

Theoretical Perspectives and Historical Background





Theories of Global Politics

Realism

Criticisms of Realism

- Liberalism
- Idealism
- World Economic System Analysis
- Constructivism
- Feminist Perspectives

Summary

Key Terms

global politics Area of study that concerns the relations among different actors in the world, the characteristics of those relations, and their consequences.

theoretical perspectives Alternative interpretations of how international relations work, why actors do what they do, and what underlying factors govern relationships in global politics.

Global politics concerns the relations between different actors in the world, the characteristics of those relations, and their consequences. It has to do with the nature of those actors, how they have changed over time, and how their interactions have changed over time. Global politics, also commonly referred to as *international politics*, *world politics*, and *international relations*, includes questions of international conflict (for example, Why do countries and ethnic groups go to war with one another, and what contributes to peaceful relations?), questions of international economics (for example, Why and how do states enter into trading agreements with one another, and how is wealth distributed in the world?), and questions that transcend actors but confront them nonetheless (for example, What contributes to global environmental problems, and how is cultural, political, and economic globalization changing world politics?).

The major purpose of this book, *Global Politics*, is to help students understand world politics in the past, present, and future. The process begins in this first chapter with a discussion of theoretical perspectives on the way international relations operate. **Theoretical perspectives** of international politics provide answers to these basic questions: Who are the main actors in international politics? Why do actors do what they do in international politics? What are the underlying factors that govern relationships in global politics? How have international relations changed or stayed the same over the centuries? What accounts for conflict and cooperation in international politics?

Each of the theoretical perspectives presented in this chapter provides *different* answers to these questions. Each perspective is based on different assumptions about humans, governments, and international politics. Each can provide a different analysis of the same event in international politics, such as the Vietnam War, the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the rise of the World Trade Organization, internal conflict in Sudan, or the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss and compare these alternative takes on international politics. This chapter presents an overview of these theoretical perspectives. Subsequent chapters will illustrate how these perspectives can be used to explain more specific topics of international politics.

Understanding alternative theoretical perspectives is important for understanding world politics for two main reasons. First, everybody already has some theoretical perspective in mind when they consider international relations. Even students new to the subject bring with them a set of assumptions about the world and its actors. When you read about current events or the history of international relations, you are seeing the “facts” through a particular lens. Knowing what lens you are using, and what alternative lens may be available, will help you better understand how you are interpreting the facts and how facts may be seen in different ways.

Second, understanding alternative theoretical perspectives allows students of international relations to analyze global politics in the future, long after they finish reading this book or taking courses on the subject. When students learn only history and contemporary issues, and the particular explanations of historical and contemporary events, their knowledge of global politics is limited in time because new issues and events are always arising. Students who understand theoretical perspectives that are more general have the capability of analyzing international relations that have yet to take place. Thus, the theoretical perspectives provide more long-lasting analytical tools.

The most prominent theoretical perspectives for understanding global politics are realism, liberalism, idealism, world economic system analysis, constructivism, and feminist perspectives. Each perspective has a different focus for understanding international relations. It is not the case that one perspective is clearly “right” and the other is clearly “wrong”; all have something to contribute to our understanding of world politics. One perspective, however, may be more appropriate than others for certain parts of international relations or better at explaining certain events. Indeed, the study of global politics is about discovering what the various theoretical perspectives do best.

Realism

realism A theoretical perspective for understanding international relations that emphasizes states as the most important actor in global politics, the anarchical nature of the international system, and the pursuit of power to secure states’ interests. Also known as “Realpolitik” or “power politics.”

Thucydides Greek historian who wrote about the Peloponnesian Wars between the Greek city-states Athens and Sparta in 431–404 B.C.E. Thucydides’ accounts described and explained the relations between these actors in a realist approach.

Morgenthau Considered the father of modern realist thought with his work *Politics Among Nations*, first published shortly after World War II.

Realism is the first theoretical perspective for understanding international relations that we consider because it has historically been the dominant lens through which world leaders and scholars alike have understood global politics. Indeed, realism can be traced back to Thucydides’ account of the Peloponnesian Wars between the Greek city-states Athens and Sparta in 431–404 B.C.E.¹ **Thucydides**, a historian, described and explained the relations between these actors with the realist propositions discussed below. Realism was also the dominant way leaders in Europe in the seventeenth through early twentieth centuries understood international relations. It was during this period that the modern international system was created, largely based on realist notions. After World War II, scholars of international relations embraced realism as the dominant perspective for explaining global politics. The chief advocate of the realist theory of international politics was Hans J. **Morgenthau**, considered the father of modern realist thought. His classic text, *Politics Among Nations*, was first published shortly after World War II and carefully defined the realist theoretical perspective that most scholars would then adopt.² Because of this dominant position, in many ways, all of the other theoretical perspectives for understanding global politics are reactions to and criticisms of realism.

The first proposition of realism, also known as Realpolitik, is that states are the most important actors in global politics. **States** are governments that exercise supreme, or sovereign, authority over a defined territory. **Sovereignty** means that states are legally the ultimate authority

states Governments that have legal sovereignty over a defined territory.

sovereignty The legal notion that states are the ultimate authority over their territory and no other actor in the international system has the right to interfere in states' internal affairs.

over their territory and no other actor in the international system has the legal right to interfere in states' internal affairs. States are the countries, such as Australia, France, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Senegal, Ukraine, and the United States, on world maps. For realists, it is these states, and not their leaders, their citizens, business corporations, or international organizations, that are the key actors and determine what happens in the world. States can, if they choose, control all other actors, according to realism. Realism is state-centric because of the central and predominant position that states play in this perspective.

