

## Introduction: the timeless wisdom of realism

According to the conventional wisdom, realism emerged victorious over idealism in the field's first Great Debate. 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 the realists argued that 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 **nation-states** shared a set of common 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. 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 who all emphasized the ubiquity of power and the competitive nature of politics among **nations** (Schmidt 2012). The standard account of the Great Debate is that the realists emerged victorious, and from 1939 to the present many theorists and policy-makers have continued to view the world through realist lenses. Realism taught foreign policy officials 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 political theorists 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**. 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. 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 notions of morality. Machiavelli argued that these principles were positively harmful if adhered to by state leaders. It was imperative that state leaders learn 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. 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 **community** to exist domestically.

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



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 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 have resulted in other states losing their existence. 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. 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 to another actor or international institution, such as the United Nations. Unlike in domestic politics, there is no emergency number that states can dial when they are in mortal danger.

What options do states have 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 by increasing its military capabilities. 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 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 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 so that 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 (see Ch. 4).

The peaceful conclusion of the cold war caught many realists off guard. The 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



Since the end of the cold war, intra-state war (internal conflicts in one state) has 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, which 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 for 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 previously 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.

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 importance of non-state actors (see Chs 7, 17, and 26). 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 (see Ch. 19). Critics also contend that realism is unable to explain the increasing incidence of intra-state wars plaguing the global South. As **Box 6.1** 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 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, only to see the resurgence of new forms of realism arise. 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 on 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 of whether realism does embody 'timeless truths' about politics will be returned to in the conclusion of the chapter.

### 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 war we have seen heightened criticism of realist assumptions.