

# 2 Realism and foreign policy

*William C. Wohlforth*

## Chapter contents

Introduction	32
What is realism?	32
The development of realist theories	34
Realist analysis of foreign policy	38
Using realism in analysing foreign policy	42
Conclusion: hedgehogs, foxes, and analysing foreign policy	45

## Reader's guide

This chapter shows how familiarity with realist theory improves foreign policy analysis. The main challenge is to exploit two features of realism that are often in tension with each other: its firm grounding in centuries of real foreign policy practice, and its aspiration to create powerful general theories that help to simplify and explain the international setting in which foreign policy takes place. The chapter identifies a branch of realist theory—neoclassical realism—that bridges the gap between these two aspects of the realist tradition and thus is most useful for the analysis of foreign policy. Key questions addressed are:

- What is realism?
- How is it applied to the analysis and practice of foreign policy?
- What are the main pitfalls in applying realist theories to foreign policy analysis?
- What is a useful set of guidelines for avoiding those pitfalls and using realist insights to sharpen the analysis of foreign policy?

## Introduction

Realism is the foundational school of thought about international politics around which all others are oriented. It follows that any foreign policy analyst who wishes to make use of International Relations theory must understand realism. Fortunately, this is not difficult to do. As this chapter demonstrates, the realist school can be understood as a body of theories and related arguments that flow from a very small set of basic assumptions about how the world works. Used with sensitivity in their application to the complexity and uncertainty of the real political world, realist theories can substantially sharpen the analysis of foreign policy.

To apply realism to foreign policy analysis, one has to bridge the gap that divides highly general, 'top down' theory from the 'inside-out' analysis of specific cases. Realism itself embodies this tension, reflecting the desire to be both realistic (that is, grounded in actual foreign policy practice) and theoretical (that is, aspiring to general, timeless knowledge). Realists seek to distill the accumulated wisdom of generations of foreign policy practitioners into general theories of international relations. Realism's basic conceptual

foundations are derived from the close observation of lived politics. But in seeking to construct and apply a reality-based theory, realists constantly face the challenge of cycling between the nuanced subtleties of real foreign policy situations and the razor-sharp assumptions and deductions of theory.

In this chapter, I show that realism's promise for the analysis of foreign policy stems from its twin commitments to particular and general knowledge, and that most of the pitfalls of applying realism derive from a failure to get this balance right. I outline an approach to realist theory designed to connect the insights of general theory to the details and uncertainty of analysing specific foreign policy situations. This approach reflects a sustained effort on the part of a new generation of scholars to gain the analytical benefits of realist theory without falling prey to its potentially misleading over-generalization. To understand this new approach, however, one first needs to know what realism is, how it has developed over the years, and how the general theories that have developed as part of the realist canon have been used to analyse foreign policy.

## What is realism?

Realism is a school of thought based on three core assumptions about how the world works:<sup>1</sup>

- *Groupism.* Humans face one another mainly as members of groups. To survive at anything above a subsistence level, people need the cohesion provided by group solidarity, yet that very same in-group cohesion generates the potential for conflict with other groups. Today the most important human groups are nation-states and the most important source of in-group cohesion is nationalism. For convenience, I shall use the term 'states' henceforth. But it is important to stress that realism makes no assumption about the nature of the polity. It may apply to any social setting where groups interact.
- *Egoism.* Self-interest ultimately drives political behaviour. Although certain conditions can facilitate altruistic behaviour, egoism is rooted in human nature. When push comes to shove and ultimate trade-offs between collective and self-interest must be confronted, egoism tends to trump altruism. As the classic realist adage has it, 'Inhumanity is just humanity under pressure.'
- *Power-centrism.* Power is the fundamental feature of politics. Once past the hunter-gatherer stage, human affairs are always marked by great inequalities of power in both senses of that term: social influence or *control* (some groups and individuals always have an outsized influence on politics)

and *resources* (some groups and individuals are always disproportionately endowed with the material wherewithal to get what they want). Key to politics in any area is the interaction between social and material power, an interaction that unfolds in the shadow of the potential use of material power to coerce. As Kenneth Waltz (1979: 186) put it, 'The web of social and political life is spun out of inclinations and incentives, deterrent threats and punishments. Eliminate the latter two, and the ordering of society depends entirely on the former—a utopian thought impractical this side of Eden.'

If one believes the world generally works by these rules, then many important consequences follow for how one thinks about international politics: that the main groups with which people identify—be they tribes, city-states, empires, or nation-states—will exert a major influence on human affairs; that the group's collective interest, however defined, will be central to its politics; that necessity as the group interest defines it will trump any putatively universal morality and ethics; and thus that humankind is unlikely ever to wholly transcend power politics through the progressive power of reason.

This way of thinking about international relations leads immediately to an identifiably realist approach to foreign policy: an orientation toward the most powerful (that is, most resource rich and influential) groups at any given time (today this means major powers like the United States or China); a scepticism toward professed aims of foreign policy other than the state interest; a tendency to question the ability of any state's foreign policy to transcend power politics; and a penchant for looking beyond rhetoric to the power realities that realists expect nearly always underlie policy. These precepts represent a simple realist checklist for foreign policy analysis: look for where the power is, what the group interests are, and to the role power relationships play in reconciling clashing interests.

Certain types of thinkers tend to share similar bets about how the world works. Critics like to say that the kind of person most likely to accept the core realist assumptions is a congenital pessimist and cynic. Realists counter that these assumptions are simply realistic—based on the dispassionate observation of human affairs the way they are, as opposed to the way we might wish them to be. There is a degree of truth to both views, and they add up to produce a unity of realist thought stretching from Thucydides to Machiavelli, Weber, Carr, Morgenthau, and Waltz. Even though the thinkers indelibly associated with realism are a highly diverse lot, and even though their ideas often contradict each other, the threads of those three core assumptions tie them all together into a coherent intellectual school. Reading any of the writings of any of these thinkers concerning the foreign policies of their day, one immediately discerns the unmistakably realist approach to foreign policy I identified above.