The second proposition of realism answers the question, Why do states act the way they do in international politics? States, according to realism, pursue their interests, defined as power. State interests, rather than their values or ideological preferences, are the reason behind every state act. And it is the maximization of power that is in a state's interest. Thus, everything a state does can be explained by its desire to maintain, safeguard, or increase its power in relation to other states.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, for example, was a power move, according to the realist perspective. It had nothing to do with its leader, Saddam Hussein, and his personality. It had nothing to do with the authoritarian nature of the Iraqi political system or any anti-Western beliefs held by some in the Middle East. For realists, it was simply a chance for Iraq to maximize its power against Kuwait and the other key states in the region. For realists, the invasion of Kuwait was in Iraq's interest, and it would have happened regardless of the leader, political system, or beliefs in Iraq. Similarly, the reaction of the United States and its decision to lead a military effort to oust Iraq from Kuwait was also about interests and the maximization of power. The U.S. interests and power in the region were threatened by the Iraqi invasion, and so the reason behind the U.S.-led Desert Storm operation had nothing to do with the humanitarian interests to save the Kuwaiti people or pure economic interests to safeguard a supply of cheap oil; it had to do with maintaining its power in the region. With this focus on power as the primary goal of states, realist ideas are also known as the power politics perspective.

Why is the maximization of power in a state's interest? The answer to this question is based on the definition of the primary actor, the state. Since states exercise sovereign authority over a defined territory and no other actor in the international system has a higher authority over states, there is no world government to look after individual states' interests. According to realism, the defining feature of global politics is that the international system exists as an **anarchy**.³ Anarchy does not mean chaos or confusion, but simply the lack of an overarching political authority or world government. Without a central government, international politics is akin to the philosopher Thomas Hobbes's "state of nature" or "state of war" in which individuals must fend for themselves and life is "nasty, brutish, and short."⁴ For realists, anarchy is what makes international politics so very different from domestic politics, which occurs inside countries. Within political systems, individuals can live peacefully knowing

anarchy According to realism, a defining feature of the international system wherein there is no overarching political authority or world government; different from "chaos" or "disorder."

that there is a government to provide them protection in the form of a national defense and internal police and to provide laws that deter or punish those who seek to harm their individual interests. States in the international system enjoy no such luxury. Without an international world authority, they must look out for their own interests. The way they do this, according to realism, is by securing and maintaining their power. Maintaining power is a rational response to the anarchic international system.

Because each state must follow a self-help strategy to protect its own interests, states are naturally competitive with each other, eyeing one another with necessary suspicion. Conflict, then, is an inevitable outcome, and for realists, conflict and the use of force is the central concern in international politics. War is a means by which states compete for power, and, relatedly, the key components of power are military in nature, because ultimately it is the goal of every state to survive and to protect its territorial integrity (if not its citizens as well) in a conflict-ridden world. Typically such "protection" translates into military forces. In a dangerous world, states seek greater security by building up their military forces, by making military alliances, and, if necessary, by the prudent use of military force.



After military intervention in Iraq in 2003, U.S. troops often came under attack. The realist perspective sees such conflict and the use of military force as an inevitable part of global politics.

(Scott Nelson/Getty Images)

For realism, the pursuit of power and political interests is separate from economic spheres, moral spheres, and any other sphere of human activity. Moreover, power considerations must come first. Action taken in the name of economic wealth must be evaluated according to how it contributes to or detracts from the national interests. Realists, for example, sometimes worry that their state's economic ties with other states, in the form of trade agreements and investment deals, unnecessarily constrain their state and make them dependent on and at the mercy of others' interests. Even if an economic agreement will make more money for the state, realists would caution against it if it detracted from the state's independence or contributed to the power of a potential enemy. Realists also caution against applying moral principles to state actions. They frown on human rights policies that do not further the power of a state and may even threaten its power.

One of the advantages of the realist theory is that it can serve as an explanation for global politics across the many centuries of state interaction. Indeed, the focus in realism is on continuity. Since all states, no matter when, no matter where, are all motivated by the same drive to protect their interests by maximizing their power, realism sees great continuity in international relations. Despite all the changes in world politics throughout time, realists say that states are basically doing the same thing as they did all along: seeking power. And realists point out that because of this, conflict remains a dominant feature of the international landscape today.

Criticisms of Realism

Realism has dominated twentieth-century thinking about global politics so much that most other contemporary theoretical perspectives can be considered reactions to and criticisms of realism. Not all of these alternative theories criticize each proposition of realism. Rather, they focus on particular points of realism and offer divergent ways of thinking about international relations. The most prominent alternatives to realism today are liberalism, idealism, world economic system analysis, constructivism, and feminist perspectives. Their reactions to realist propositions are summarized in Table 1.1.

Liberalism

liberalism A theoretical perspective emphasizing interdependence between states and substate actors as the key characteristic of the international system.

