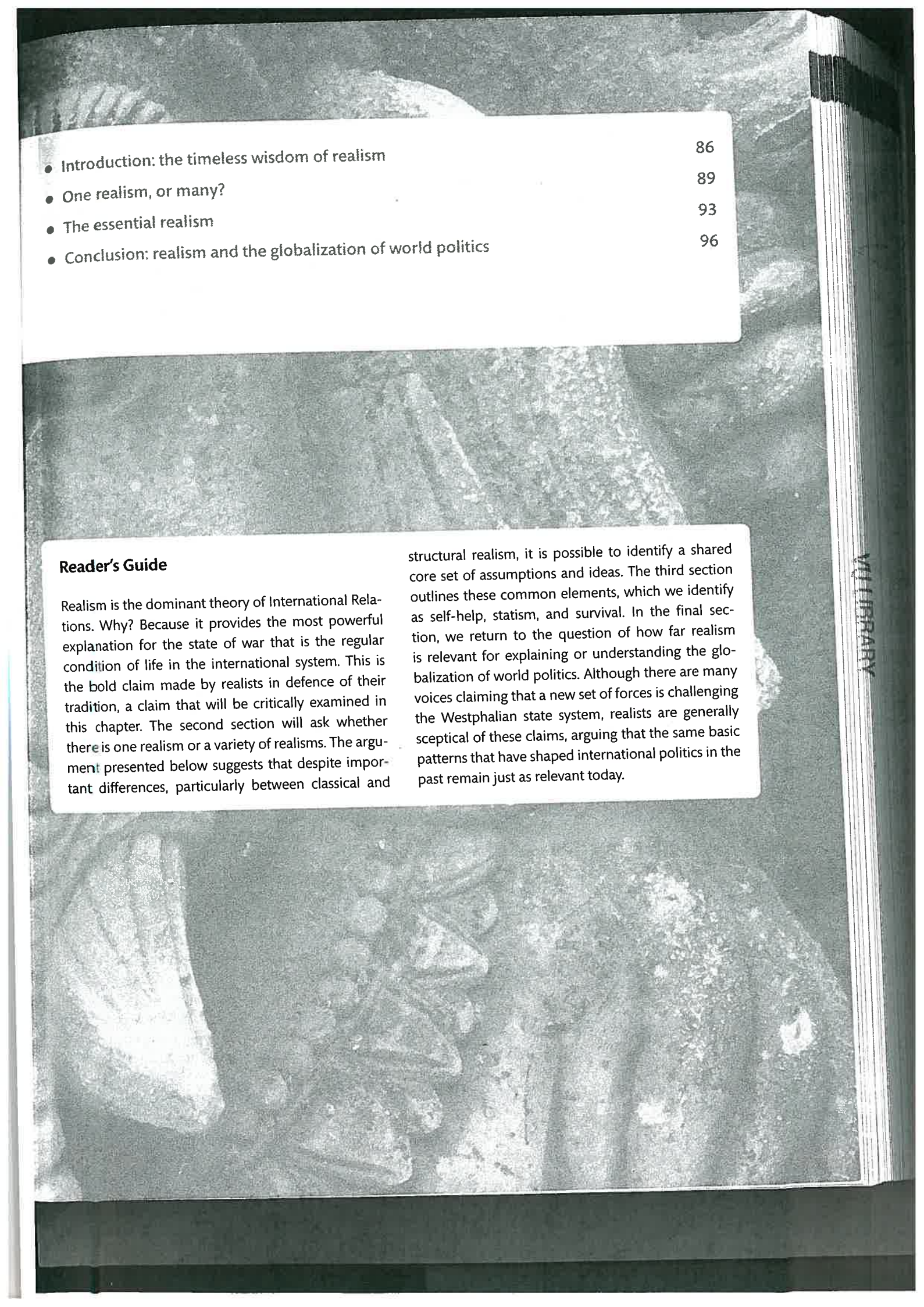


Chapter 5

Realism

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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 that 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 that 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. The third section 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 forces is challenging the Westphalian 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 inter-war period (1919–39). Writing in the aftermath of the First World War, the ‘idealists’, a term that realist writers have retrospectively imposed on the inter-war 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. For example, they ignored the role of power, overestimated the degree to which human beings were rational, mistakenly believed that **nation-states** shared a set of interests, and were overly optimistic that humankind could overcome the scourge of war. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 confirmed, for the realists at least, the inadequacies of the idealists’ approach to studying international politics.

