



Approaches to the Study of IR

Introduction

When we talk about International Relations as a discipline, we are not just learning events or facts. We are learning *ways of seeing the world*. These are called **approaches**. Each approach gives you a unique lens to understand why states behave the way they do, why wars happen, why peace holds, and how global institutions evolve.

IR as the Youngest Discipline

IR is often described as the **youngest discipline** in the social sciences. It formally took shape only after the devastation of World War I. The **first chair in IR** was created at the **University of Wales in 1914**, signalling that the world needed a systematic study of peace and conflict. Over time, because American universities invested heavily in research, methods, and theories, IR gradually evolved into what many scholars call an **American Social Science**.

Idealist Approach

The **Idealist** approach grew from the ashes of the First World War. Idealists believed that war is not inevitable; it is a failure of institutions and ideas. They emphasised **cooperation, collective security, rule-based systems, and the power of values and norms**. Their dream was a **new world order**, built on peace rather than power politics. Woodrow Wilson's vision for the League of Nations is the classic symbol of Idealism.

Realist Approach

Realism emerged as a powerful critique of Idealism. Realists argued that the **old world order**, especially the **Westphalian system**, is fundamentally shaped by **sovereignty, territorial**

integrity, and anarchy — meaning no authority exists above the state. In this system, **power is both the means and the end**. States interact like **billiard balls**: hard, self-contained units with **no permanent friends or enemies**, only interests. Thus, **balance of power** becomes essential for stability.

Marxist Approach

The Marxist approach shifts the focus from states to **classes, capitalism, and global exploitation**. Marxists argue that IR cannot be understood without examining **economic structures, class conflict, and the global capitalist system**. For them, imperialism, colonialism, and global inequality are not accidents; they are the natural outcomes of capitalism expanding across borders.

Functionalist Approach

The Functionalist approach came with a more hopeful idea: if states begin to cooperate in small, technical areas — like health, transport, or trade — cooperation will gradually expand. The key idea is **spillover**. Start with limited, functional cooperation, and over time, states will build deep interdependence, eventually reducing the incentives for war.

Systems Theory Approach

Systems theorists see the world as a **complex system** of interlinked units. Instead of looking at state decisions alone, they analyse **patterns, structures, and interactions** within the global system. The focus is on how the **international system shapes state behaviour**, not just how states shape the system. Kenneth Waltz's structural realism is one of the most influential forms of systems thinking in IR.



Conclusion

Each approach opens a new window into the world of IR. Idealism gives us hope. Realism gives us caution. Marxism gives us critique. Functionalism gives us cooperation. Systems theory gives us structure. Together, they help us understand the beautiful, complicated, unpredictable dance of world politics.

Idealism

Idealism is the approach in IR that brings values, ideas and hope back into world politics. It tells us that the international system is not destined to be violent or chaotic. If states choose **cooperation**, **collective security**, and **rule-based systems**, peace is not only possible but sustainable. Idealists believe that human reason and moral commitment can reshape global relations.

Genesis of Idealism

To understand why Idealism emerged, we must first understand what it reacted against. Its genesis lies in the **old world order** — the world created by the **Westphalian system**. Westphalia established **sovereignty** and **territorial integrity** as sacred principles. No authority existed **above the state**, which meant the international system lived in **anarchy**.

The Power-Centric Order

In this old order, **power served as both means and end**. States behaved like hard shells — the famous **billiard ball model** — colliding, competing, and constantly balancing each other. There were **no permanent friends or enemies**, only shifting alignments based on interest. The only way to maintain order was through the

Balance of Power, which often resulted in tensions, rivalries and wars.

IR Before World War I

Till **WWI**, International Relations essentially meant **politics among European countries**. The major powers fought, negotiated and formed alliances within their own club. Outside this club, the **U.S. remained isolated**, guided by its **Monroe Doctrines**, avoiding European entanglements. Meanwhile, the **rest of the world remained colonies**, denied sovereignty and trapped in imperial domination.