Next to realism, **liberalism** is the most accepted alternative theoretical perspective for understanding global politics. In this context, *liberalism* and *liberal* are not to be confused with the terms as they are used to mean left-of-center in domestic politics in the United States. Rather, liberalism has a special meaning when applied to an understanding of international politics. Whereas realism stresses great continuity in international relations across the centuries, contemporary liberalism sees great changes. In particular, states and societies became so interdependent by the second half of the twentieth century that, according to liberalism, the way

TABLE 1.1

Realism and Its Critics

Main Realist Propositions	Main Criticisms*				
	<i>Liberalism</i>	<i>Idealism</i>	<i>World Economic Systems Analysis</i>	<i>Constructivism</i>	<i>Feminist Perspectives</i>
Sovereign states are most important actors	Transnational and substate actors are increasingly important		Economic divisions are more important than political/state divisions		Women are important actors left out by a focus on male-led states
States pursue their interests defined as power	Power is no longer primarily military in nature; economics is important	States are motivated by morality and values		Power, like all other concepts, is subjectively constructed	Military power and individual state interests are masculine ways of thinking
States maximize power to protect themselves in an anarchic world; conflict is inevitable	Interdependence means states' interests are intertwined and cooperation is likely	States cooperate to further values, such as peace	Economic conflict between the core and periphery is inevitable	Cooperation and conflict depend on states' social understandings	Security is multidimensional and achieved through cooperation
There is great continuity in global politics across time	The post-World War II world is very different		Historical processes such as the development of capitalism and imperialism continue to affect global politics		

* As noted in the text, not all of the alternative theories criticize each proposition of realism. Rather, they focus on particular points of realism, offering divergent ways of thinking about international relations.

interdependence The condition in which states and their fortunes are connected to each other.

they relate to each other changed in fundamental ways. **Interdependence** means that states and their fortunes are connected to each other. What happens inside one state can have significant effects on what happens inside another state, and the relations between two states can greatly affect the relations between other states. While the fortunes of states may have always been connected, or interdependent, liberalism proposes that a particular kind of interdependence came to characterize the international

complex interdependence The dominant feature of global politics according to liberalism. Complex interdependence has three specific components: multiple channels, multiple issues, and the decline in use of and effectiveness of military force.

transnational actors Global actors, such as nongovernmental organizations, multinational corporations, intergovernmental organizations, and private organizations, that operate across borders and share the world stage with states.

multinational corporations Large companies doing business globally, which may have plants and factories in more than one state, pay taxes in more than one state, or have investments in more than one state.

nongovernmental organizations Transnational, private organizations that have members and activities across state borders.

intergovernmental organizations Actors whose members are states, such as the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

substate actors Actors within a state that interact with others outside the state, such as local businesses that import goods from abroad and provincial governments that establish trade mission in other countries.

system, beginning after World War II and in place by the 1970s. According to liberalism, **complex interdependence** became the dominant feature of global politics.⁵ Complex interdependence has three specific components: multiple channels, multiple issues, and the decline in the use of and effectiveness of military force.

First, complex interdependence means that there are multiple channels among a variety of actors in international politics. Since realism sees states as the only significant actors, international politics is really confined to state-to-state relations. Although liberalism does not deny that these interstate connections remain important, it proposes that states are not the only important actors in global politics. There are a variety of nonstate actors that liberalism sees as sharing the world stage with states. **Transnational actors** operate across state borders and include **multinational corporations** (MNCs), which are large companies doing business globally. These organizations may have plants or factories in more than one state, pay taxes in more than one state, or have investments in more than one state. McDonald's, Colgate-Palmolive, General Foods, and General Motors are MNCs. **Nongovernmental organizations** (NGOs) are another type of transnational actor. NGOs are private, international organizations that act across borders and have members in different states, such as the Catholic Church, Greenpeace, the Red Cross, and Amnesty International. In addition, **intergovernmental organizations** (IGOs) are actors whose members are states—for example, the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization of American States, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—and can become fairly independent from the states that govern them. Liberalism views IGOs, NGOs, and MNCs as important international connections across state boundaries.

In addition, relations between **substate actors** also make up the multiple channels in a complex interdependent world. Substate actors may be businesses that are not multinational because they essentially operate within a single border, but may buy imported goods from abroad to make their products. Substate actors also include provincial governments that establish trade missions in other countries. California, Texas, and New York are “provinces” in the United States that have extensive relations and diplomatic representation with other parts of the world. Substate actors may also include individuals who travel abroad or have friendships with individuals in other countries. With the growing activity of substate and transnational actors, liberalism sees a complex web of connections across the globe. Focusing only on state-to-state relations, as realism does, misses an important part of world politics, according to liberalism. Furthermore, states are not the only actors to have interests that drive their actions. Nonstate actors have their own goals and interests that sometimes diverge from those of the state.

The second component of complex interdependence is that there are multiple issues, not just military security, that are of interest to the variety of global actors. Economic, ideological, religious, and cultural issues are part of the global agenda. Furthermore, security issues do not dominate

the agenda, as realism assumes. Even issues that realism sees as purely domestic, or internal to the state, can become tangled up in international politics. Environmental regulations, for example, may be adopted by a government to safeguard the health of its citizens, but they can also have an effect on the state's trading partners if imports to the country must meet the regulations as well. In this way, domestic policy can automatically become foreign policy because of the connections between issues, the multiple channels operating in the world, and the interdependence among actors. Realism's division of issues as either foreign or domestic, argues liberalism, is out-of-date and artificial.

Finally, complex interdependence means that military force is not as effective or frequently used as it was in the past. Many of the issues that are of concern to states and nonstate actors do not lend themselves to military solutions. It is difficult to solve global environmental problems, for example, through military interventions or the detonation of a nuclear bomb. These actions simply make the problem worse. It also does not make sense for a state to conquer a trading partner through military force to address a trade imbalance since this would destroy the very economic market to which the state and its businesses want to export goods. Complex interdependence means that states are constrained in their use of military power because the use of this power only harms the multiple interests of states and other actors.