A new approach, one based on the timeless insights of realism, replaced the discredited idealist approach.¹ 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, 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 policy-makers have continued to view the world through realist lenses. Realism taught American leaders to focus on interests rather than on 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 dominant tradition in the study of world politics. The theory of realism that prevailed after the Second World War is often claimed to rest on an older, classical tradition of thought. 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), Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78). The insights that these realists offered into 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.

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’ (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 shall see, the assumption that the state is the principal actor, coupled with the view that the environment that states inhabit is a perilous place, helps 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: 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 with traditional Christian virtues but with 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 conditions 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' (Desch 2003).

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 classical realism 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.

Realism identifies the group as the fundamental unit of political analysis. When Thucydides and Machiavelli were writing, the basic unit was the *polis* or city-state, but since the Peace 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 within its domestic borders. 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.

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 illustrate the qualitatively different result this struggle has on international politics as compared to

domestic politics ([1948] 1955: 25). 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 considers itself to be its own highest authority and does not recognize a higher power. 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 has traditionally been defined narrowly in military strategic terms. Yet irrespective of how much power a state may possess, the core **national interest** of all states must be survival. Like the pursuit of power, the promotion of the national interest is, according to realists, 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 its own well-being and survival. Realists do not believe it is prudent for a state to entrust its safety and survival on another actor or international institution, such as the United Nations. States, in short, should not depend on other states 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 who 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 many 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. Critics also maintained that realism was unable to provide a persuasive account of new developments such as regional **integration**, humanitarian intervention, the emergence of a **security community** in Western Europe, and the growing incidence of intra-state war wracking the global South. 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. Critics also contend that realism is unable to explain the increasing incidence of intra-state wars plaguing the global South. As Box 5.1 discusses, realists claim that their theory does indeed explain the incidence of intra-state conflicts. 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. 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 that remain true across time (history) and space (geopolitics). Thus while political conditions have changed since the end of the cold war, realists believe that the world continues to operate according to the logic of realism. The question whether realism does embody 'timeless truths' about politics will be returned to in the conclusion of the chapter.

Box 5.1 Realism and intra-state war

Since the end of the cold war, intra-state war (internal conflicts in one state) have become more prevalent than inter-state war. Since realists generally focus on the latter type of conflict, critics contend that realism is irrelevant to the predicament of the global South that has been wracked by nationalist and ethnic wars. But this is not the case, and realists have turned their attention to analysing the causes of intra-state war and recommending solutions.

Structural realists maintain that when the sovereign authority of the state collapses, such as in Somalia and Haiti, internal wars happen for many of the same reasons that wars between states happen. In a fundamental sense, the dichotomy between domestic order and international disorder breaks down when the state loses the legitimate authority to rule. The resulting anarchy inside the state is analogous to the anarchy among states. In such a situation, realist theory contends that the different groups inside the state will vie for power in an attempt to gain a sense of security. Barry Posen (1993) has applied the key realist concept of the **security dilemma** to explain the political dynamics that result when different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups suddenly

find themselves responsible for their own security. He argues that it is natural to expect that security will be their first priority and that they will seek the means to perpetuate their own existence. Yet, just as in the case of states, one group's attempt to enhance its security will create uncertainty in the minds of rival groups, which will in turn seek to augment their own power. Realists argue that this revolving spiral of distrust and uncertainty leads to intense security competition and often to military conflict among the various independent groups who were earlier subject to the sovereign power of the state.

