

POLS 318: Theories of IR  
Lecture 4 (09.01.2020):  
Realism & Neorealism

Rotem Dvir

Texas A&M University  
*rdvir@tamu.edu*

Department of Political Science  
Fall 2020

# Overview

- 1 Quick review
- 2 Material theories - Realism
- 3 Material theories - Neorealism
- 4 Extra Material

# Review

## WHAT WE COVERED LAST MEETING?

- Levels of analysis in studying IR.
- The Macro level: the international system.
- The micro level: the nation-state.
- Theory and practice debate:
  - What policymakers value?
  - What scholars produce?
  - 'Bridging the Gap'.

Questions?? Email me!

# Realist Theory

## Background

- Enduring conflict between states.
- Dominant during the cold war.
- Simple and powerful: war, alliances, imperialism.
- Levels of analysis?
- System theory → structural conditions explain behavior.

# Realism - Core principles

## GLOBAL POLITICS - IR THEORY

- **(1) International politics** - objective laws and human nature.
- Decisions are rational - costs and benefits of choice.
- States have innate desire to dominate others.

# Realism - Core principles

## REALIST VIEW

- **(2) Power** → main driver of behavior.
- Interest defined in terms of power.
- Statesmen think in "power terms".
- Simplifying assumption - general explanation.
- **(3) Power** → universal, objective, multiple meanings.
- Power - physical or psychological control
- Organized or uncontrolled "settings"

# Realism - Core principles

## MORAL CONSIDERATIONS

- **(4) Moral values** → political action.
- Morality and politics tensions.
- Universal versus individual moral principles.
- **(5) Moral values** → system outranks states.
- **(6) Unique approach** - autonomous and general view of the world.

# Realist Theory

## THE BALANCE OF POWER (BOP)





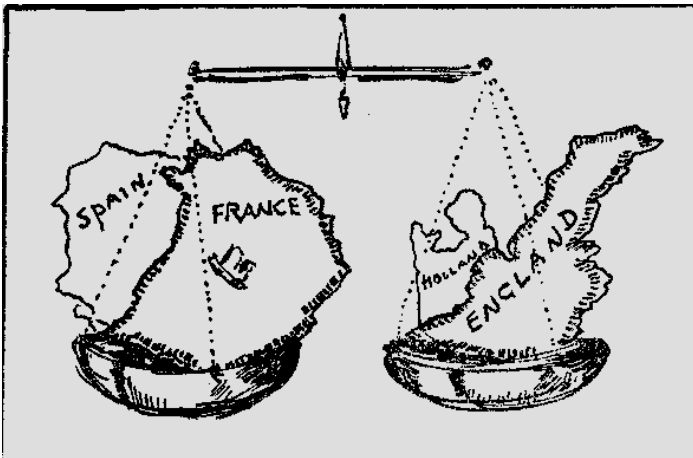
# Realism - the Balance of Power

## GLOBAL SYSTEM STRUCTURE

- BOP → essential for stability in a society of sovereign nations.
- A structural theory, why?
- Ensure stability while preserve system composition.

How does it work?

# Realism - the Balance of Power



# Realism - the Balance of Power

## BALANCING METHODS

- Arms race: increase military power to balance rival.
- Alliances: "sharing strategic objectives".

## Alliances

- Motivation → extends power.
- Practical commitment, not too costly.

# Realism in practice

## Real world examples:

- (1) Global system before 1914.
- Balanced and stable.
  
- (2) Ethnic groups tensions.
- Power dynamics following multi-ethnic states' break-up.
- Rival groups fight for dominance.
- Risks for minorities in disputed territories.
- Yugoslavia following the end of the cold war.

# Neorealism (Waltz 1979)

## REALISM 2.0?

- Advanced version of classic realism.
- International system → state behavior.
- Simplifying assumptions enhance structural framework.
- Parsimony - Accuracy.

## Assumptions

- ① Anarchy and self-help.
- ② States - primary actors in international politics.
- ③ Maximize *Security*.
- ④ Increase power only if no security risk.

# Neorealism

## How does it work?

- Several great powers seeking to ensure survival.
- Anarchic system → each nation must rely on itself.
- Weak states need help - bandwagoning??
- No!! → balance *against* powerful nations.

# Neorealism

## Defensive realism

- Early version of neorealism.
- Great powers seek survival, not power.
- Balancing alliances - defensive postures.

## Offensive - Defensive Balance

- Defense is easier → no incentives for aggression.
- Supports the expansion of security.
- Distinguish defense and offense - reduce anarchy.

# Neorealism

## Theory specifics

- Reductionist theory - general explanation for international politics.
- Distinct from realism → security, not power.
- Power - important in relative sense.
- Emphasis on prudent policy to avoid war.
- Cooperation → not a long-term policy.
- *Alliances* are short-lived.



# Illustrating Neorealism

## BIPOLAR SYSTEM



# Testing Material theories

## Realism vs. Neorealism

- Compare the dynamics of interactions among states.
- Military commitments before 1914: **▶ BOP**
  - Much uncertainty.
  - Inter-connections.
  - Russia - Hungary and the clash over Serbia.
- Structure during cold war (1945-1989): **▶ Bipolarity**
  - NATO (US) - Warsaw pact (USSR).
  - Stable and predictable.
  - No "cross ties" between poles.

# Testing Material theories

## Realism vs. Neorealism

- System stability and longevity
  - Multipolar structure (1648-1914).
  - Bipolar structure (1945-1989).
  - Multipolar system → instability and conflicts.
- Number and length of wars between main powers
  - Bipolar - no direct clash between super-powers.
  - Us - China (Korean war).
  - Multiple proxy wars.
  - Multipolarity: Long peaceful periods (40-50 years)

## Recommended readings

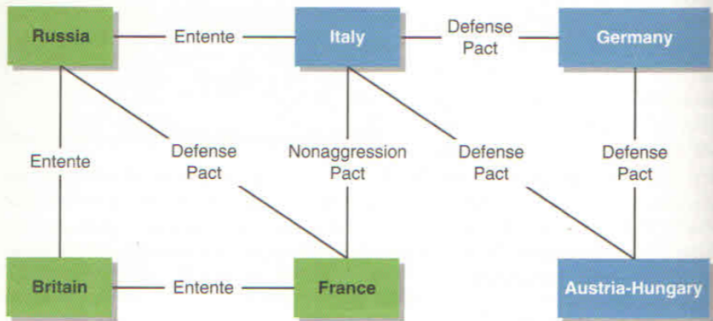
More studies on IR theory and policymaking:

- 1 Hendrix, Cullen. (2020). "Do Policy Recommendations = Policy Relevance." *Duck of Minerva blog*, [Link to post](#)
- 2 Byman, D., & Kroenig, M. (2016). "Reaching beyond the ivory tower: a how to manual." *Security Studies*, 25(2), 289-319.
- 3 Jentleson, B. W., & Ratner, E. (2011). "Bridging the beltway – ivory tower gap". *International Studies Review*, 13(1), 6-11.

# Realism

**FIGURE 5.2**

**European Great Power Alliance Commitments, 1914**



# Neorealism

**FIGURE 5.3****European Great Power Alliance Commitments, 1989**