To be sure, realism is more than academic theory. It is also a tradition of statecraft that tends to reflect these same basic assumptions. But the focus here is on the use of scholarly theory to inform the analysis of foreign policy. For that purpose, it is important to be clear about how scholars transform the basic assumptions about the world into theories. And that demands clarity about what we mean by the word 'theory'. Confusingly, scholars use 'theory' to refer to three distinct things: realism itself (a large and complex school of thought); sub-schools within realism such as neorealism (smaller but still complex schools of thought fitting within the realist tradition); and specific realist theories like the balance of power, the security dilemma, or the offence–defence balance (all propositions about patterns of relations among states or pressures facing a particular state). In this chapter, I keep these things clear, reserving the term 'theory' for specific propositions or arguments. These distinctions are not academic quibbles. The foreign policy analyst may well be sceptical of realism in general but still find specific realist theories very helpful indeed.

## The development of realist theories

Trademark realist theories all proceed from realism's three core assumptions of groupism, egoism, and power-centrism. The first and most general of all these theories, and the one from which most others proceed, can be stated simply: if human affairs are indeed characterized by groupism, egoism, and power-centrism, then politics is likely to be conflictual unless there is some central authority to enforce order. When no authority exists which can enforce agreements—a condition theorists call anarchy—then any state can resort to force to get what it wants. Even if a state can be fairly sure that no other state will today take up arms, there is no guarantee against the possibility that one might do so tomorrow. Because no state can rule out this prospect, states tend to arm themselves against this contingency. With all states thus armed, politics takes on a different cast. Disputes that would be easy to settle if states could rely on some higher authority to enforce an agreement can escalate to war in the absence of such authority. The classic realist theoretical argument is therefore that anarchy renders states' security problematic, potentially conflictual, and is a key underlying cause of war.

To move from this very general argument about the potential importance of power and conflict in international relations to any real foreign policy situation requires three steps: a knowledge of theoretical schools within realism, familiarity with specific realist theories, and, perhaps most important, clarity about how theories, assumptions, and conditions are related.

### Theoretical schools within realism

The development of realist thought can be seen as a series of refinements, amendments, qualifications, and extensions of the basic argument. For simplicity's sake, scholars often lump together all realist thought from Thucydides to the middle years of the Cold War as classical realism. They describe distinctions within the massive classical realist canon by reference to individual thinkers. The classical realists all sought to

translate the distilled wisdom of generations of practitioners and analysts into very general theories. But they were not always clear about when their theories applied to specific situations as opposed to general patterns. This ambiguity in the classical realist writings led to endless debates about what was actually being claimed for any particular theory.

As interest in the scientific approach to the study of politics grew (especially in the United States), Kenneth Waltz sought to revivify realist thinking by translating some core realist ideas into a deductive, top-down theoretical framework that eventually came to be called neorealism. Waltz (1959) held that classical realists' powerful insights into the workings of international politics were weakened by their failure to distinguish clearly among arguments about human nature, the internal attributes of states, and the overall system of states. His *Theory of International Politics* (1979) brought together and clarified many earlier realist ideas about how the features of the overall system of states affect the ways states interact. He restated in the clearest form yet the classic argument about how the mere existence of groups in anarchy can lead to powerful competitive pressure and war—regardless of what the internal politics of those groups might be like.

The advent of neorealism caused scholars to think much harder and more clearly about the underlying forces that drive international relations. Realists discovered that, depending on how they thought about the core assumptions, and what they saw as the most reasonable expectations about real-world conditions, neorealism could lead to very different predictions. Written in a highly abstract manner, Waltz's neorealism ignored important variations in international relations, including geography and technology. Depending on how one conceptualized those factors, the very same neorealist ideas could generate widely disparate implications about the dynamics of interstate politics. Out of this realization were borne two new theoretical subschools, each of which built on the basic insights of neorealism.

Defensive realists reasoned that under very common conditions the war-causing potential of anarchy is attenuated. Proceeding from the core realist assumption about groupism, these theorists argued that the stronger group identity is—as in the modern era of nationalism—the harder it is to conquer and subjugate other groups. And the harder conquest is, the more secure all states can be. Similarly, technology may make conquest hard—for example, it is hard to contemplate the conquest of states that have the capacity to strike back with nuclear weapons. Thus, even accepting all of Waltz's arguments about how difficult it is to be secure in an anarchic world, under these kinds of conditions, states could still be expected to find ways of defending themselves without threatening others, or could otherwise signal their peaceful intentions, resulting in an international system with more built-in potential for peace than many realists previously thought. The result was to push analysts to look inside states for the domestic/ideational causes of war and peace.

Offensive realists, by contrast, were more persuaded by the conflict-generating, structural potential of anarchy itself. They reasoned that, with no authority to enforce agreements, states could never be certain that any peace-causing condition today would remain operative in the future. Even if conquest may seem hard today owing to geography, technology, or group identity, there is no guarantee against the prospect that another state will develop some fiendish device for overcoming these barriers. Given this uncertainty, states can rarely be confident of their security and must always view other states' increases in power with suspicion. As a result, states are often tempted to expand or otherwise strengthen themselves—and/or to weaken others—in order to survive over the long haul. The result is to reinforce the classic realist argument about the competitive nature of life under anarchy, regardless of the internal properties of states.

As clear and elegant as neorealism and its immediate outgrowths were, it remained unclear just how relevant they were to any given foreign policy problem. So focused were realists on defining the single best and most universal formulation of their

theory that it began to seem as if the development of realism had taken a completely different path from the analysis of foreign policy. Waltz (1996) himself argued famously that 'international politics is *not* foreign policy', implying that theory development and foreign policy analysis had become two distinct endeavours with little connection to each other.