These three components of complex interdependence—multiple channels, multiple issues, and the ineffectiveness of military force for some issues—lead liberalism to expect much more cooperation in global politics than does realism. This is the key point of disagreement between the two perspectives. While liberals do not deny that conflict occurs, they argue that cooperation is the norm and realism exaggerates the importance of and frequency of conflict. Liberals point out that states trade peacefully, they sign nonaggression pacts, they share military responsibilities, some have very small militaries or even no military at all (such as Costa Rica), and some military rivalries that have endured for centuries (such as France and Germany) have now transformed into military and economic partnerships. At best, realism does not account for the considerable cooperation that occurs in international relations; at worst, this cooperation violates realist expectations.

Why do states cooperate if the world is so dangerous and anarchic? According to liberalism, states cooperate because it is in their interests to do so. Because the world is so interdependent, states realize that hostile actions are likely to harm their interests as much as those of any potential rival. Also, liberalism points out that the multiple channels that connect nonstate actors constrain states. Even if leaders of states recognize security threats and want to employ conflictual means, they often face resistance from the public or powerful interest groups, such as MNCs, that benefit more from cooperation. Of course, it is easier for the public and interest groups to constrain leaders in political systems

that are democratic and provide avenues of influence. In democracies, where opposition is legal and allowed and citizens can hold their leaders accountable for their actions through competitive elections, the multiple channels across societies are more likely to constrain leaders from conflict. Thus, liberalism expects the effects of complex interdependence to be more significant in a more democratic world.

The spread of democracy is just one factor that liberalism cites to account for the rise of complex interdependence in the twentieth century. With the end of World War II, the fascist regimes of Italy, Germany, and Japan were transformed into democracies. The end of World War II also brought on the beginnings of decolonization when the European empires gave up their territorial possessions around the globe. In some cases, such as India, these newly independent countries became democratic for the first time. Other factors are also important in the rise of interdependence. The invention of nuclear weapons meant that force, or at least all-out war, was less of an option for the major powers. For the first time in history, using the ultimate weapon in one's military arsenal meant risking significant damage to all humanity.

Also after World War II, wealth began to be distributed around the world to more economies as well, instead of being concentrated in Europe. The United States became the largest economy in the world and spread its wealth through aid packages (such as the Marshall Plan to war-torn Western Europe after World War II) and through a military presence around the globe during the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union. Multinational corporations also spread out across the globe. In the 1970s, oil-producing states begin cooperating with each other to make money off the oil-needy economies of Japan, Western Europe, and the United States. And by the 1980s, newly rich economies sprang up in Asia: in South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Indonesia. This new distribution of wealth meant that more countries and their economies were tied together more than ever before.

Finally, liberalism points to the technological developments that allowed for increased global communication and transportation. With phones, television, jet planes, faxes, the Internet, and satellites, the world community has become increasingly capable of being in touch and informed on a global scale. The "shrinking" of the world has meant that there are more significant connections, which are encouraging cooperation between states. While these factors—such as democratization, the globalization of the world economy, and technological innovation—occurred over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, there has been noticeable development in these areas in the past fifteen years. With the end of the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union (and the collapse of the Soviet Union), democratization, economic globalization, and global communications have reached an unprecedented stage. Liberals say that this makes complex interdependence even more critical for understanding current and future world politics.

The last major difference between realism and liberalism concerns the role of international organizations. Not only are international organizations increasingly present in global politics, serving as a potential challenge to states as the dominant actor, but liberalism sees states as actively promoting the rise of international organizations, particularly intergovernmental organizations in which states are members. International institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization facilitate cooperation, which liberals see as in the interests of states. International institutions provide an arena for communication and diplomatic bargaining and an alternative to conflictual means. International institutions also help states establish agreements and international law that can provide incentives for cooperation and organized, collective responses for punishing states that do not cooperate. Furthermore, international institutions can actually change a state's interests by developing new norms of international behavior, such as the respect for human rights, and by developing mechanisms for areas of cooperation, such as in economic integration.⁶ Realism, however, sees these institutions as a threat to state sovereignty and state interests that have little impact on state behavior.⁷

Contemporary liberalism, as a theoretical perspective for understanding global politics, has its roots in many strands of liberal philosophies. Writers of eighteenth-century enlightenment and rationalism, such as the French philosopher Montesquieu and the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, argued that individuals, and states as well, are not inherently evil and can learn to live peacefully if good social institutions are created around them.⁸ Contemporary liberalism incorporates these ideas in its focus on international institutions and law as positive and desired ways to foster cooperation. Nineteenth-century liberalism, also known as **classical liberalism**, stressed the importance of the individual and democratic political systems. Philosophers such as John Stuart Mill argued that individuals were capable of satisfying their own interests, and the role of the state should merely be to help provide stability and peace for the realization of individual interests.⁹ Contemporary liberalism incorporates these ideas in its focus on how individuals in a democracy can articulate alternative interests to those of the state and on how democratic constraints can produce cooperation. Finally, contemporary liberalism is consistent with early-twentieth-century liberal writings, such as those by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, who argued that war was partly a product of nondemocratic countries and that war can be prevented through international organizations. Wilson argued that U.S. participation in World War I was about "making the world safe for democracy" by destroying authoritarian governments and empires in Europe. He designed the League of Nations, an international organization whose goal was to make war extremely unlikely. Wilson's ideas are even more closely associated with idealism and will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

With these philosophical roots, contemporary liberalism offers a fairly comprehensive alternative perspective on the fundamental features of global politics. Liberalism's chief disagreements with realism concern the

classical liberalism

The nineteenth-century philosophy that stressed the importance of the individual and democratic political systems.

predominance of states, the expectation for cooperation versus conflict, the role of international institutions, and the focus on change versus continuity in international politics.

