

# Classical Realism and the Explanation of International Relations: Assessing Its Primacy

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**Abstract.** International relations is a dynamic process; therefore, studying its developments and changes is important. Since the second half of the twentieth century, international relations has encompassed not only interactions among the governments of sovereign states but also transnational relations involving individuals, groups, and societies. Transnational non-governmental organisations, multinational corporations, and other non-state actors have increasingly influenced state-centred decision-making in international relations. Examining the consequences of this influence for peace and security is a key concern of contemporary international relations.

Nevertheless, wars, crises, polarisation, arms races, and geopolitical confrontations in various regions of the world today show that the state remains the primary actor and that power remains the principal instrument in international politics. In our view, attempting to alter the nature of international relations by investigating the causes of this situation is not the most appropriate approach. Instead, attention should focus on achieving the best possible outcomes within existing conditions.

This article argues that realism is the most suitable theoretical framework for studying international relations. To this end, the article first explains the nature of international relations, then examines realism's fundamental assumptions by analysing several realist works from different historical periods to illustrate the cyclical character of events in international relations. In addition, a comparative analysis shows that realism is the foundational theory of international relations. In contrast, other theories and approaches have largely emerged from it or developed in response to it. The study presents the anarchic nature of the international system, the significance of power, and the inevitability of war as its central theses. Using comparative analysis, analogy, cause-and-effect reasoning, and correlation methods, and drawing on both theoretical and practical examples, the study concludes that realism offers the most comprehensive explanation of international events across historical periods, providing both empirical and normative interpretations. Realist theory demonstrates that theory not only emerges from practice but also influences the course of events. By shaping and dominating human thought, it affects the decisions and actions of political actors. For this reason, realism is embraced, applied, and further developed because it remains closely aligned with human nature.

**Keywords:** international relations; realism; human nature; state; power; power policy; war; conflict.

## INTRODUCTION

The main stimulus for writing this article is that current international relations reflect the principles of realist theory. However, realism is not only relevant today but has also been the strongest theory explaining international politics throughout history. For this reason, the research stands out for its relevance. This study aims to show that realism, which emerged from practice, not only explains international relations but also influences practice and helps shape policy.

First, it is necessary to clarify the essence of international relations. Throughout history, political units have taken the form of city-states, empires, colonies, and, finally, nation-states. With the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, sovereign nation-states emerged, increasing the number of political units. From the 20th century onward, individuals, groups, and societies outside sovereign governments began establishing relations with one another. Today, this tendency continues rapidly and intensively, changing the state-centric nature of decision-making in international relations and world politics. Second, explaining international relations involves not only the identities of the actors operating in this environment but also the nature of their relations. International relations are social relations. These relations, whether cooperative or conflictual, encompass political, economic, military, social, cultural, and other spheres. Thirdly, the scope of what is meant by international relations has changed over time. As long as inter-state relations were dominant, military-political relations were considered "high politics." From the 20th century onwards, social and economic relations, once regarded as "low politics" [4], also came to be considered international relations, as non-state actors' interests increasingly focused on these areas. Fourth, the question arises of the space in which international relations occur. Historically, bilateral and regional relations prevailed, and the spatial factor was not of primary importance. Therefore, regional orders were observed. It is impossible to imagine international relations without geopolitical relations. Based on this criterion, international relations can be local, regional, or global.

In the early 20th century, ideas about international relations were interpretative, focusing on explaining and interpreting specific events. The catastrophe of World War I prompted scholars and politicians to explain why war became an

instrument of foreign policy. War, a central issue in the study of international relations, has been examined from both normative and empirical perspectives. Researchers, positivists who attempt to explain international relations through objective scientific laws, argue that it should be treated as a scientific field, emphasising cause-and-effect relationships and evidence-based explanations. These scholars became prominent after the behavioural revolution in the United States in the 1950s–60s.