In addition to analysing the cause of intra-state wars, realists have prescribed solutions. Unlike many liberal solutions to civil and ethnic wars that rest on power-sharing agreements and the creation of multi-ethnic states, realists have advocated separation or partition. For realists, anarchy can be eliminated by creating a central government. And while the creation of multi-ethnic states might be a noble endeavour, realists argue that they do not have a very good success rate. Ethnically homogeneous states are held by realists to be more stable and less dependent on outside military occupation.

Key Points

- Realism has been the dominant theory of world politics since the beginning of academic International Relations.
- Outside the academy, realism has a much longer history in 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 such that their security cannot be taken for granted.
- At the start of the new millennium, realism continues to attract academicians and inform policy-makers, although in the period since the end of the cold we have seen heightened criticism of realist assumptions.

One realism, or many?

The intellectual exercise of articulating a unified theory of realism has been criticized by writers who are both sympathetic and critical of the tradition (M. J. Smith 1986; Doyle 1997). The belief that there is not one realism, but many, leads logically to a delineation of different types of realism. A number of thematic classifications have been offered to differentiate realism into a variety of distinct categories. The most simple distinction is a form of periodization that 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), which officially entered the picture following the publication of Kenneth Waltz's landmark text *Theory of International Politics* (1979). While these different periods suggest a neat historical sequence, they are problematic in so far as they close down the important question about divergence within each historical phase. 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 5.1.

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 that 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 classical realists who

Table 5.1 A taxonomy of realisms

Type of realism	Key thinkers	Key texts	'Big idea'
Classical realism (Human nature)	Thucydides (c. 430–406 BC)	<i>The Peloponnesian War</i>	International politics is driven by an endless struggle for power, which has its roots in human nature. Justice, law, and society have either no place or are circumscribed.
	Machiavelli (1532)	<i>The Prince</i>	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.
	Morgenthau (1948)	<i>Politics among Nations</i>	Politics is governed by laws that are created by human nature. The mechanism we use to understand international politics is the concept of interests, defined in terms of power.
Structural realism (international system)	Rousseau (c. 1750)	<i>The State of War</i>	It is not human nature but the anarchical system that fosters fear, jealousy, suspicion, and insecurity.
	Waltz (1979)	<i>Theory of International Politics</i>	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.
	Mearsheimer (2001)	<i>Tragedy of Great Power Politics</i>	The anarchical, self-help system compels states to maximize their relative power position.
Neoclassical realism	Zakaria (1998)	<i>From Wealth to Power</i>	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.

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). This 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. (See our case study, The Melian dialogue.)

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. 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

Case Study The Melian dialogue—realism and the preparation for war



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. The Case Study 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 politics. Because of their vastly superior military force, they are able to present a *fait accompli* to the Melians: either submit peacefully or be exterminated. The Melians for their part try to 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 power politics prevails in human affairs.

A short excerpt from the Dialogue appears below (Thucydides 1954/1972: 401–7). Note that the symbol [...] indicates where words have been omitted from the original text.

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. [...] 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.** [...] 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. This is no fair fight, with honour on one side and shame on the other. It is rather a question of saving your lives and not resisting those who are far too strong for you.

MELIANS. It is difficult [...] for us to oppose your power and fortune [...] Nevertheless we trust that the gods will give us fortune as good as yours [...]

ATHENIANS. 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. [...] 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. [...] 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.

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.

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 relative distribution of power in the international system. 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 organizing principles: anarchy, which corresponds to the decentralized realm 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 relative distribution of power in the international system is the key independent variable in 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 USA and the Soviet Union—that constituted the bipolar international system.

How does the international distribution of power impact 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 counter-balancing coalition of states.