Neoclassical realism is a subschool within realism that seeks to rectify this imbalance between the general and the particular. It accepts from neorealism and its descendents the basic utility of thinking theoretically about the international system as distinct from the internal properties of states (Rose, 1998). Having carefully specified their assessment of the international conditions particular states face, however, neoclassical realists go on to factor in specific features of a given situation to generate more complete explanations of foreign policy. They seek to recapture the grounding in the gritty details of foreign policy that marked classical realism, while also benefiting from the rigorous theorizing that typified neorealism.

Neoclassical realists are not driven by the dream of creating a single universal theory of international politics. For them, the question is: which realist school (if any) is most useful for analysing issues of foreign policy at a given place and time? To some extent, the choice of theory is a contextual issue. In parts of Europe for long stretches of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, for example, offensive realism provides a powerful shorthand portrayal of the incentives and constraints states faced. In other periods, and for some groups of states in Europe, defensive realism arguably provides a more accurate model of the international setting. And many analysts hold that in today's European Union anarchy is sufficiently attenuated that neither is much use.

The degree to which a theoretical picture of the international system really applies is a matter of judgment, based on the analyst's reading of the context. Neoclassical realists remain agnostic over which theoretical proposition may apply; they bring to bear those theories that are arguably relevant. However, while they are agnostic over *which* theory or theoretical school may apply, they agree that theory helps

strengthen analysis. From the perspective of realism, a basic set of questions constantly recurs in foreign policy analysis. To what degree is state *X*'s policy a response to external pressures and incentives as opposed to internally generated? If a new party were to come to power, how much would the policy change? Would state *X* respond more favourably to incentives or threats? To answer these questions, one has to imagine what *any* state would do in *X*'s position. The key contribution of neorealism and its offshoot subschools of offensive and defensive realism is rigorous thinking about exactly these questions. For neoclassical realists, theoretical structures like offensive and defensive realism are not always and everywhere true or false. Rather, they make it easier to perform the key mental experiments that lie at the core of foreign policy analysis by helping analysts frame their assessments of the external constraints and incentives states face.

This, I shall argue, is the approach most likely to exploit the benefits of realism for the analysis of foreign policy while avoiding the potential pitfalls. To see why this is so, it is necessary to be familiar with more specific realist theories, and aware of how theories actually relate to specific situations.

### Theories within realism

Theoretical subschools do not capture realism's full diversity. Equally important are specific theories about the fundamental constraints and incentives that shape foreign policy. A knowledge of realist theories prompts one to ask questions about foreign policy one would not otherwise ask, to look for patterns that would not otherwise seem relevant, and to see commonalities through time and so help distinguish the mundane from the remarkable.

Arguably the best-known theoretical proposition about international relations is balance of power theory. Given the basic problem that under anarchy any state can resort to force to get what it wants, it follows that states are likely to guard against the possibility that one state might amass the wherewithal to compel all the others to do its will and even possibly eliminate them. The theory posits that states will

check dangerous concentrations of power by building up their own capabilities ('internal balancing') or aggregating their capabilities with other states in alliances ('external balancing'). Because states are always looking to the future to anticipate possible problems, balancing may occur even before any one state or alliance has gained an obvious power edge. Thus, Britain and France fought the Russian Empire in the Crimea in the middle of the nineteenth century less because they saw an immediate challenge to their position than because they reasoned that, if unchecked, Russian power might someday be a threat to them. However wise or unwise it may have been, the thinking in London and Paris at this time strikes many historians as entirely consistent with the expectations of balance of power theory.

Balance of threat theory adds complexity to this picture. As its name implies, this theory predicts that states will balance against threats. Threat, in turn, is driven by a combination of three key variables: aggregate capabilities (that is, a state's overall military and economic potential), geography, and perceptions of aggressive intentions. If one state becomes especially powerful and if its location and behaviour feed threat perceptions on the part of other states, then balancing strategies will come to dominate their foreign policies. Thus, the United States began both external and internal balancing after the end of the Second World War even though the Soviet Union remained decidedly inferior in most categories of power. Ultimately, the western alliance overwhelmed the Soviet-led alliance on nearly every dimension. Balance-of-threat theory holds that it was the *location* of Soviet power in the heart of Europe, as well as the threat inherent in its secretive government and perceived aggressiveness, that produced this outcome.

Hegemonic stability theory builds on the observation that powerful states tend to seek dominance over all or parts of any international system, thus fostering some degree of hierarchy within the overall systemic anarchy. It seeks to explain how cooperation can emerge among major powers, and how international orders, comprising rules, norms, and institutions, emerge and are sustained. The theory's

core prediction is that any international order is stable only to the degree that the relations of authority within it are sustained by the underlying distribution of power. According to this theory, the current 'globalization' order is sustained by US power and is likely to come undone as challengers like China gain strength.

Power transition theory is a subset of hegemonic stability that seeks to explain how orders break down into war. Building from the premises of hegemonic stability theory, it deduces that dominant states will prefer to retain leadership, that lesser states' preference for contesting that leadership will tend to strengthen as they become stronger relative to the dominant state, and that this clash is likely to come to the fore as the capabilities of the two sides approach parity. Applied to the current context, the theory posits that the stronger China gets, the more likely it is to become dissatisfied with the US-led global order. It predicts that a war or at least a Cold War-style rivalry between the United States and China will become likely unless China's growth slows down or Washington finds a way to accommodate Beijing's preferences.

