

nonrealist theories. Again, the emphasis in this study will be on making the case for offensive realism.

Nevertheless, it makes good sense at this point to describe the theories that dominate thinking about international relations in both the academic and policy worlds, and to show how offensive realism compares with its main realist and nonrealist competitors.

LIBERALISM VS. REALISM

Liberalism and realism are the two bodies of theory which hold places of privilege on the theoretical menu of international relations. Most of the great intellectual battles among international relations scholars take place either across the divide between realism and liberalism, or within those paradigms.¹⁵ To illustrate this point, consider the three most influential realist works of the twentieth century:

- 1) E. H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939*, which was published in the United Kingdom shortly after World War II started in Europe (1939) and is still widely read today.
- 2) Hans Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*, which was first published in the United States in the early days of the Cold War (1948) and dominated the field of international relations for at least the next two decades.
- 3) Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, which has dominated the field since it first appeared during the latter part of the Cold War (1979).¹⁶

All three of these realist giants critique some aspect of liberalism in their writings. For example, both Carr and Waltz take issue with the liberal claim that economic interdependence enhances the prospects for peace.¹⁷ More generally, Carr and Morgenthau frequently criticize liberals for holding utopian views of politics which, if followed, would lead states to disaster. At the same time, these realists also disagree about a number of important issues. Waltz, for example, challenges Morgenthau's claim that multipolar systems are more stable than bipolar systems.¹⁸ Furthermore, whereas Morgenthau argues that states strive to gain power because they

have an innate desire for power, Waltz maintains that the structure of the international system forces states to pursue power to enhance their prospects for survival. These examples are just a small sample of the differences among realist thinkers.¹⁹

Let us now look more closely at liberalism and realism, focusing first on the core beliefs shared by the theories in each paradigm, and second on the differences among specific liberal and realist theories.

Liberalism

The liberal tradition has its roots in the Enlightenment, that period in eighteenth-century Europe when intellectuals and political leaders had a powerful sense that reason could be employed to make the world a better place.²⁰ Accordingly, liberals tend to be hopeful about the prospects of making the world safer and more peaceful. Most liberals believe that it is possible to substantially reduce the scourge of war and to increase international prosperity. For this reason, liberal theories are sometimes labelled “utopian” or “idealist.”

Liberalism’s optimistic view of international politics is based on three core beliefs, which are common to almost all of the theories in the paradigm. First, liberals consider states to be the main actors in international politics. Second, they emphasize that the internal characteristics of states vary considerably, and that these differences have profound effects on state behavior.²¹ Furthermore, liberal theorists often believe that some internal arrangements (e.g., democracy) are inherently preferable to others (e.g., dictatorship). For liberals, therefore, there are “good” and “bad” states in the international system. Good states pursue cooperative policies and hardly ever start wars on their own, whereas bad states cause conflicts with other states and are prone to use force to get their way.²² Thus, the key to peace is to populate the world with good states.

Third, liberals believe that calculations about power matter little for explaining the behavior of good states. Other kinds of political and economic calculations matter more, although the form of those calculations varies from theory to theory, as will become apparent below. Bad states might be motivated by the desire to gain power at the expense of other

states, but that is only because they are misguided. In an ideal world, where there are only good states, power would be largely irrelevant.

Among the various theories found under the big tent of liberalism, the three main ones mentioned earlier are particularly influential. The first argues that high levels of economic interdependence among states make them unlikely to fight each other.²³ The taproot of stability, according to this theory, is the creation and maintenance of a liberal economic order that allows for free economic exchange among states. Such an order makes states more prosperous, thereby bolstering peace, because prosperous states are more economically satisfied and satisfied states are more peaceful. Many wars are waged to gain or preserve wealth, but states have much less motive to initiate war if they are already wealthy. Furthermore, wealthy states with interdependent economies stand to become less prosperous if they fight each other, since they are biting the hand that feeds them. Once states establish extensive economic ties, in short, they avoid war and can concentrate instead on accumulating wealth.

The second, democratic peace theory, claims that democracies do not go to war against other democracies.²⁴ Thus, a world containing only democratic states would be a world without war. The argument here is not that democracies are less warlike than non-democracies, but rather that democracies do not fight among themselves. There are a variety of explanations for the democratic peace, but little agreement as to which one is correct. Liberal thinkers do agree, however, that democratic peace theory offers a direct challenge to realism and provides a powerful recipe for peace.