The Rise of a New Vision

When WWI shattered Europe, Idealism rose with a powerful message: the old power-centric international system had failed. A **new world order** must be built on **cooperation**, **collective security**, and **rule-based institutions**. This was the birth of Idealism — a hopeful attempt to replace power politics with moral politics.

Vision of New World Order

The Idealist Dream After WWI

When the First World War devastated millions of lives, humanity stood at a crossroads. Idealists believed the old power-centric system had collapsed morally and politically. They imagined a **new world order** — an order meant to **avoid war** and **establish peace** through cooperation, reason and shared values. For the first time, international politics began to dream of a world guided by norms rather than brute force.

Woodrow Wilson's 14-Point Speech

Into this crisis stepped **Woodrow Wilson**, the U.S. President who became the intellectual voice



of Idealism. His famous **14-point speech** laid out a bold alternative to old diplomacy. Wilson promoted **democracy, freedom of navigation, transparency in diplomacy, self-determination, and above all, the creation of the League of Nations**. This League would operate through **collective security**, where an attack on one would be considered an attack on all. It was Idealism turned into institutional design.

Function and Influence

During the interwar years, Idealism shaped global imagination. Leaders, academics and diplomats believed that cooperation, treaties and international institutions could transform global politics. The very idea that states could sit together, deliberate and prevent conflict was revolutionary for that time. The League became the laboratory where collective security and rule-based systems were tested.

Failure of the League of Nations

Yet, history was harsh. The **failure of the LoN** to stop aggression — Japan in Manchuria, Italy in Ethiopia, Germany under Hitler — showed the structural weakness of collective security. Great powers refused to act decisively, unanimity rules paralysed decisions, and the U.S. itself never joined. The collapse of the League became the symbolic **failure of collective security** and the practical failure of Idealism in that era.

Why It Still Matters

But Idealism did not die. Its ideas seeded the United Nations, international law, peacekeeping, human rights, and the belief that institutions can shape state behaviour. Even today, every time we talk about multilateralism, global governance, or a rules-based system, we are echoing the idealist dream.

Realism

The Hard Truth of World Politics

If Idealism is the hope of IR, **Realism** is its hard truth. Realists look at the world and say: states ultimately act according to **power** and **self-interest**. Morality, emotions, speeches — they matter little when survival is at stake. Realism tells us that to understand international relations, we must understand how states pursue power, protect themselves, and navigate a world where no one can guarantee their safety.

Power as Means and End

In the realist worldview, **power is both means and end**. You need power to survive, and the pursuit of power never stops. Whether it is military strength, economic capability or strategic alliances, every action revolves around accumulating power. Realists believe that a state that ignores power risks becoming irrelevant — or worse, vulnerable.

State-Centric Worldview

Realism builds on the continuity of the **Westphalian order**. States are the primary, rational actors. They possess **sovereignty**, and they operate in an environment where no authority stands above them. Civil society, individuals, international organisations — all are secondary. The state remains the centrepiece of IR.

Anarchy and Self-Help

Because there is **anarchy** — no world government, no higher judge — each state lives in a condition of **self-help**. This means every state must rely on its own capabilities for survival. No ally is permanent, no promise



absolute. Realists constantly remind us: if you do not protect yourself, no one else will.

The Security Dilemma

In this world of mistrust, even defensive actions can spark fear. This is the **security dilemma**. When one state increases its security, others feel insecure and respond with more armament. This cycle creates tension and competition, even when no one intends harm. Realists argue that this dilemma is unavoidable in an anarchic system.

Zero-Sum Game

For Realism, international relations often resemble a **zero-sum game** — the gain of one is seen as the loss of another. If one state becomes stronger, others worry. If one state secures influence, others feel threatened. Cooperation is possible, but always fragile and temporary, because states never forget that interests can diverge anytime.

The Realist Message

Realism may sound harsh, but it offers clarity. It forces us to see the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. By emphasising power, self-interest, anarchy, self-help, and the security dilemma, Realism provides one of the most enduring frameworks for understanding global politics — from ancient wars to contemporary geopolitics.