A different account of the power dynamics that operate in the **anarchic system** is provided by John Mearsheimer's theory of **offensive realism**, which is another variant of structural realism. While sharing many of the basic assumptions of 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**. Yet because Mearsheimer believes that **global hegemony** is impossible, he concludes that the world is condemned to perpetual great power competition.

Contemporary realist challenges to structural realism

While offensive realism makes 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 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 (1996) 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 returns to the writings of realists such as 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; they also differ in terms of their ability to extract and direct resources from the societies 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 state 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'.

Given the varieties of realism that exist, it is hardly surprising that the overall coherence of the realist tradition of enquiry has been questioned. The answer to the question of 'coherence' is, of course, contingent upon how strict the criteria are for judging the continuities that 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. Despite the different strands running through the tradition, there is a sense in which all realists have a common set of propositions.

Key Points

- There is a lack of consensus in the literature as to whether we can meaningfully speak about realism as a single coherent theory.
- There are good reasons for delineating different types of realism.
- Structural realism divides into two camps: those who argue that states are security maximizers (defensive realism), and those who argue that states are power maximizers (offensive realism).
- Neoclassical realists bring individual and unit variation back into the theory.

The essential realism

The previous paragraphs have argued that realism is a theoretically 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' (M. J. Smith 1986: 23).² 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 for the realist, then, is to organize power domestically. 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. 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.

Realists claim that, in anarchy, states compete with other states for power and security. 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. 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 USA 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 is often reduced to counting the number of troops, tanks, aircraft, and naval ships a country possesses in the belief that this translates into the ability to get other actors to do something they would not otherwise do.

A number of criticisms have been made as to how realists define and measure power, many of which are discussed in later chapters. Critics argue that realism has been purchased at a discount precisely because its currency, power, has remained under-theorized and inconsistently used. Simply asserting that states seek power provides no answer to crucial questions. Why do states struggle for power? Surely power is a means to an end rather than an end in itself? Is there not a difference between the mere possession of power and the ability to change the behaviour of others?

Structural realists have attempted to bring more conceptual clarity to bear on the meaning of power. 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 of 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 ideologically 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. Yet many today question the adequacy of the state-centric assumption of realism.

Survival

The second principle that unites realists is the assertion that, in international politics, the pre-eminent goal is survival. Although there is 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 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 argue that states have security as their principal interest and therefore seek only 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 hegemonies are always willing to take risks with the aim of improving their position in the international system.

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Niccolò 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 would enable leaders to maintain their hold on power. 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 that 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 performed 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**. 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 as 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. This moral relativism has generated a substantial body of criticism, particularly from liberal theorists who endorse the notion of universal human rights. For a fuller discussion see Chapter 6.

Self-help

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 fueling 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 those of neighbouring states. The irony is that, at the end of the day, 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 anarchic system populated by states that seek to perpetuate themselves, alliances will be formed that seek to check and balance the power against threatening states. Classical realists, however, are more likely to emphasize the crucial role that 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 **unipolarity**. It is questionable whether other countries will actively attempt to balance against the USA, 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 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 militates 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 free movement 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 providing

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. 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.

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 that has juridical authority over its territory.
- **Key criticism:** statism is flawed on both 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.
- **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.
- **Key criticism:** self-help is not an inevitable consequence of the absence of a world government; it 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 by 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. But the importance of realism has not been diminished by the dynamics of globalization. It

is not clear that economic **interdependence** has made war less likely. The state continues to be the dominant unit in world politics. And 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.

Not surprisingly, realist thinkers have been quick to seize on the apparent convergence between our post-

9/11 experience 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. 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 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 that allegedly harboured terrorists. The USA rushed 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 that had to be targeted and defeated using conventional military means.

