack of tangible power. For example, a group of people may have reputation for never having been conquered by an outside invader, which would serve as a deterrent to efforts to invade the country.

Also, the quality of the leadership and government of a country also constitute another important intangible element of national power.

Alliances

Finally, a state can also enhance its power, according to the realist, by joining a military alliance such as [NATO](#). (read Goldstein's discussion of alliances carefully) Alliances may not remain the same but may change to reflect shifting balances of power, as states have no permanent friends, but only permanent interests. Weak states may also bandwagon with stronger states such as global or regional hegemony, in an effort to protect themselves.

With the end of the Cold War, NATO has evolved a new global strategy, which has resulted in its transformation from a collective defense organization to more of a collective security organization. For instance, NATO is expanding eastward into the power vacuum that was created in Eastern Europe, as a result of the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Small and medium sized East European states, which are weak from a military point of view, have focused upon becoming members of NATO, in order to provide for their security against a potentially powerful Russia in the future. President Bush has endorsed the robust expansion of NATO from the Baltics to the Balkans. It was expected that a summit meeting of NATO, scheduled to take place in Prague, the Czech Republic, in November 2002, would implement a robust enlargement of the alliance, admitting seven new members: Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania. The decision to engage in this "Big Bang" approach to NATO enlargement was



triggered by the need to involve as many NATO countries as possible in the "War against Terror". An added factor was the possibility that the United States might launch an attack against Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein from power, and adding countries such as the Black Sea states of Romania and Bulgaria to the alliance would enhance the ability of the U.S. to project its power into the Middle East. At the NATO summit meeting in November 2002, the decision indeed was made to invite the seven countries mentioned above to join the military organization. When the United States did invade Iraq in 2003, it was able to use the airspace of Romania and Bulgaria to support its military operations in Iraq. As the Iraq war opened up a rift between the United States and its traditional NATO allies of Belgium, France, and Germany, the US considered moving its military bases further East to friendlier countries like Romania. In 2004, the US unveiled a plan to do precisely this, which would involve moving approximately 70,000 troops out of Germany. Such a move would reduce the American commitment to the defense of Western Europe, and further European efforts to create their own defence force. Moving US military bases from the "old Europe" (a term coined by US Secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld, to refer to countries such as France and Germany) to new NATO members like Romania, would bring US military power closer to the arc of crisis which exists in central Asia and the Middle East.

Furthermore, following the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, for the first time in its history, NATO invoked article 5 of its Charter, which called for all of the members of the military alliance to provide aid to the United States. This took the form of AWAC radar planes engaging in patrols in the United States.