Idealism

idealism A theoretical perspective, in contrast to realism, that focuses on the importance of morality and values in international relations.

Idealism is not as comprehensive as liberalism in its criticism of realism. Rather, idealism focuses on one key point: the absence of morality in realism. Morals and values, not state interests, should and do shape individual and state behavior, according to idealism. Idealism's focus on what states "should" do makes it different from other theoretical perspectives. By prescribing how states should behave, idealism is a more normative, or prescriptive, theory.

Idealism sees realism's emphasis on power politics as blind to the underlying values that states try to promote and worries that the realist perspective makes the use of military force an acceptable means without consideration of the ends for which it is used. For most idealists, war must be a last resort since it takes away human life, a value idealism sees as universally held by all.

Idealism shares many features with liberalism and grows out of some of the same philosophical foundations, including the writings of Immanuel Kant. According to idealism, humans are basically good, and it is social institutions that drive them to immoral acts. Perfecting social institutions is not only possible, but is the key to promoting cooperation and peace in the global society. Thus, like liberalism, idealism sees a role for international organizations in world politics. For liberals, states participate in intergovernmental organizations and desire cooperation because it serves their interests or the *interests* of nonstate actors that constrain states. For idealists, cooperation is desirable because it promotes a *value*—peace—and avoids something morally questionable—war. These were the values that motivated idealists such as Woodrow Wilson to design the League of Nations during the time period between World War I and World War II. The League was meant to promote the values of peace and democracy, but it failed to prevent the Second World War. After World War II, idealist values surfaced in a new international security organization, the United Nations. The charter signed by members of the United Nations obliges states to pursue peaceful means for resolving conflicts.

Applying values to international politics is not easy, and idealism does not offer specific guidelines for how to do so. Although most idealists agree that human rights, for example, is an especially important value to uphold, there is considerable disagreement over which human rights are the most important and whether they should be considered universal. These issues lead to a number of questions: Should one society impose its morals on another, or are values culturally relative? Should societies that value women's rights, equal rights between ethnic groups, economic equality, freedom from torture, freedom from the death penalty, or democratic



ISSUE: The advanced industrialized economic states are challenged when they try to balance the economic advantages of trade with China against security and human rights concerns. Realism, idealism, and liberalism offer alternative policy prescriptions on this question.

Option #1: The advanced economic states should limit their economic ties with China.

Arguments: (a) Realists are concerned that trade with China strengthens a potential threat to other states' security. Economic exchanges on technology can be used for military purposes, and China can use its economic gain to fund its growing military. Furthermore, Chinese threats to Taiwan and its transfer of nuclear technology to Iran and Pakistan should not be rewarded with economic ties. (b) Idealists argue that China should be punished with economic isolation because of its violation of individual political and religious rights, its use of child labor, and its suppression of self-rule in Tibet. The advanced economic states should hold economic exchanges as a reward to China if it conforms with these values.

Counterarguments: (a) China is not a great threat. Although it has a large military, it is not sophisticated technologically and does not come close to matching the capabilities of the United States, the main power with a significant presence in Asia. Furthermore, internal divisions will keep China more focused at home and away from hostile adventures. (b) The application of Western values to China is cultural imperialism and is an intrusion of sovereignty. The advanced economic states would themselves see such intrusions into their own internal politics as unacceptable.

Option #2: The advanced economic states should pursue more economic ties with China.

Arguments: (a) Liberals argue that economic cooperation and interdependence will restrain China from threatening behavior since it is in China's interest to prosper economically, and military threats would harm those interests. (b) Liberals also argue that political liberalization will follow economic liberalization and that more contact with other democracies will eventually undermine the authoritarian government in China, thus addressing human rights concerns. (c) Liberals argue that given the importance of economics today and the profits that can be made from the Chinese market, it is not in the interests of the advanced economic states to sacrifice wealth for security or moral values.

Counterarguments: (a) Increased economic cooperation with China in the past has not diminished its threatening behavior, and democratic structures are not in place to allow those who oppose conflictual policy to influence Chinese decision makers. (b) Human rights violations have continued despite increased economic cooperation with China in the past. (c) Economic trade with China is not that profitable (the United States, for example, has a trade deficit with China), and there are other sources of economic wealth that do not compromise security and values.

political rights apply those values to others who do not? Disagreement also occurs over when to use military force in the name of other values. Idealism does not mean pacifism, and many idealists would argue that full force should be used in situations that have moral imperatives, such as the prevention of genocide. Yet since idealists also believe that one should weigh the moral end with the immoral consequences of killing, the actual balance of values in a particular situation can spark considerable debate. Idealists, however, would say that debating which values are important and how to apply values to international politics is far better than ignoring values by stressing interests, as realism and liberalism do. The Policy Choices box demonstrates some of the key differences among realism, liberalism, and idealism.

World Economic System Analysis

world economic system analysis A theoretical perspective that focuses on the international system of capitalism and the global competition among economic classes.

The theoretical perspective known as **world economic system analysis** disagrees most fundamentally with the realist state-centric assumption. Whereas realism focuses on the international system of anarchy and state competition for power, the world economic system perspective focuses on the international system of capitalism and the competition among economic classes. For this perspective, economics is the primary explanation for world politics. In this way, it is a Marxist theory. But whereas Marx concentrated on class conflict within countries, the world economic system perspective concentrates on global class conflict.

core Countries where the most advanced economic activities take place and wealth is concentrated.