Intellectual Forerunners

Kautilya and the Mandala Sidhanta

Long before modern IR was born, **Kautilya** understood the logic of power politics. His **Mandala Sidhanta** declared that an **enemy's enemy is a friend**, a principle that mirrors modern geopolitics. You can see this clearly in

India–Pakistan–China dynamics, where alliances and rivalries shift according to threat perception, not emotions. Kautilya shows us that Realism has ancient roots.

Sun Tzu's Art of War

In China, **Sun Tzu** offered one of history's most strategic texts: **The Art of War**. It is unapologetically **amoral**, teaching leaders to win through deception, timing, and superior calculation. For Sun Tzu, victory depends not on moral righteousness but on reading the terrain, understanding the enemy, and acting decisively.

Thucydides and Human Nature

The Greek historian **Thucydides** brought another realist insight: **human nature is power seeking**. States pursue power because **the benefit of power is more rewarding than being right or wrong**. In his world, waiting for divine help was pointless — **God doesn't help; self-help does**. This becomes the core of Realism: survival is your responsibility.

Thucydides Trap — Graham T. Allison

Modern scholars extended this logic. **Graham T. Allison's Thucydides Trap** explains what happens when a **revisionist Chinese power** rises against an established or **acquired power like the U.S.** Both seek **hegemony**, both aspire to be **rule maker**, and this structural tension makes conflict more likely. It is Thucydides reborn in the 21st century.

Machiavelli and Raison d'État

Then enters **Machiavelli**, who boldly separated **ethics from politics**. His idea of **Raison d'état** — the **reason of the state** — justified actions that secure power and stability. If peace required deception, if unity required force, so be it. For



Machiavelli, moral judgment is secondary; the survival of the state is primary.

Realpolitik and Bismarck

This logic matured into **Realpolitik**, visible in **Bismarck's policy of expediency**. He united Germany through **pragmatism**, strategy and "using whatever means necessary." No lofty ideals, no emotional decisions — only cold calculation. Bismarck proved that power politics can build nations.

Thomas Hobbes and the State of Nature

Finally, **Thomas Hobbes** explained why power matters. In his vision, human beings seek **pleasure** and safety, but in a world without authority — a **state of nature** — there is **anarchy**. This creates the **security dilemma**: you arm to feel safe; I arm because your armament threatens me. Hobbes shows that Realism begins with human psychology and extends to global politics.

The Realist Legacy

Taken together, these thinkers built the intellectual DNA of Realism: power, survival, self-help, pragmatism, anarchy, and the continuous struggle for security. Realism is not just a theory — it is a centuries-old way of understanding how humans and states behave when the stakes are high.

Classical Realism

The Return of Hard Truths

Classical Realism emerges from a moment of deep disillusionment. When the **League of Nations** collapsed and collective security failed, the world witnessed aggression in Manchuria, Ethiopia and Europe. Idealism's promise of a

cooperative world seemed shattered. Out of this failure grew a new intellectual force — **Classical Realism** — a school that insisted on seeing the world as it is, not as we wish it to be.

Why Classical Realism Rose

Realists looked at the interwar period and said: the world is not peaceful because human nature is not peaceful. The failure of the LoN created a profound **scepticism about a cooperative world**. Classical Realists argued that expecting states to trust each other in an anarchic system is naïve. Cooperation collapses when power imbalances grow.

Interwar Argument: War as an Inevitability

One of the boldest ideas of Classical Realism was its **interwar argument**:

War is inevitable, they said. Not because leaders want it, but because the structure of the international system pushes states into conflict. States constantly compete, calculate, and prepare for threats.

Classical Realists explained it like this:

Peace is realised through war — meaning stable peace is usually the product of a decisive victory, a balance reset, or a power equilibrium created after conflict. Their harsh conclusion was that states are **either in the state of war or in the preparation of war**. There is no third condition.