### Assumptions, conditions, and theories

The chief challenge for foreign policy analysis is: how do we know whether one of these theoretical sub-schools or specific theories applies to a specific foreign policy issue? The answer lies in being clear about how the various parts of any theory fit together. Recall the general argument I spelled out about how anarchy fosters conflict. This contains three pieces: the three *assumptions* of groupism, egoism, and power-centrism, a postulated scope condition (anarchy), and a very general *theory* (given those assumptions, politics in anarchy is conflictual). Many realists and critics of realism confuse these three things. For example, many assert that anarchy or conflict are assumptions that define realism. This is wrong, and leads to major analytical mistakes on the part of scholars both favourably and unfavourably disposed

toward realism. Realists do not *assume* anarchy. Rather they create theories about what happens in anarchical settings. Realists do not *assume* that inter-state interaction will be conflictual. Rather, realism contains theories that identify the conditions under which inter-state interactions are likely to be conflictual. Two common ways in which analysts can go astray when applying realism to foreign policy are thus apparent.

The first error is to confuse assumptions with scope conditions. If you think anarchy is a core assumption about international politics, then you are likely to think realist theories that highlight anarchy apply equally strongly to all states everywhere. But in practice anarchy is variable. States' ability to rely on some authority to enforce agreements is a matter of degree. For example, great powers sometimes seek to enforce order among nearby small states. For those smaller states, anarchy is attenuated. On some set of issues, those states might reasonably expect the local great power to enforce agreements. Realist theories that highlight anarchy, therefore, would not apply particularly strongly to those states on that set of issues. Thus, for example, the United States in Central America, the EU in the Balkans, and perhaps Russia in Central Asia may all perform this anarchy-attenuating role (albeit in very different ways). The only way to know where and to what degree anarchy is attenuated is to acquire in-depth knowledge about specific states—just what foreign policy analysts are supposed to do.

The second kind of error is to confuse assumptions with predictions. If you mistakenly think that conflict is a core assumption of realism, you might well conclude that whenever states are nice to each other, realist theories must not apply. But this is not necessarily so. Because realist theories explain war, they also explain peace. For realists, peace results when the key causes of war are absent. Thus the amity you might observe among some group of states may be a result of the attenuation of anarchy among them caused by a local order-providing great power. Or amity among one group of states may arise from their shared need to oppose another state or group. In either case, realist theories predict that the absence

Propositions commonly seen as definitive 'assumption of Realism'	Actual relation to three core assumptions
'States are main actors'	Current manifestation of the groupism assumption  Predictions/arguments derived from three assumptions
'Universal moral principals do not apply to states'	
'States calculate interest in terms of power'	
'Scepticism toward international law and institutions'	
'International politics is essentially conflictual'	
'Humankind cannot transcend conflict through the progressive power of reason'	
'Primacy of balance of power politics'	
'International system is anarchic'	Scope conditions
'Uncertainty'	
'The utility of force'	Implication of egoism
'Politics not a function of ethics; reasons of state trump ethics'	
'State interest is survival'	Implication of groupism
'Realists assume tendency to evil'	Mis-stated implication of egoism

Figure 2.1 Many propositions thought to be definitive of realism are actually derivative of the three core assumptions

of conflict is contingent on a particular configuration of power and that conflict might return when that configuration changes. (See Figure 2.1.)

The upshot is that realist theories can be powerful tools in foreign policy analysis, but applying them is harder than it might seem. The trick is to recognize the contingent nature of all theories. The question of whether a theory applies to a given case is hard

to answer, and often requires precisely the kind of deep local knowledge analysts of foreign policy tend to possess. Neoclassical realism, I have suggested, best captures this delicate combination between the general and the particular. So far, I have made this case at a very general level. It becomes much clearer when we examine actual realist analysis of foreign policy.

## Realist analysis of foreign policy

While the analysis of foreign policy might begin with theory, it should never end there. To generate explanations of foreign policy, one must combine the general and timeless causes theories identify with the particulars of a given situation. As I have stressed,

realism is the school of thought arguably most firmly grounded in real foreign policy practice while also most committed to creating highly general theories. How have realists reconciled these potentially contradictory commitments?



## Practitioners' realist foreign policy approaches

Examples are easy to find. Frequently one encounters the explicit or implicit use of realist theory balanced with in-depth case-specific knowledge in the analysis of real policy makers.

In 1900, the Russian Minister of War Prince Kuropatkin wrote a comprehensive report for Tsar Alexander II on the strategic situation. It provided three important assessments—all of which were controversial at the time but in hindsight appear prescient, given the fate that we now know would soon befall the Russian Empire: that Russia was a satisfied power needing no further expansion for any of its core interests; that any expansion would only frighten other states, causing them to build up their own forces or ally against St. Petersburg; and that, given its own power and that of its potential enemies, Russia could ill-afford any such confrontation and needed to do all it could to reduce tensions with other major powers. Focusing on the relative power of states and the ever-present potential for conflict, Kuropatkin's analysis built on all the core realist assumptions. Most importantly, the report recognized that whatever its universal validity as a general portrayal of international politics, in 1900, balance of power theory was working against Russia. In today's terms, the report relies on balance of threat theory and the general assessment of the security dilemma found in defensive realism. The brilliance of Kuropatkin's analysis was its sophisticated recognition that even though Russia was weak, it could still seem strong and threatening to others, causing them to take countermeasures that could end up making Russia even less secure. This report was, historian William Fuller (1992: 379) notes, 'a masterly effort and inspires admiration'.

In 1907 a British diplomat, Sir Eyre Crowe, wrote a memorandum for the Government outlining the need for a thoroughgoing reorientation of Britain's foreign policy. At its core was a dispassionate analysis of the Empire's overall power position and the fundamental challenges presented by the rise of Germany. Crowe used balance of power theory to explain why

Britain had to concentrate its dwindling resources on the problem of containing German power. The memorandum brought together the typical realist emphasis on systemic power concerns with a detailed examination of German domestic politics, statecraft, and intentions.