The world economic system perspective takes a historical view of global politics, tracing the development of the world economic system. According to this perspective, the world economy has always been divided into a **core**, in which the most advanced economic activities take place and wealth is concentrated, and a **periphery**, in which the less advanced economic activities occur and wealth is scarce. Over time, particular country economies may move from core to periphery or vice versa, but what is constant across history is that the globe is split into this core-periphery international division of labor and the economic conflict that is inherent in this divide. "As a consequence, the core receives the most favorable proportion of the system's economic surplus through its exploitation of the periphery, which, in turn, is compelled to specialize in the supply of less well rewarded raw materials and labor."¹⁰ Since the development of **capitalism** (a "mode of production . . . dominated by those who operate on the primacy of endless accumulation"),¹¹ a significant change in the world system, the core has primarily consisted of the industrialized economies of Europe and eventually North America and parts of East Asia, and the periphery has consisted of the economies based on the extraction of raw materials in Africa, Latin America, parts of Southeast Asia, and the Middle East.

periphery Countries in which the less advanced economic activities occur and wealth is scarce.

capitalism The dominant mode of economic production today, in which the means of production are privately owned and goods and services are distributed in a free market for profit.

This particular division of labor did not develop arbitrarily, but instead was a product of the historical expansion of the European powers that in

imperialism The domination of a population and territory by another state. The European imperial powers established colonies throughout the world from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century.

dependency theory A theoretical perspective arguing that after the colonized areas became independent, the core continued to exploit the periphery through neo-imperialism—not outright occupation of areas but through indirect domination.

constructivism A theoretical perspective that proposes that the physical world is much less important than the social world and that important aspects of global politics are socially “constructed” through systems of norms, beliefs, and discourse.

the sixteenth century began colonizing the rest of the world. Colonization involved changing the conquered territories’ economies to suit the needs of the European powers. In most parts of Latin America and Africa, for example, agricultural economies designed to feed the population for centuries were destroyed and replaced by luxury crops (largely goods exported for Europeans) such as bananas and sugar cane or raw materials such as gold. This **imperialism** changed the nature of the world economic system to the advantage of the European powers, and the conflict between the core and the periphery involved economic and political domination to ensure continued economic gain on the part of the core.¹² Related to world economic system analysis, **dependency theory** argues that even after the colonized areas became independent, the core continued to exploit the periphery through neo-imperialism—not outright occupation of the areas but indirect domination through military interventions, control of international organizations, biased trading practices, and collusion with corrupted elites who governed the periphery.¹³

The implications of and debates surrounding world economic system analysis will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 11. At this point, however, it is important to recognize the alternative vision of global politics that it presents compared to other theoretical perspectives. Its focus on economics contrasts greatly with the realist focus on power and the idealist focus on values. Compared to liberalism, which also recognizes the importance of economic relations, world economic system analysis stresses the historical circumstances that created the capitalist division of labor. Moreover, whereas liberalism sees interdependence as fostering cooperation among states and other nonstate actors, the world economic system perspective sees a particular kind of interdependence—dependence of the periphery on the core—as fostering conflict among global economic classes.

Constructivism

Constructivism represents yet another challenge to realism. To better understand constructivism, we need to look at its basic roots, which (as the name implies) involve “construction.” Although we typically think of construction as involving physical things, like buildings or cars, constructivists consider how the social world is built. There are many different kinds of constructivists, but they all tend to support the idea that the physical world is much less important than the social world and that important parts of the physical world are actually built of, or “constructed” by, the social world.¹⁴

Consider a thief. What exactly is a “thief”? You might readily answer that a thief is a person who steals things. But then you are left with the question of what it means to “steal” things. Again, you might answer that it means taking things that do not belong to you. But, then, what does “belong to” mean? Surely, a constructivist might argue, we know

that different societies around the world define things like stealing and possessions differently. Some societies do not even operate on the basis of private property, and thus the notion of stealing is largely absent. This same sort of thinking applies to actions as well. Murder, for example, is understood very differently depending on how each society defines it. The physical acts may be remarkably similar, but killing a prisoner, a political dissident, an unwanted baby, or a trespasser can all be constructed as very different. We can see, then, that a "thief" or a "murder" are best thought of not as real things, but rather as ideas that are constructed from the rules of a society or a particular social context. Two people might see a person take something away from another person or end the life of another person, but the physical act could have entirely different meanings to each of the observers. We might even say that thieves and murders do not exist, except insofar as a particular society defines them (constructs them) into existence. The physical world, it would seem, is far less important than how the social world constructs that physical world.

But how does this apply to international relations, and how does constructivism represent a challenge to realism? If realism is purportedly based on what is "real," then constructivism confronts realism by questioning "reality." Realists tend to objectify the world by asserting that there is a single, knowable, true world that is separate from one's social context. Constructivists counter that there is no certain, permanent, factual reality, and even if there were, physical truths matter less than social constructions. Thus, constructivism questions some of the basic claims of realism.

Take the concept of a "state." Recall that states are the central actors according to a realist perspective, and it is the pursuit of state power that drives international relations. Indeed, realists contend that all states are the same in that they are actors pursuing their objective self-interests. But what is a "state"? A realist would answer that it is a government that exercises sovereign authority over a defined territory. But, then, what is a "government," and what is "sovereign authority"? Certainly the notion of "government" varies from society to society, as do conceptions of both "sovereignty" and "authority." Moreover, a constructivist might ask what these "objective interests" are that realists espouse. Certainly these things are not "facts" in the sense that they truly exist somewhere. Rather, they are constructed from various understandings associated with different societies and cultures. Thus, it becomes important to understand how a "state" or a society conceives of itself and its interests, rather than simply asserting that all states are the same. In a sense, constructivists are more interested in understanding the subjective than the objective and are quite hesitant to claim that certain concepts apply in the same fashion to all people.