The Classical Realist Mindset

For Classical Realists, power, rivalry and insecurity are the constants of international life. Human nature is flawed, ambition is endless, and fear is universal. Therefore, expecting permanent peace or collective security is unrealistic. Stability comes only from deterrence, strength and balance, not from goodwill.



Why It Still Matters

In today's world — from Ukraine to the South China Sea — these insights often feel uncomfortably accurate. Classical Realism continues to remind policymakers that ignoring the reality of power politics is dangerous.

Hans Morgenthau

The Architect of Modern Realism

When the world emerged from the ruins of WWII, one thinker gave shape, structure and clarity to Realism: **Hans Morgenthau**. His masterpiece, **Politics Among Nations (1948)**, transformed Realism from scattered insights into a **systematic realist theory**. Morgenthau, much like **Machiavelli**, warned that after WWII the **U.S. should not be magnanimous**. Superpowers cannot afford sentimental politics. They must never **lose sight of basic international politics** — the relentless pursuit of power, security and survival.

Morgenthau's Six Principles

Objective Laws and Human Nature

Morgenthau began with a bold idea: **politics is governed by objective laws rooted in human nature**. And human nature, he argued, is fundamentally **power seeking**. This drive exists **independent of individual wishes or perceptions**. Leaders may have noble intentions, but the deeper currents of human behaviour shape political outcomes.

Interest Defined in Terms of Power

For Morgenthau, the central compass of foreign policy is **interest defined in terms of power**. States pursue survival by enhancing their **capabilities and security**. Forget idealistic dreams — interests matter because power matters.

National Interest as the Ultimate Criterion

He insisted that **national interest** is the highest standard for judging foreign policy. It becomes the **ultimate criterion** that guides decisions. A morally appealing act that weakens the state is not wise; a tough act that strengthens the state is justified.

Moral Principles Are Not Universal

Morgenthau cautioned against imposing personal morality onto states. **Moral principles are not universal** in international politics. States must operate with **pragmatism and expediency**, not idealistic morality. A leader cannot sacrifice national security to uphold abstract ethics.

Balance of Power as a Stabiliser

For Morgenthau, the **balance of power** is the backbone of global stability. He believed that **BoP and diplomacy are the only ways to avoid war**. If the balance collapses, conflict becomes inevitable. Careful diplomacy, therefore, is the real art of peace.

Autonomy of Political Morality

Finally, Morgenthau argued that **the morality of the state differs from individual morality**, because the stakes are different. Individuals live in a society with law; states live in **anarchy**. Thus, **politics is autonomous** — it follows its own rules, its own logic and its own ethics.



Why Morgenthau Still Matters

Even today, diplomats, strategists and scholars return to Morgenthau because he teaches us how to think. His Realism is not cynicism; it is clarity. It helps states navigate a world defined by ambition, fear and power.

Criticism of Classical Realism

Stanley Hoffman's Critique: Beyond Power Monism

Classical Realism rests on a powerful but narrow assumption — that **power** is the central, almost exclusive, driver of world politics. **Stanley Hoffman** called this **power monism**, and he challenged it head-on. He argued that **power is not the only factor** shaping international relations. In modern global politics, states constantly negotiate, sign agreements and cooperate. By ignoring **international institutions like treaties**, Realism misses critical mechanisms that shape real-world behaviour.

Hoffman also pointed to the **neglect of non-state actors** — MNCs, NGOs and transnational movements — all of which now shape global flows of capital, ideas and activism. Realists also **underestimate cultural factors and domestic politics**, even though nationalism, identity, public opinion and internal political structures heavily influence foreign policy. Hoffman's message was simple: Realism explains a part of the world, not the whole world.

Feminist Critique — Ann J. Tickner

Reformulating the Six Principles

One of the most powerful critiques came from **Ann J. Tickner**, who argued that Morgenthau's supposedly **objective laws based on human nature** are not really objective at all. They are **culturally defined**, shaped by a worldview that is **gendered and masculine**. Concepts like dominance, competition and conflict reflect a particular vision of human nature — not a universal truth.