Finally, some liberals maintain that international institutions enhance the prospects for cooperation among states and thus significantly reduce the likelihood of war.²⁵ Institutions are not independent political entities that sit above states and force them to behave in acceptable ways. Instead, institutions are sets of rules that stipulate the ways in which states should cooperate and compete with each other. They prescribe acceptable forms of state behavior and proscribe unacceptable kinds of behavior. These rules are not imposed on states by some leviathan, but are negotiated by states, which agree to abide by the rules they created because it is in their interest to do so. Liberals claim that these institutions or rules can fundamentally change state behavior. Institutions, so the argument goes, can discourage states from calculating self-interest on the basis of how their every move affects

their relative power position, and thus they push states away from war and promote peace.

Realism

In contrast to liberals, realists are pessimists when it comes to international politics. Realists agree that creating a peaceful world would be desirable, but they see no easy way to escape the harsh world of security competition and war. Creating a peaceful world is surely an attractive idea, but it is not a practical one. “Realism,” as Carr notes, “tends to emphasize the irresistible strength of existing forces and the inevitable character of existing tendencies, and to insist that the highest wisdom lies in accepting, and adapting oneself to these forces and these tendencies.”²⁶

This gloomy view of international relations is based on three core beliefs. First, realists, like liberals, treat states as the principal actors in world politics. Realists focus mainly on great powers, however, because these states dominate and shape international politics and they also cause the deadliest wars. Second, realists believe that the behavior of great powers is influenced mainly by their external environment, not by their internal characteristics. The structure of the international system, which all states must deal with, largely shapes their foreign policies. Realists tend not to draw sharp distinctions between “good” and “bad” states, because all great powers act according to the same logic regardless of their culture, political system, or who runs the government.²⁷ It is therefore difficult to discriminate among states, save for differences in relative power. In essence, great powers are like billiard balls that vary only in size.²⁸

Third, realists hold that calculations about power dominate states’ thinking, and that states compete for power among themselves. That competition sometimes necessitates going to war, which is considered an acceptable instrument of statecraft. To quote Carl von Clausewitz, the nineteenth-century military strategist, war is a continuation of politics by other means.²⁹ Finally, a zero-sum quality characterizes that competition, sometimes making it intense and unforgiving. States may cooperate with each other on occasion, but at root they have conflicting interests.

Although there are many realist theories dealing with different aspects of power, two of them stand above the others: human nature realism, which

is laid out in Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations*, and defensive realism, which is presented mainly in Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*. What sets these works apart from those of other realists and makes them both important and controversial is that they provide answers to the two foundational questions described above. Specifically, they explain why states pursue power—that is, they have a story to tell about the *causes* of security competition—and each offers an argument about how much power a state is likely to want.

Some other famous realist thinkers concentrate on making the case that great powers care deeply about power, but they do not attempt to explain why states compete for power or what level of power states deem satisfactory. In essence, they provide a general defense of the realist approach, but they do not offer their own theory of international politics. The works of Carr and American diplomat George Kennan fit this description. In his seminal realist tract, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, Carr criticizes liberalism at length and argues that states are motivated principally by power considerations. Nevertheless, he says little about why states care about power or how much power they want.³⁰ Bluntly put, there is no theory in his book. The same basic pattern obtains in Kennan's well-known book *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950*.³¹ Morgenthau and Waltz, on the other hand, offer their own theories of international relations, which is why they have dominated the discourse about world politics for the past fifty years.

Human nature realism, which is sometimes called “classical realism,” dominated the study of international relations from the late 1940s, when Morgenthau's writings began attracting a large audience, until the early 1970s.³² It is based on the simple assumption that states are led by human beings who have a “will to power” hardwired into them at birth.³³ That is, states have an insatiable appetite for power, or what Morgenthau calls “a limitless lust for power,” which means that they constantly look for opportunities to take the offensive and dominate other states.³⁴ All states come with an “*animus dominandi*,” so there is no basis for discriminating among more aggressive and less aggressive states, and there certainly should be no room in the theory for status quo states.³⁵ Human nature realists recognize that international anarchy—the absence of a governing authority over the great powers—causes states to worry about the balance

of power. But that structural constraint is treated as a second-order cause of state behavior. The principal driving force in international politics is the will to power inherent in every state in the system, and it pushes each of them to strive for supremacy.