In 1946, George Kennan, the US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, drafted one of the most famous memoranda of modern times, the 'long telegram', urging Washington to adopt a policy of containing Soviet power. He argued that the USSR was in a position that threatened the global balance of power and that the country was internally disposed to continue expanding unless it met a powerful counterweight. Once again we see the general realist precepts (a dispassionate analysis of Soviet, US, and British capabilities and of the fundamental importance of the world's key power centres, a penchant for discounting the universalistic rhetoric on both sides, a focus on narrow group interest and the potential for conflict), a very general, timeless theory (again, the balance of power), and an in-depth and insightful analysis of domestic Soviet politics.

In the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger engineered a reorientation of US foreign policy. Underlying this shift was Kissinger's hard-headed analysis of the relative decline in US power against the backdrop of the increasing power of the United States' own allies in Europe and Asia, as well as that of their main rival, the Soviet Union, and many other regional states. The chief argument of this study was that in view of its weakened power position, Washington should do less by itself, work to get allies and partners to shoulder more of the burden of containing Soviet power, reduce the number of potential enemies by reaching out to China, and attenuate the rivalry with the USSR by pursuing a relaxation of tensions known in diplomatic parlance as *détente*.

These examples are all from foreign policy practitioners steeped in the realist intellectual tradition. They share the trademark realist emphasis on a dispassionate analysis of the relative power positions of groups in anarchy and the ubiquity of power politics.

Their realism becomes clearer when compared to what others were saying at the time. In each case, these analysts confronted competing analyses that did not share the basic realist features noted above. Historian Fuller observed that Kuropatkin's report was 'the first occasion in Russian history in which a statesman had tried to commit to paper a synoptic vision of Russia's political and military strategies in the past, present, and future.' Crowe's memorandum met with a sceptical response from the Liberal cabinet of the day, and both Kennan's and Kissinger's mode of thinking struck many of their fellow countrymen as somehow un-American.

These practitioners deployed arguments that would later develop into rigorous academic theories like the security dilemma or balance of threat theory. But they are also based on a deep familiarity with specific players involved in each situation, their history, culture, and collective mindsets. Needless to

say, this balance between theory and case is just what today's neoclassical realists seek to recapture.

## Scholars' realist foreign policy approaches

Academic analysts of foreign policy frequently reach for realist theories to inform their critical studies. Hans Morgenthau, the most renowned US realist scholar of the mid-twentieth century, periodically used realist ideas to inform trenchant critiques of his government's foreign policy. He argued that waging a cold war against all communist party-led states, no matter what the differences among them, only multiplied US enemies and commitments. The analyses (see Box 2.1) made just as the United States was gearing up for a major and ultimately disastrous military commitment to Vietnam show many hallmarks of realist foreign policy analysis.

### BOX 2.1 Morgenthau on US Cold War foreign policy and Vietnam

From *New York Times Magazine*, 18 April 1965.

It is ironic that this simple juxtaposition of "Communism" and "free world" was erected by John Foster Dulles's crusading moralism into the guiding principle of American foreign policy at a time when the national Communism of Yugoslavia, the neutralism of the third world and the incipient split between the Soviet Union and China were rendering that juxtaposition invalid.

Today, it is belaboring the obvious to say that we are faced not with one monolithic Communism whose uniform hostility must be countered with equally uniform hostility, but with a number of different Communisms whose hostility, determined by different national interests, varies. In fact, the United States encounters today less hostility from Tito, who is a Communist, than from de Gaulle, who is not.

We can today distinguish four different types of Communism in view of the kind and degree of hostility to the United States they represent: a Communism identified with the Soviet Union—e.g. Poland; a Communism identified with China—e.g. Albania; a Communism that straddles the fence between the Soviet Union and China—e.g. Rumania; and independent

Communism—e.g. Yugoslavia. Each of these Communisms must be dealt with in terms of the bearing its foreign policy has upon the interests of the United States in a concrete instance.

It would, of course, be absurd to suggest that the officials responsible for the conduct of American foreign policy are unaware of these distinctions and of the demands they make for discriminating subtlety. Yet it is an obvious fact of experience that these officials are incapable of living up to these demands when they deal with Vietnam.

Thus they maneuver themselves into a position which is anti-revolutionary per se and which requires military opposition to revolution wherever it is found in Asia, regardless of how it affects the interests—and how susceptible it is to the power—of the United States. There is a historic precedent for this kind of policy: Metternich's military opposition to liberalism after the Napoleonic Wars, which collapsed in 1848. For better or for worse, we live again in an age of revolution. It is the task of statesmanship not to oppose what cannot be opposed without a chance of success, but to bend it to one's own interests.

**BOX 2.1 Continued**

From *Meet the Press* May 16 1965:

Q.: Professor, do you think because we may not be able to stop them [the Chinese], is that a good reason for not trying if they are dangerous and they want to get the whole world under their thumb?

Morgenthau: This is the best reason in the world. If you look at the problem of politics in general, you realize that politics is the art of the possible. There are certain things that you would like to do but you can't do because you haven't got the means to do them.

Let us consider another example in detail. In the late 1980s, the Cold War had defined international politics for over a generation and it seemed set to endure far into the future. But there was a new actor on the scene. The Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, had inaugurated a new diplomatic strategy that entailed making concessions on key outstanding issues dividing the Soviet Union from the United States and its allies. At the same time, Gorbachev espoused a new set of foreign policy principles called 'new political thinking' that called for transcending conflict and building a new world order. Most foreign policy analysts in the United States discounted the new thinking as an attempt to hoodwink the western powers into making dangerous concessions, and held that real change in Moscow's course would be strictly limited. A small minority took the ideas seriously, contending that major changes were possible, provided that the West reciprocated Gorbachev's concessions.