Although different periods of history have seen both strong and weak states in the East and the West, the modern international order is essentially Western. Debates continue over whether this reflects the strength of Western ideas or specific historical circumstances, many of which stem from exploitation and subjugation [2]. Since International Relations emerged as a field of study and professional practice in the twentieth century, it has also shown a degree of Western-centrism. The declining importance of vast territories and abundant natural resources, compared to the past, has given rise to the argument that ideas shape and generate physical power. The first academic journals on international relations include *International Conciliation* (published since 1907) and *The Roundtable* (published in Britain since 1910). The first international relations course was taught at the University of Wisconsin in 1899–1900. Some authors argue that international relations emerged in reaction to World War I, including E. Carr [12].

International relations and international politics examine relations among nation-states. Two approaches to studying the world exist: one treats the world as an external reality unaffected by theories. The other argues that the world is internal and shaped by theories, meaning we create the social world through our concepts and theories.

## METHODS

This study uses a qualitative methodology and applies historical-traditional and historical-sociological analysis, as well as comparative and normative methods, to show that classical realism remains the most suitable theory for explaining international relations across different historical periods. The analysis of major events that have shaped the development of international relations, along with the examination of works

dedicated to those events, draws on both primary and secondary sources, including scholarly books and journal articles that interpret them. Within the scope of the research, particular attention is given to the ideas of leading classical realist thinkers, especially Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Hans Morgenthau, and E. Carr. Analysing events across different historical eras helps identify recurring patterns and similarities, revealing the cyclical nature of international relations. To further demonstrate realism's significance, this paper also compares the theory with the liberal approach, particularly in the context of twentieth-century international politics.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Although the academic field of international relations was established in the 20th century, the initial ideas about inter-state relations belong to realists. The realist tradition in international relations, which emerged before our era, remained the dominant set of ideas until the second half of the 20th century. This is known as classical realism. Thinkers who advanced such ideas are considered representatives of the realist approach. Their views explain to us the nature and characteristics of inter-state relations. Their works and thoughts form the foundation of the theory and school of realism that developed with the establishment of international relations as an academic discipline.

One such thinker is the Athenian Thucydides, author of a work devoted to the Peloponnesian War fought between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians. He noted that the real cause of the war was Athens' growing power [10]. It has always been held as a law that the weak should be subject to the strong [10]. Based on human nature, conflict is the primary state of relationships. Depending on the outcome of a conflict, a certain degree of cooperation or peace may emerge. However, such peace is temporary. History, particularly as we study it through the lens of international relations, seems largely shaped by wars (whether among the powerful or in their cooperation) and their consequences. Where there is war, morality disappears. Where power prevails, considerations of justice tend to recede, and power shapes our interests. The Russia-Ukraine war, currently one of the most significant threats to international peace, illustrates this point well. It can be argued that, without the military, finan-

cial, and political support of the United States and the European Union, Ukraine would not have been able to sustain its war effort to the extent that it has.

The principle that national interests are paramount and that foreign policy must be justified in accordance with national interests is the fundamental rule of conducting international relations. Thucydides' example shows that early realist thought on international relations was based on philosophical and historical approaches to specific foreign policy problems. His work demonstrates cause-and-effect reasoning.

The realist tradition also continues in the ideas of the 16th-century philosopher and diplomat N. Machiavelli, who became famous for *The Prince*. This work plays an important role in the development of realism. In it, Machiavelli uses the Romans as an example and argues that wise rulers should pay attention not only to immediate dangers but also to potential future problems, and take measures to prevent them. He illustrates this point with an analogy to disease, emphasising that in its early stages a disease is difficult to diagnose but easy to cure. In contrast, over time it becomes easier to diagnose but harder to cure. Likewise, a ruler's wisdom lies in identifying future threats to the state early and preventing them before they become serious problems [5]. Allowing a problem to grow to avoid war ultimately serves the interests of others, because war, if inevitable, cannot be avoided but only postponed [5]. In this work, the author notes dual moral standards, stating that when the ruler faces a choice between personal morality and the interests of the state, he must choose the latter. He emphasises that the ruler should act both strong like a lion and cunning like a fox [5]. This suggests that any means necessary to ensure the state's international security stems from human nature.

In the development of the realist school, the English philosopher T. Hobbes and his work *Leviathan*, which reflects his views on the world and international relations, hold a special place. Hobbes explained international relations by comparing them to the pre-civil state of humanity, the "state of nature" [3, 9]. In this view, Hobbes, like other classical thinkers, argued that no single world government exists in international relations; therefore, the situation is anarchic and dangerous. In such a situation, survival and security become the state's primary goals.