Defensive realism, which is frequently referred to as “structural realism,” came on the scene in the late 1970s with the appearance of Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*.³⁶ Unlike Morgenthau, Waltz does not assume that great powers are inherently aggressive because they are infused with a will to power; instead he starts by assuming that states merely aim to survive. Above all else, they seek security. Nevertheless, he maintains that the structure of the international system forces great powers to pay careful attention to the balance of power. In particular, anarchy forces security-seeking states to compete with each other for power, because power is the best means to survival. Whereas human nature is the deep cause of security competition in Morgenthau’s theory, anarchy plays that role in Waltz’s theory.³⁷

Waltz does not emphasize, however, that the international system provides great powers with good reasons to act offensively to gain power. Instead, he appears to make the opposite case: that anarchy encourages states to behave defensively and to maintain rather than upset the balance of power. “The first concern of states,” he writes, is “to maintain their position in the system.”³⁸ There seems to be, as international relations theorist Randall Schweller notes, a “status quo bias” in Waltz’s theory.³⁹

Waltz recognizes that states have incentives to gain power at their rivals’ expense and that it makes good strategic sense to act on that motive when the time is right. But he does not develop that line of argument in any detail. On the contrary, he emphasizes that when great powers behave aggressively, the potential victims usually balance against the aggressor and thwart its efforts to gain power.⁴⁰ For Waltz, in short, balancing checkmates offense.⁴¹ Furthermore, he stresses that great powers must be careful not to acquire too much power, because “excessive strength” is likely to cause other states to join forces against them, thereby leaving them worse off than they would have been had they refrained from seeking additional increments of power.⁴²

Waltz’s views on the causes of war further reflect his theory’s status quo bias. There are no profound or deep causes of war in his theory. In

particular, he does not suggest that there might be important benefits to be gained from war. In fact, he says little about the causes of war, other than to argue that wars are largely the result of uncertainty and miscalculation. In other words, if states knew better, they would not start wars.

Robert Jervis, Jack Snyder, and Stephen Van Evera buttress the defensive realists' case by focusing attention on a structural concept known as the offense-defense balance.⁴³ They maintain that military power at any point in time can be categorized as favoring either offense or defense. If defense has a clear advantage over offense, and conquest is therefore difficult, great powers will have little incentive to use force to gain power and will concentrate instead on protecting what they have. When defense has the advantage, protecting what you have should be a relatively easy task. Alternatively, if offense is easier, states will be sorely tempted to try conquering each other, and there will be a lot of war in the system. Defensive realists argue, however, that the offense-defense balance is usually heavily tilted toward defense, thus making conquest extremely difficult.⁴⁴ In sum, efficient balancing coupled with the natural advantages of defense over offense should discourage great powers from pursuing aggressive strategies and instead make them "defensive positionalists."⁴⁵

My theory of offensive realism is also a structural theory of international politics. As with defensive realism, my theory sees great powers as concerned mainly with figuring out how to survive in a world where there is no agency to protect them from each other; they quickly realize that power is the key to their survival. Offensive realism parts company with defensive realism over the question of how much power states want. For defensive realists, the international structure provides states with little incentive to seek additional increments of power; instead it pushes them to maintain the existing balance of power. Preserving power, rather than increasing it, is the main goal of states. Offensive realists, on the other hand, believe that status quo powers are rarely found in world politics, because the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals, and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs. A state's ultimate goal is to be the hegemon in the system.⁴⁶

It should be apparent that both offensive realism and human nature realism portray great powers as relentlessly seeking power. The key difference between the two perspectives is that offensive realists reject

Morgenthau’s claim that states are naturally endowed with Type A personalities. On the contrary, they believe that the international system forces great powers to maximize their relative power because that is the optimal way to maximize their security. In other words, survival mandates aggressive behavior. Great powers behave aggressively not because they want to or because they possess some inner drive to dominate, but because they have to seek more power if they want to maximize their odds of survival. (Table 1.1 summarizes how the main realist theories answer the foundational questions described above.)

No article or book makes the case for offensive realism in the sophisticated way that Morgenthau does for human nature realism and Waltz and others do for defensive realism. For sure, some realists have argued that the system gives great powers good reasons to act aggressively. Probably the best brief for offensive realism is a short, obscure book written during World War I by G. Lowes Dickinson, a British academic who was an early advocate of the League of Nations.⁴⁷ In *The European Anarchy*, he argues that the root cause of World War I “was not Germany nor any other power. The real culprit was the European anarchy,” which created powerful incentives for states “to acquire supremacy over the others for motives at once of security and domination.”⁴⁸ Nevertheless, neither Dickinson nor anyone else makes a comprehensive case for offensive realism.⁴⁹ My aim in writing this book is to fill that void.

TABLE 1.1

The Major Realist Theories

	Human Nature Realism	Defensive Realism	Offensive Realism
What causes states to compete for power?	Lust for power inherent in states	Structure of the system	Structure of the system
How much power do states want?	All they can get. States maximize relative power, with hegemony as their ultimate goal.	Not much more than what they have. States concentrate on maintaining the balance of power.	All they can get. States maximize relative power, with hegemony as their ultimate goal.