Into this debate came an article whose title said it all: 'Gorbachev's Foreign Policy: Diplomacy of Decline?' The author, Stephen Sestanovich, proceeded from the core realist assumptions to suggest that group interest and power (not the global visions of new thinking) are the key to politics. This led him to look at the underlying power position of the Soviet Union, which was arguably declining. Against the majority position, he held that the new Soviet policy was serious precisely because it was a response to power shifts. Against the minority position, he contended that the new thinking ideas were not important in themselves but rather reflected the attempt to put the best face on a concessionary policy of appeasement driven by decline. He observed that states tend to generate ideas for transcending conflict just when they see that they lack the power to carry on the struggle. Sestanovich realized

that declining states do in fact have other options. For example, realist thinking also emphasizes that a declining power can use force to try to rescue its position. It was only by combining the general theory with his detailed knowledge of the Cold War and Soviet politics that he could be reasonably confident that Moscow would choose appeasement over war.

As things turned out, Sestanovich was right about many things. Remember: the policy debate was over whether the new Soviet course was serious and whether the West had to move toward Gorbachev's new thinking and reciprocate his concessions in order to attenuate the Cold War rivalry. As it happened, US policy makers never accepted new thinking and never reciprocated Gorbachev's major concessions, yet the Soviet Union continued to back away from its Cold War positions and the rivalry was ended on western terms. And although scholars continue to debate its relative importance, there is no question that decline was a major driving force behind Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War's endgame.

One issue on which Sestanovich was less than clear was whether Gorbachev actually believed his new thinking rhetoric. The diplomacy may well have been a response to decline, and the ideas may have been rationalizations for the tough decisions Gorbachev had to make, but they may nonetheless have been sincerely believed. This brings us to the Soviet side of the story. In Moscow, at exactly this time, there was a group of Russian realist analysts. Looking at them is instructive, because in the Soviet Union for many decades realist analysis had been forbidden. All foreign policy analysis had formally to adhere to the official ideology of Marxism-Leninism. As Soviet society began to loosen up, Russian analysts were able to express realist ideas openly for the first time in decades.

By 1988, young Russian realist analysts felt emboldened enough to publish careful critiques of official Soviet policy.<sup>2</sup> Their studies are instantly recognizable as belonging to the same (classical realist) tradition as Kuropatkin, Crowe, Kennan and Kissinger. Conducting the familiar realist assessment of relative power trends, these analysts agreed with Sestanovich that Soviet foreign policy had to respond to decline by making concessions to ease the burdens of empire. But they criticized Gorbachev's new thinking for obscuring rather than clarifying the tough trade-offs facing Moscow. In their view, the grand visionary ideas were delaying tough decisions, particularly regarding Germany. Pre-emptive concessions on that issue, they argued, would allow Moscow to get ahead of the curve, gain control of

the agenda, and buy time for critical domestic reforms. Given what occurred in the two years after these analyses were published—Moscow's total loss of its alliance system and ultimately the collapse of the Soviet Union itself—they look prescient indeed.

Recent examples of scholars' realist foreign policy analysis include the opposition of many self-proclaimed realists to the United States invasion of Iraq in 2002–3, and, more generally, opposition to unqualified support for Israel. The details are different but the thrust is redolent of Morgenthau's arguments four decades earlier: that an overly idealistic definition of US interest ran the risk of multiplying enemies and expanding commitments beyond the country's means.

## Using realism in analysing foreign policy

### Guidelines

To illustrate the potential analytical power of realism, I have selected examples in which analysts struck an ideal balance between realism's aspiration to general theory and its equally strong commitment to grounding in foreign policy practice. While they show that realism can inform the analysis of foreign policy, they do not tell us how this occurs. Despite the apparent overlap between realist principles and the dynamics of foreign policy, realist theories do not necessarily guarantee a clear and accurate analysis of foreign policy. It is all too easy to find examples of analyses reliant on realist theories that do not read so well in retrospect. Examining some of those less successful examples helps clarify the potential pitfalls of realism as a guide to foreign policy.

### Example 1: The never-ending Cold War

The most renowned realist theorist of the last generation, Kenneth Waltz, proclaimed in 1988 that the Cold War was 'firmly rooted in the structure of postwar international politics and will last as long

as that structure endures' (Waltz in Rotberg, 1988: 52). No one reading that article would have expected the Cold War structure to come crashing down in the next few years. The contrast with Sestanovich's article and the analysis by the Russian realists noted above is instructive. The chief difference is that those analyses were deeply immersed in the analysis of Soviet foreign policy. They were acutely aware that the bipolar structure was the product of the ability of the two superpowers to sustain it, and that the depths of Soviet decline placed a question mark over the stability of the Cold War order. They did not question Waltz's theory linking bipolarity to the Cold War; rather, their case-specific knowledge led them to question whether the theory's initial conditions—two relatively equally matched superpowers—would remain in place. To his credit, Waltz understood this as well, having posed the question of whether the Soviet Union could long keep up its side of the Cold War. But the passage just cited is an example of reasoning from theory to a case without using case detail to interrogate the theory. It exemplifies the pitfall of applying a theory without due regard to whether its scope conditions are actually present.

### Example 2: Major power war in 1990s Europe

The following year, another highly influential realist scholar, John J. Mearsheimer, argued that his brand of offensive realism predicted that the end of the Cold War would lead to a more war-prone Europe. As such, 'the West has an interest in maintaining the Cold War order, and hence has an interest in maintaining the Cold War confrontation', meaning, of course, that western powers should support 'the continued existence of a powerful Soviet Union with substantial military forces in Eastern Europe' (Mearsheimer, 1990: 125). Needless to say, policy makers did not heed this advice. Similar to the above case, one problem with this application of realist theory to a specific foreign policy situation was that the Soviet Union was losing the material wherewithal to maintain a massive troop presence in Central Europe. Hence, even setting aside the willingness of Central European publics to tolerate the Soviet presence, it was unclear that Moscow could afford to sustain it. More importantly, Mearsheimer did not question whether the scope conditions of polarity theory really applied. The theory that multipolarity (an international system shaped by the power of three or more major states) is more prone to war than bipolarity (an international system shaped by the power of two major states, or superpowers) may well be right, but it is not clear whether it applied to a region like Europe in which a powerful outside actor—the United States—maintained a strong security presence. Hence, even in terms of a spare realist theory that ignores the EU and new domestic politics and identities, it was doubtful that Mearsheimer's analysis applied to that case.