The Leviathan, a sea monster, is also referenced in theology and mythology. Life without a strong government is not worth living; there is no concept of good and evil, and human desires are governed by nature. The natural state is anarchy. For this reason, both the strong and the weak, driven solely by survival, entered into a social and security contract and created a sovereign state. In doing so, they civilised themselves out of fear of death [8, 9]. They essentially tamed their nature-driven desires.

Since the victors of World War I were Western states, particularly the United States and Great Britain, academic international relations was strongly influenced by liberal ideas through their political circles. Nevertheless, liberals could not consolidate their position and were overshadowed by realists. Edward Carr, famous for *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, harshly criticised idealism and revitalised realism in the 20th century. Unlike utopian liberals, Carr described the period between World War I and World War II as a crisis. Like other realist scholars, he emphasises the importance of power, arguing that the First World War was driven by fear, anxiety, and insecurity [1, 11]. During the war, the weakening of some states aroused a desire in stronger ones for new territories and resources, which led them to continue the war instead of ending it. This shows that their actions did not stem from the will of specific individuals but had structural causes.

By reviving classical political philosophy and giving realism new life, Morgenthau's approach during this period became known as neoclassical realism. This neo-Machiavellian tradition was the most ardent representative of the human-nature-based explanation of inter-state relations. According to Morgenthau, political power is a psychological relationship between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised [6]. Joseph Nye's concept of soft power comes to mind here. Soft power is the ability to achieve desired outcomes by making others want what you want [4, 7]. We may therefore conclude that power is indispensable to international relations. Its form depends on a state's capabilities. States use physical force when they can no longer influence others' thoughts, preferences, and behaviour. In such circumstances, what is exercised is no longer political power in the true sense; rather, it reflects a decline in that state's ability to achieve its objectives through political means and may be seen as a sign of weakness in international politics. Power politics stems from human-

ity's inherent lust for power. Therefore, there can be no wish to abolish or renounce power, nor can power be eliminated through institutions. Dichotomies such as good versus evil or right versus wrong cannot prevent the negativities and tragedies of political life. Like other realists, he argued that international politics is a power struggle.

These thinkers distinguished between political ethics and personal ethics. In personal ethics, lying, deception, and trickery are unacceptable, but in foreign policy this is not the case. Even the rights of the human being, considered the highest entity, are not above national interests. In personal ethics, evil may be answered with good, but in political ethics, responding to evil with evil can prevent greater evil. Small interests must sometimes be sacrificed for larger ones. States justify going to war in the name of national interests.

The outbreak of World War II marked realism's victory over idealism. This was the first major debate in international relations. The League of Nations, which idealists claimed would effectively prevent international conflicts through collective security, failed in practice. World War II showed that realist ideas best explain international relations. Among the defeated liberals, both strong and weak voices emerged, but realists remained dominant.

## CONCLUSIONS

In international relations, realism is both a tradition rooted in states' practical experience and a theory. Philosophers, inspired by nature, laid the foundation of realist thought. Referring to human nature when explaining events has always been relevant. Because human beings are inherently self-centred, self-loving, self-interested, power-seeking, and ambitious, realist scholars view international relations as recurring phenomena and argue that this field will make no fundamental progress in the future. World politics is associated with hostility, conflict, and war because every state, like individuals, strives to protect its national interests and security. The core political values of realism in international relations are preserving statehood, national security, and survival. Realists consider the balance of power the most effective way to prevent war. When power is the issue, people tend to forget moral, ethical, and spiritual values. The state is regarded as the main actor in international relations. States focus

on their national interests to ensure national security. This means that states can never fully trust one another.

Despite the wide range of theories in International Relations, I contend that realism remains the dominant theoretical framework. It may even be argued that realism constitutes the founda-

tional theory of the discipline. Consequently, from ontological, epistemological, and methodological standpoints, realism offers the most comprehensive and universally applicable framework for explaining international relations across different historical periods and political contexts.

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