Collective Empowerment vs Zero-Sum Thinking

Tickner emphasised **collective empowerment** instead of zero-sum power politics. For her, security isn't just about military dominance but about protecting people. She contrasted **national security vs human security**, urging us to look at hunger, health, vulnerability and dignity, not just territorial borders.

Justice, Basic Needs and Social Reproduction

She argued that Realism ignores the foundations of social life — the **basic needs for social reproduction** such as care, welfare, justice and community. A theory that overlooks these cannot fully understand global politics.

Multi-Dimensional Power

Tickner expanded the idea of power itself. Realists fixate on military might, but she pointed to **nuclear, economic and environmental interdependence** — forms of **multi-dimensional power** that shape global cooperation and conflict in the 21st century.



Morality and Human Survival

Most importantly, Tickner insisted that **survival of humanity is impossible without moral principles**. Realism treats morality as a luxury; Tickner treats it as a necessity. Environmental crises, nuclear risks, pandemics — none of these can be solved by power alone. They require empathy, cooperation and shared responsibility.

Why These Critiques Matter

Together, Hoffman and Tickner remind us that Realism is powerful but incomplete. Power matters, but so do institutions, culture, gender, people and ethics. They push IR to see not just states but societies. Not just conflict but care.

Structural Realism / Scientific Realism

Waltz and a New Realist Revolution

By the late 1970s, the world was experiencing **détente**, arms control talks, and major cooperative treaties like the **PTBT 1964** and the **NPT 1968**. Many scholars believed realism was outdated. But **Kenneth Waltz**, through his landmark book **The Theory of International Politics (1979)**, brought Realism back — not as old wisdom, but as **scientific, structural Realism**. He reaffirmed that Realism is **timeless wisdom**, but he rebuilt it on a more rigorous foundation.

Rejecting Human Nature Realism

Waltz argued that classical realism — based on human nature — was **unscientific**. Leaders might change, cultures might evolve, but the *structure* of the international system does not. So, instead of

analysing states as moral or immoral actors, Waltz shifted the entire discipline to the **structural level**, away from the **unit level (state)**. What matters is not what states are like inside, but how they are placed in the system.

Features of Structure

Anarchy vs Hierarchy

Waltz's starting point is simple but profound: the world is divided into systems.

Domestic systems are **hierarchical** — someone is above you, a government sets rules, and authority exists.

The international system is the opposite: it is defined by **anarchy**, meaning **no authority above sovereign states**.

In anarchy, each state must survive through **self help**. Nobody will rescue you. No world police will enforce order. This structural condition generates competition, mistrust and balancing behaviour.

No Functional Differentiation

In domestic systems, different institutions have different roles — courts judge, legislatures make laws, executives govern.

But in IR, Waltz says there is **no functional differentiation**:

all states perform similar functions and roles — they all try to protect borders, maintain order, build armies, and survive.

The big and small differ not in function but in strength.

Distribution of Capabilities

Since states do the same things, what distinguishes them is **capabilities** — the **different amounts of power** they possess.



This distribution of capabilities creates polarity: unipolar, bipolar or multipolar systems.

For Waltz, the structure — especially polarity — determines stability, conflict and alliances far more than the intentions of leaders.

Why Waltz Matters

Structural Realism became a turning point: it brought mathematical clarity, system-level thinking and a scientific tone to IR. It told scholars to stop searching for villains and heroes and instead look at the architecture of the global system.

Mearsheimer

A Realist Voice for the Post-Cold War World

When the Cold War ended, many scholars celebrated a new liberal era of peace, democracy and economic interdependence. But **John J. Mearsheimer**, through his influential book **The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (2001)**, delivered a sharp reminder: power politics never ends. His work was a response to the optimism of the 1990s, the rise of globalisation, and the challenges posed by liberal and interdependence theories.

Inherently Conflictual Relations

Mearsheimer argued that **relationships between nations are inherently conflictual**. Not because leaders are evil or cultures clash, but because the **structure of the international system** forces states to fear each other. With no higher authority above them, states can never be sure about others' intentions.