### Example 3: Anti-US counterbalancing in the 1990s

Waltz and other realists began to argue that, with the end of the Cold War, a new multipolar balance-of-power order would re-emerge in which other major powers would counterbalance the United States. They

held that overly provocative US policies such as the expansion of NATO to former Soviet allies in Central Europe would push Russia and other major powers into an anti-US alliance. Again, policy makers in Washington and Europe chose to ignore this advice. NATO expansion occurred, accompanied by a highly active and interventionist US foreign policy. No traditional counterbalancing occurred. As in the other cases, there are plenty of non-realist theories that might account for this outcome. But more to the point here, this appears to be another case of applying a theory to a situation without due regard to whether its scope conditions are actually present. Realists' prediction of counterbalancing and the accompanying policy analysis were based on balance of power theory. But it became increasingly clear that that theory's scope conditions did not apply to the 1990s United States (Wohlforth, 1999) in a condition of unipolarity. The theory predicts reactions to a *rising* hegemonic power, not responses to a power whose hegemony is already firmly established. All the centuries of theory, practice, and lore about the balance of power may well be right, but they simply did not apply to the case at hand. Belatedly recognizing this, realists began developing a new theory of soft balancing to explain constraint actions against a dominant power in a unipolar setting (see Pape, 2005).

### Avoiding pitfalls

Assessing the veracity of foreign policy analysis from the comfortable vantage of hindsight is hard to do fairly. The point is not to play the 'gotcha!' game against individual scholars—all scholars have mixed records of prognostication and policy assessment—but to understand where specific discussions of foreign policy might have gone astray in their particular application of realism.

Realist theories clearly generate widely disparate implications for foreign policy, some of which may illuminate while others may be perceived as flat wrong. How does one increase the likelihood that realist theories will help rather than hinder foreign policy analysis? The key is a knowledgeable use of

these theories. Knowing how to use these theories requires careful thought about how precisely they are related to realism's own core assumptions, scope conditions, and expected outcomes as well as to the real-world foreign policy scenarios to which they are applied. As illustrated above, in the simple confusing of scope conditions with assumptions, analysts

of foreign policy may try to apply realist theories to international settings where they are profoundly misleading. (See Figure 2.2.)

The two major lessons to avoid erroneous or inaccurate foreign policy analyses are to know the specifics of the foreign policy case at hand and to pay close attention to the scope conditions that may connect

Theory or Subschool	Main theorist	What it explains	Scope conditions
Offensive Realism	Mearsheimer	Expansionism/war	Security is scarce; offence/defence cannot be distinguished; technology/geography favour offence
Defensive Realism	Jervis, Glaser	Over-expansionism; cooperation	Security is plentiful; offence/defence distinguishable; technology/geography favour defence
Balance of Power	Waltz	Alliances, military build-ups, militarized rivalries	One great power rising to potential hegemony/predominance
Balance of Threat	Walt	Alliances, military build-ups, militarized rivalries	One great power rising to potential hegemony/predominance whose geographical location, military posture, and overall behaviour engender threat perceptions
Soft Balancing	Pape	Subtle constraint actions vs. unipole	One great power too strong to be balanced: unipolarity
Hegemonic Stability	Gilpin	Cooperation; institution-norm construction; 'order'	One great power predominant in system or region
Power Transition	Organski, Gilpin	War	Capabilities of a rising challenger approaching parity with dominant hegemon

Figure 2.2 Theories and scope conditions

it more generally to key realist precepts. Theories, especially realism, are sometimes assumed to be universal—applying always and everywhere without alteration. In reality, as Fig. 2 suggests, theories and even subschools within realism apply in very different conditions. Only by knowing the details of a given foreign policy issue can one determine whether the

circumstances under analysis truly correspond to the known parameters of a given theory. Applying these lessons is much harder to do than it seems, for it requires deep familiarity with both general theory and the specifics of the foreign policy case, as well as a continual mental back-and-forth check between the case and the theory.

## Conclusion: hedgehogs, foxes, and analysing foreign policy

Aside from the admonition to study both realist theories and the specifics of contemporary foreign policy problems—and the unhelpful warning that this is in fact quite hard to do—what other concrete lessons can be taken away? Analysts—frequently academics themselves—make mistakes by failing to recognize the contingent nature of theory: whether a theory applies to a given situation depends on the degree to which its scope conditions are actually present. One can be very critical of academic realist theory, however, and yet still find realism very useful in foreign policy analysis. Indeed, most decent practitioners will tell you that this is exactly how they approach foreign policy analysis.

Ironically, academic realists can be their own worst enemy when it comes to foreign policy analysis. Theorists face two incentives to treat their theories as universal as opposed to contingent. First, to clarify their theories they need pure and clean conceptual building blocks. In other words, they strive to put the basic ideas out of which their theories are built in the clearest possible way so that the basic logic at work is clear for all to see. The notion of ‘anarchy’ is an example. Theorists require a clear understanding of anarchy in order to construct a coherent theory of what international politics in an anarchical setting looks like. Scholars mainly interested in building theory are thus very resistant to understanding anarchy as I have discussed it here: as a matter of degree. Hence, realist scholars squabble over whether the logic of anarchy spelled out in defensive or offensive realism is universally valid. Foreign policy analysts, by

contrast, must be sensitive to the fact that anarchy in the real world is a variable, not a constant. In order to know how strongly realist theories apply, one needs to know to what degree anarchy might be attenuated. As I have noted, anarchy can be attenuated for purely ‘realist’ reasons, as in a regional order created by a local hegemon. Or, of course, it may be attenuated for reasons not identified in realist theory, as in the institutions-based order of the EU. In either case, realist theories about the conflict-generating potential of anarchy do not apply particularly strongly. As scholars move from theory to the real world, they sometimes fail to adjust their pure conception of anarchy to the messy reality they confront.

