

## **Realism**

**Realism** is the most well-established theoretical perspective in International Relations. Indeed, it has been argued that realism has dominated International Relations to such a degree that students, and indeed scholars, have often lost sight of the fact that it is in fact one perspective amongst many. The result is that realism is often presented as if it were a ‘commonsense’ view of the world against which all other perspectives should be judged. We will return to this notion of realism as ‘common sense’ later in the book. At this juncture, it is enough to highlight that realism is one perspective in IR, not *the* perspective.

**Realism** has been represented using the idea of a billiard table in which the balls represent sovereign states (hence, the ‘billiard ball model’).

Realists have traditionally held that the major problem of international relations was one of

**Anarchy.** Anarchy prevailed because, in international relations, there was no sovereign authority that could enforce the rule of law and ensure that ‘wrongdoers’ were punished. The League of Nations was a poor substitute for a truly sovereign power possessing a system of law and a military under the control of a single, sovereign government. However, realists went on to argue that it was impossible to set up a genuine world government, because states would not give up their

sovereignty to an international body. Accordingly, realists argued that war could not be avoided completely. It is necessary, therefore, to accept the inevitability of war and pursue the necessary preparations for conflict. Only in this way can war be properly deterred, or at least managed.

After the Second World War realism emerged as accepted wisdom in International Relations because of the clear lessons that the conflict appeared to reiterate. Realists argued that the long history of world politics demonstrated that it was not an exercise in writing laws and treaties or in creating international organisations. Instead it was a struggle for power and security carried out under conditions of ‘every country for itself’.

So, what are the key ideas and assumptions which underpin realist thought? In summary the assumptions of realism are that:

- States are the key actors in international relations.
- Sovereignty, or independence and self-control, is the defining characteristic of the state.
- States are motivated by a drive for power, security and pursuit of the ‘national interest’.
- States, like men, behave in a self-interested manner.

- The central problem in international relations is the condition of anarchy, which means the lack of a central sovereign authority at the global level to regulate relations between states.
- The aggressive intent of states, combined with the lack of world government, means that conflict is an unavoidable and ever-present reality of international relations.
- A semblance of order and security can be maintained by shifting alliances among states so preventing any one state from becoming overwhelmingly powerful and, thus, constituting a threat to the peace and security of others.
- International institutions and law play a role in international relations, but are only effective if backed by force or effective sanction.
- Power is the key to understanding international behavior and state motivation. For realists the main form of power is military or physical power.
- Human nature can be said to be inherently selfish and constant. As a result, humans will act to further their own interests even to the detriment of others, which can often lead to conflict. Because human nature is unchanging, there is little prospect that this kind of behavior will change.

The **security dilemma**, also referred to as the **spiral model**, is a term used in international relations and refers to a situation in which, under anarchy, actions by a state intended to heighten its security, such as

increasing its military strength, committing to use weapons or making alliances, can lead other states to respond with similar measures, producing increased tensions that create conflict, even when no side really desires it. The security dilemma then leads toward another phenomena which is called '**Arm Race**'. Because of the sense of insecurity states engage themselves in building their weapons to counter the threat from a rival state.

### **The balance of power**

Realists have developed an analysis of how power is distributed in the international system. This idea is referred to as the 'balance of power'. A simple definition of the balance of power is that it is a mechanism which operates to prevent the dominance of any one state in the international system. The balance of power is sometimes viewed as a naturally occurring phenomenon, or a situation that comes about fortuitously. At other times it is suggested that it is a strategy consciously pursued by states. States engineer such balances to counter threats from other powerful states and so ensure their own survival. As we would expect, the balance of power is frequently measured in terms of military strength. For realists, the primary aim of the 'balance of power' is not to preserve peace but to preserve the security of (major) states, if necessary by means of war. The balance of power is about the closest realists ever come to outlining the conditions for a peaceful international order, in so far as peace is defined negatively as an absence of war.

In nineteenth-century Europe the situation was characterised by five or six roughly equal powers. These countries were quite successful at avoiding war, either by making alliances or because the most powerful state, Great Britain, would side one way or the other to act as a 'balancer' of power.