

Chapter 3

Theory in Practice: A Realist Studying World Affairs

We would like to study some activity or event of the real world of international relations from the perspective of realism. As Realists, how should we go about doing that? The following are some important theoretical lenses through which Realists study the world.

From studying Chapter 3, we have a notion of how Realists look at the world, and how they think about international relations. They notice the many international issues on which statesmen and stateswomen disagree. They think about the fundamental values of national security and international order. They notice that some disagreements and disputes cannot be settled by reasonable discussion between the parties. They notice that power - especially military power, but also economic power, as well as other instrumental means, such as information gathered by intelligence agencies - are often crucial considerations and instruments in the resolution of international conflict. They emphasize that in a world of independent states, power must sometimes be relied on to defend the national interest. They see that either the threat of military power (coercion) or the use of military power (force) is sometimes necessary to resolve international conflicts or to promote international order. They recognize the importance of creating and maintaining a balance of power in order to foster international peace and security. They worry about the capability and credibility of the power of their own nation in relation to rival nations or adversary nations. They believe in the doctrine of deterrence. They believe in negotiation from strength.

For Realist scholars, research questions typically emerge from viewing events and episodes of world politics from this perspective. Two examples are the break-up of the Soviet Union and the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Such events and episodes raise certain kinds of questions and concerns in the minds of realist scholars.

Fundamental values of peace and security are uppermost in those researchers' minds. Points of conflict are noticed. Usually the most powerful states and their relations are the focal point. So, for example, relations between the United States and Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) have been a focus of Realists. That was the case during the Cold War and it is still the case today, although not with the same urgency. The issue of peace and security in the context of relations with Russia can be seen in the debate over the question of whether or not NATO should expand eastwards. The decision has been taken to expand and that expansion already has taken place. A classical realist might have one point-of-view on that question. A strategic Realist might have a related but somewhat different viewpoint and a neorealist might have a point-of-view that would be somewhat different again. These differing realist perspectives can be employed to analyse the question of NATO expansion. Questions arising from the 2001 terrorist attack on the United States and the subsequent 'war on terrorism' can also be scrutinized from these realist perspectives.

Assignments

1. Check the online resources for links to content on NATO's involvement in the war in Afghanistan. Look for various texts and statements that indicate the goals and concerns that NATO has expressed in regards to that war. Organize the texts you find into categories of classical realism, strategic realism, and neorealism. Try to determine which realist approach makes the most sense.

2. Check the online resources for links to content on United States foreign policy and defence policy, and look for various texts and statements that indicate the goals and concerns of the United States government regarding the 'war on terror'. Organize the texts you find into categories of the various realist approaches. How well do they each account for the way in which the United States is waging its 'war on terrorism'?