Second, theorists operate in a competitive scholarly world, where theories and schools of thought are often seen to be competing against others. Adjustments to the theory, recognition of its contingent nature, may be seized upon by intellectual rivals as admissions of the theory’s weakness or irrelevance. Realism is the fulcrum of these academic debates. Most other schools of thought and theories are written in one way or another as a response to realism. Perhaps responding in turn, realist scholars sometimes seem very reluctant to acknowledge the contingent nature of their theories. Analysts of foreign policy, by contrast, generally have no reason to increase competition between theories. To understand foreign policy dilemmas from as many angles as possible, such analysts naturally gravitate towards the idea that theories are complementary rather than competitive.

Over half a century ago, the philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote an essay that built on a line among the fragments of the Greek poet Archilochus which says: 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.' Berlin argued that

“taken figuratively, the words can be made to yield a sense in which they mark one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general. For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel—a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance—and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related by no moral or aesthetic principle; these last lead lives, perform acts, and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal, their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision.”

Academic theorists tend to be hedgehogs, not foxes. Berlin (1992) suggested that foxes will be better at practical tasks like foreign policy analysis. There is more than intuition to support this conclusion: practitioners themselves argue that they have to be foxes. As explored in Chapter Six, we have the results of a twenty-five year long research project that tracked experts' real analytic and forecasting acumen. The result? Foxes systematically outperform hedgehogs (Tetlock, 2006).

The implication is that analysts should not be dogmatic realists—or anti-realists. They should know theories without becoming overly committed to any one. And nothing in the realist approach makes one

inevitably a hedgehog. On the contrary, many realist scholars and analysts are foxes. Fox-like foreign policy analysis involving a constant dialogue between case expertise and general theory is possible. All of the examples I cited above are cases in point. As explored above, there is a whole scholarly approach devoted to putting these ideas in practice. After neorealism gave birth to defensive and offensive realism, a new subschool came into its own. Neoclassical realism is, simply put, realist theory for the foreign policy analyst. While this proliferation of realisms causes some physics-envying purists to quip about a 'declining research programme', it is only a boon to foreign policy analysis.

Examples of work by neoclassical realists can be found in 'Further Reading'. All have in common sensitivity to realist core insights and an appreciation of how neorealism can aid in the mental experiments that lie at the core of foreign policy analysis, but they lack dogmatic attachment to one theory or the other. All are masters, not slaves of theory. But neorealists, too, can avoid the pitfalls of hedgehogism. Consider the case of US neorealists' opposition to the Bush administration's foreign policy, especially the Iraq war. There is no doubt that realists were the most visible international relations scholars opposing the march to war. Yet the analysis behind their policy prescription was quintessentially fox-like. It did not flow directly from neorealist theory but rather from a careful analysis of the situation informed generally by realist ideas.

In a sense, these scholars seek to do what classical realists like Hans Morgenthau or George Kennan did when they analysed foreign policy, or what analysts like Stephen Sestanovich did in his study of Soviet policy under Gorbachev, but to do so with a more self-conscious attention to the interaction between general theories and specific cases. For that purpose, specific realist theories are in many ways more important than the more general schools of thought.



## Key points

- ❑ Realism is the foundational approach to IR theory, and other approaches are mainly responses to it, so those who wish to use IR theory in FPA must be knowledgeable about realism.
- ❑ Realism is a diverse intellectual approach that combines a general school of thought about IR, with subschools like neorealism, and specific theories like the security dilemma or the balance of power.
- ❑ All this diversity can be understood as derived from three basic assumptions: groupism, egoism, and power-centrism.
- ❑ Knowledge of realism as a general school of thought sharpens FPA by inculcating basic realist analytical precepts (which themselves reflect centuries of diplomatic practice) as well as helping us understand other theoretical approaches in IR.
- ❑ Realism is at once committed to deep grounding in real foreign policy practice and to the construction of highly general theories.
- ❑ While they often seem as if they are universal in scope, realist theories and subschools are conditional; different theories apply in different strengths depending on circumstances.
- ❑ Most pitfalls in applying realism to FPA have to do with getting the balance wrong—uncritically using theory without sufficient cross checking with detailed knowledge about the foreign policy situation under scrutiny.
- ❑ When we get the balance right—as today's neoclassical realists seek to do—the result is a powerful tool of FPA, as demonstrated by prescient realist analysis of decisions on US policy ranging from Vietnam to Iraq.

## ? Questions

1. According to this chapter, how is realism defined?
2. What are the key components of realism?
3. What are the main hallmarks of realist FPA?
4. Name a recent example, not mentioned in the text, of realist FPA?
5. What is the main mistake people make when applying realist theory to FPA?
6. What is the most important distinction to keep in mind when applying realist theory to FPA?

## » Further reading

- Donnelly, J. (2000) *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).  
The best general introduction to realism.
- Wivel, A. (2005) 'Explaining why state X made a certain move last Tuesday: the promise and limitations of realist foreign policy analysis', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 8: 355–80.  
This article presents a useful and more critical view of realism and FPA.
- Vasquez, J. A., and Elman C. (2003) (eds), *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall).  
This is an excellent compendium on balance of power theory and balance of threat theory.