For realists such as Colin 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). For Waltz, the Iraq War illustrated the tendency for states with overwhelming power to misuse it. While neoconservatives in the Bush administration championed the virtues of American hegemony, the pre-emptive use of military force, and democracy promotion, realists viewed this as a recipe for disaster (Schmidt and Williams 2008). The liberal crusading aspect of post-9/11 American foreign policy has resulted in a number of scholars returning to the insights of classical realists such as Morgenthau and Kennan, who had earlier warned of the dangers that follow when states neglect their core national interests. Most realists argued that the Iraq War was not in the American national interest, and were public in their condemnation (see Box 5.2). Iraq, they argued, could have been deterred from threatening both the security of the USA and its neighbours in the Middle East. It is now obvious that the costly military intervention and lengthy occupation of Iraq has weakened the USA's ability to contain the rising threat from China.

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. 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. What is important about a realist view

Box 5.2 Realism against wars: an unlikely alliance?

Realists are often portrayed as advocates of an aggressive foreign policy. Such a representation has always lacked credibility. Hans Morgenthau opposed the US war against the North Vietnamese on the grounds that it defied a rational understanding of the national interest. He believed that US goals were not attainable 'without unreasonable moral liabilities and military risks' (M. J. Smith 1986: 158). The US-led war against Iraq in 2003 is the most recent example of realism's council against the use of force. As the intense round of negotiations were under way in the Security Council, in the autumn of 2002, 34 leading realist thinkers co-signed an advertisement in the *New York Times* entitled 'War with Iraq is Not in America's National Interest' (Art *et al.*, original emphasis). John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt developed this position further in early 2004. Why, they asked, had the USA given up on the policy of deterrence, which proved to be successful during the cold war? They end the article with a bold, and some might say prescient, conclusion:

This war would be one the Bush administration chose to fight but did not have to fight. Even if such a war goes well and has positive long-range consequences, it will still have been unnecessary. And if it goes badly—whether in the form of high U.S. casualties, significant civilian deaths, a heightened risk of terrorism, or increased hatred of the United States in the Arab and Islamic world—then its architects will have even more to answer for.

(Mearsheimer and Walt 2003: 59)

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 USA. 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 Europe and North America, many of the assumptions that 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 1990: 398). By then, realism leads us to predict that 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, realism may need to assert itself in the West in order for Western traditions and values to survive the twenty-first.

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 now than an Athenian student did during the Peloponnesian War?
- 4 Do realists confuse a *description* of war and conflict for an *explanation* of why they occur?
- 5 Is realism anything more than the ideology of powerful, satisfied states?
- 6 How would a realist explain the war on terror?
- 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?

Further Reading



For a general survey of the realist tradition

Guzzini, S. (1998), *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy* (London: Routledge). Provides an understanding of the evolution of the realist tradition.

Smith, M. J. (1986), *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press). An excellent discussion of many of the seminal realist thinkers.

Walt, S. M. (2002), 'The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition', in **I. Katznelson and H. V. Milner** (eds), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (New York: W. W. Norton). A state-of-the-art exposition of the realist tradition.

Twentieth-century classical realism

- Carr, E. H.** (2001), *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Palgrave). An important critique of liberal idealism.
- Morgenthau, H. J.** (1948), *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf). A foundational text for the discipline of International Relations.

Structural realism

- Keohane, R.** (ed.) (1986), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press). This collection of essays includes key chapters by Waltz, an interesting defence of realism by Robert Gilpin, and powerful critiques by Richard Ashley, Robert Cox, and J. G. Ruggie.
- Mearsheimer, J.** (2001), *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton). This is the definitive account of offensive realism.
- Waltz, K.** (1979), *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley). This the exemplar for structural 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'.
- Lobell, S. E., Ripsman, N. M., and Taliaferro, J. W.** (eds) (2009), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). A comprehensive survey of neoclassical realism.
- Zakaria, F.** (1998), *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). Puts forth his theory of state-centric realism.

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Notes

- 1 A number of critical histories of the field of International Relations have recently challenged the notion that the inter-war period was essentially 'idealist' 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 field's history.
- 2 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.