Constructivists apply the same logic to the concept of anarchy, which is central to realism. Realists look at anarchy as the most important characteristic of the international system, since each state must then fend for itself rather than appeal to some higher authority. But can we really say that anarchy is a universal truth, viewed and responded to in the same

fashion by all the world? Alexander Wendt, one of the best-known constructivists, tackles this very issue in an article titled “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics.”¹⁵ There he suggests that identities and interests of states are not independent of, and are constructed by, their interactions—much as thieves and murders are not independent of, and are constructed by, their social context. Thus, when realists take as a starting point the self-interested nature of states, and only then consider how they will interact with one another, they are presupposing something. They are, in effect, treating interests as given, and then trying to determine how states will interact. They might say that *because* states are self-interested, they will use force to maximize power when they interact in an anarchical system. But a constructivist would say that interests are not given and that a state will have different interests depending on its interactions. Indeed, the notion of anarchy itself is not a universal but rather is constructed based on the social context. The social context in this instance is the actual interactions of states (an international society). Thus, anarchy (like thieves and murders) will be defined differently depending on how states interact. Anarchy is just what states make of it.

Constructivists argue that states’ constructions of the international system influence global politics more than do any objective conditions. One important type of social construction, **international norms**, can have powerful effects on how states act and understand international relations.¹⁶ Constructivists point out that what is right, wrong, or appropriate, and even what is in a state’s interest is the product of the collective social context of global politics. Norms against the slave trade, norms against the use of war for offensive purposes, and norms condoning the interference in internal affairs for human rights have, according to constructivists, been socially constructed and reinforced by states’ behavior and now act as serious constraints on what states perceive as acceptable behavior.

international norms Socially agreed-upon standards and expectations about appropriate behaviors of states.

Feminist Perspectives

Much of the feminist perspective in international politics is consistent with the constructivist perspective. Feminist constructivism examines the hidden assumptions about gender in the understanding and practice of global politics. Indeed, **feminist constructivism** rejects the idea that there is a universal truth, instead arguing that gender and the way gender is defined colors different understandings of world politics. Feminists argue, for example, that international relations theorizing is largely based on masculine assumptions and reasoning.¹⁷ Specifically, the principles of realism and its vocabulary are rather masculine in perspective. Realism’s preoccupation with conflict, domination, and war, for example, reflects a more masculine way of thinking about human and state relations. Thus, far from accepting a dog-eat-dog conception of autonomous states vying for supremacy as if it were a “real” property of the international system, feminists argue that this is merely a masculine construction of global politics.

feminist constructivism Perspective that rejects the idea of a universal truth, instead arguing that gender and the way gender is defined colors different understandings in world politics.

Furthermore, realism’s definition of power as control contrasts with feminine definitions of power as the ability to act in concert or action taken in connection with others. Feminists argue that this conception of power is practiced by weaker states but that realism, with its focus on major powers, largely ignores these aspects of international relations. Feminists also define security, a central concept in realism, differently: “Many IR [international relations] feminists define security broadly in multidimensional and multilevel terms—as the diminution of all forms of violence, including physical, structural, and ecological. . . . Most of these definitions start with the individual or community rather than the state or the international system.”¹⁸ Like idealism, feminism also criticizes realism for its amoral stance. Moral issues, particularly human rights issues, are an important part of a broad definition of security, but are marginalized in the realist perspective.

Feminism might appear to be more comfortable with liberalism and its focus on cooperation and idealism with its attention to morality, but many feminists reject the liberal philosophy of individual interests, as opposed to community interests, that underlie both of these alternative perspectives. In sum, many feminists argue that a deconstruction of the dominant perspectives of international relations will reveal that women have been “systematically omitted in the quest to represent elite male experience and images of reality, as reality per se. . . . The result is a Tradition and a discipline, and indeed a whole International Relations community, that has rendered women invisible.”¹⁹ Consequently, feminists argue, the study of international relations, especially the dominant realist perspective, is masculine in its perspective and thus is only a partial description of international politics.

Another part of the feminist perspective concerns the impact that men and women have on international politics and the impact that international politics has on men and women. It may not be surprising that our perspectives on international relations are masculine biased since males hold most of the important leadership positions. Politics in general, and perhaps especially international politics, has always been male dominated. According to the World Bank, only about 16 percent of the world’s parliamentarians are female.²⁰ A perusal of the names of the foreign ministers and defense ministers in all the states of the world shows that only a few are female; also, only a very small minority of ambassadors to the United Nations are female.

What effect does this underrepresentation of women in leadership positions have on global politics? The answer to this question depends on how differences between men and women are explained. **Essential feminism** argues that women are inherently different from men in ways that make their contributions to politics differ greatly. According to this argument, men and women have essential biological differences that lead them to think and behave differently in ways that might affect international relations. In most countries, for example, a gender gap exists in public opinion: men tend to be more supportive of war and conflictual



Map: Women’s Rights, Atlas page 27

essential feminism

Idea that women are inherently different from men in ways that make their contributions to politics differ greatly.

liberal feminism

Perspective that stresses the similarities between men and women and the entitlement for women to the same rights and responsibilities that men have.

means for addressing their countries' problems than are women. If more women were leaders, the argument continues, "a truly matriarchal world, then, would be less prone to conflict and more conciliatory and cooperative than the one we inhabit now."²¹

Most feminist scholars in international relations do not subscribe to the view that gender differences are biologically determined.²² Rather, they see gender roles as socially constructed or created and reinforced by the social environment. This view recognizes the differences between men and women and the alternative ways of thinking and behaving that arise from the feminine standpoint, but rejects any biological determinism and inherent superiority of women. **Liberal feminism**

also rejects biological determinism, but rather than focusing on the unique contributions that women can make, it stresses the similarities between men and women and the entitlement for women to the same rights and responsibilities that men enjoy. From this point of view, women can contribute in the same ways as do men with equal capability (e.g., as women leaders, soldiers, and suicide bombers) although political, economic, and social structures, in addition to gender stereotypes, often block their entry into such positions. Liberal feminists point to the women who have held leadership positions, such as India's Indira Gandhi, Israel's Golda Meir, and Great Britain's Margaret Thatcher, who were as conflictual as men in their foreign policies. More generally, a comparison of female and male leaders reveals that "both female and male leaders rely on . . . the use of force. . . . Furthermore, both female and male leaders' average use of violence is equal. According to this evidence, female leaders are not more peaceful than their male counterparts."²³ Other feminists would counter that women leaders must conform to socially constructed male roles in order to get into the positions usually reserved for men.

While women are not well represented in the public sphere of global politics, feminists point out that their contribution in the private sphere is no less important, even though it has often been ignored by both politicians and scholars. Women in their public and private work contribute greatly to the international economy. Diplomatic wives support their ambassador



Gro Harlem Brundtland is a rare exception to the male-dominated world of international diplomacy. She has held many high-ranking positions, including prime minister of Norway, chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission), and director-general of the World Health Organization.

(Prakash Singh/AFP/Getty Images)

husbands through rearing their children and hosting parties. Women make up a good percentage of regular armed forces, even though they are often restricted to noncombat roles. In revolutionary movements, women participate in the full range of armed conflict.²⁴

Women, however, tend not to benefit as greatly from their roles in global politics, and a significant part of the feminist perspective is demonstrating the impact that global politics has on women. For example, “feminists tend to focus on the consequences of what happens during wars rather than on their causes. . . . They draw on evidence to emphasize the negative impact of contemporary military conflicts on civilian populations. . . . As mothers, family providers, and care-givers, women are particularly penalized by economic sanctions associated with military conflict.”²⁵ Discrimination against women, in part because they make up half the human race, is arguably the single most profound human rights issue in the world today. In most developing countries, women work an average of 12 to 18 hours a day in their multiple roles as caretakers, educators, health promoters, and income earners, as opposed to 10 to 12 for men.²⁶ Women do about two-thirds of the work in the world but receive less than one-tenth of the income and own less than 1 percent of the world’s property.²⁷

In sum, the feminist perspective serves as another alternative lens through which to view international relations. In asking “Where are the women?” it seeks to uncover the gendered nature of global politics and our understanding of global politics.²⁸

SUMMARY

- Theoretical perspectives provide answers to these basic questions: Who are the main actors in international politics? Why do actors do what they do in international politics? What are the underlying factors that govern relationships in global politics? How have international relations changed or stayed the same over the centuries? What accounts for conflict and cooperation in international politics? These issues are important to understand because they make explicit underlying assumptions, present alternative explanations of the same events or “facts,” and provide a basis for understanding global politics in the future.
- Realism has been the dominant theoretical perspective. It sees states as the most important actors in global politics. States pursue their interests by maximizing their power, primarily military power, because of the anarchical nature of the international system. As a result, conflict is an inherent part of international politics. Realism sees great continuity in international relations across time periods.
- Liberalism argues that changes in the international system have made nonstate actors—both transnational and substate actors—more important in global politics. The multiple connections across states and substate actors, particularly in democracies, serve to constrain states from engaging

in conflicts that might harm their economic interests. Liberalism argues that complex interdependence in the international system means that states engage in and benefit from cooperation, including cooperation in international organizations.

- Idealism proposes that states should and do follow their values in global politics. Foreign policy and international organizations should be constructed to address moral issues of peace and human rights.
- The world economic system perspective focuses on the historical development of the international capitalist economic system, which is divided into a richer core and a poorer periphery. This division of labor has its roots in the imperial adventures of the European powers that, beginning in the sixteenth century, colonized most of the rest of the world. Dependency theory argues that the exploitative economic relationships established during colonization continue today.
- Constructivism proposes that the physical world is much less important than the socially constructed world. Constructivists criticize realism for the assumption that there are universal truths. Key realist concepts, such as the “state” and “anarchy,” are, for constructivists, more subjective and depend on the context. How such concepts are understood is much more important than is an objective definition of them.
- Feminist perspectives on international politics include arguments that the other major theoretical perspectives, particularly realism, contain masculine assumptions and hence offer only partial understanding of global politics. The feminist perspective also includes assessment of the gender-biased ways in which women and men participate in and are affected by global politics.

KEY TERMS

global politics	3	substate actors	9
theoretical perspectives	3	classical liberalism	12
realism	4	idealism	13
Thucydides	4	world economic system	
Morgenthau	4	analysis	15
states	4	core	15
sovereignty	4	periphery	15
anarchy	5	capitalism	15
liberalism	7	imperialism	16
interdependence	8	dependency theory	16
complex interdependence	9	constructivism	16
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