The Inescapable Security Dilemma

According to Mearsheimer, **states cannot escape the security dilemma**. Even defensive actions — building missiles, forming alliances, modernising a navy — are seen as threats by others. This creates a vicious cycle where **war becomes inevitable**. For him, peace is temporary, accidental, and fragile.

The Tragedy of Great Power Politics

Why “tragedy”?

Because even if states want peace, the anarchic structure traps them in constant competition. Great powers must relentlessly pursue power, especially **offensive power**, to secure themselves. Anything less invites vulnerability.

Strategies: Baiting, Bloodletting and Buck Passing

Mearsheimer goes further by explaining the cunning strategies states use in great power rivalry.

Baiting: Provoking two rivals to fight each other.

Bloodletting: Encouraging a rival to become weaker by dragging them into costly wars.

Buck Passing: Avoiding responsibility and letting another state confront the threatening power.

For Mearsheimer, these strategies are not immoral—they are logical responses to a dangerous world.

Why Mearsheimer Still Dominates IR Debates

Today, debates on U.S.–China rivalry, NATO, Ukraine, Taiwan and Indo-Pacific tensions constantly draw from Mearsheimer's insights. His message is blunt: as long as anarchy exists, **power politics is tragic, unavoidable and central to IR**.



Difference Between Waltz and Mearsheimer

Two Realists, Two Different Worlds

Both **Kenneth Waltz** and **John Mearsheimer** believe in an anarchic world where states struggle to survive. But they paint **very different pictures** of how states behave. Waltz is calm, cautious and restrained; Mearsheimer is sharp, aggressive and unapologetically competitive. Together, they form the two pillars of modern structural realism.

Waltz — The Defensive Realist

For **Waltz**, **power is means and security is end**. States are not greedy; they are **security maximisers**. They want just enough power to feel safe — nothing more. Too much power invites fear, balancing coalitions and instability.

Waltz believes **states seek only the power needed for security**, not domination. Stability comes from **Balance of Power (BoP)** and strong **defence**. He repeatedly warns that a **mindless search for power is counter-productive** because it provokes rivals, weakens alliances and destabilises the system. To Waltz, restraint is wisdom.

Mearsheimer — The Offensive Realist

Mearsheimer flips this logic. For him, **power is both means and end**. States are not security maximisers; they are **power maximisers**. No amount of power is enough because more power means more safety in an uncertain world.

States seek **preponderant power** — they want to become **hegemony** and ultimately **rule maker** in the system. For Mearsheimer, the best way to be secure is to be the strongest, not equal.

He also rejects the stabilising power of **BoP**. Balancing and bandwagoning are unreliable and **do not prevent war**. Great powers, driven by insecurity, competition and fear, will always test limits and push for advantage.

The Core Difference

Waltz sees a world where caution maintains order.

Mearsheimer sees a world where ambition drives conflict.

Waltz says: *Enough power for security — stop there.*

Mearsheimer says: *More power, more safety — keep going.*

Why This Debate Matters

Every major geopolitical event — U.S.–China rivalry, NATO expansion, Russia–Ukraine, Indo-Pacific tensions — can be interpreted differently through Waltz and Mearsheimer. One lens advises restraint; the other warns that restraint invites danger.

Critics of Structural Realism

Why Structural Realism Faced Pushback

Structural Realism, with its focus on anarchy, capabilities and system-level forces, brought scientific clarity to IR. But many scholars felt it reduced states to robots and ignored the human beings, cultures and identities that actually make decisions. This opened the door to powerful critiques — from **neo-classical realists**, **feminists**, and globally influential voices like **Cynthia Enloe** and **UN Resolution 1325**.



Neo-Classical Realism — Bringing the Actor Back

While Waltz insists that structure decides everything, **neo-classical realism** argues that real-world foreign policy depends heavily on **agent or actor-based decision making**. Leaders have **different personalities**, perceptions and political pressures.

A cautious leader vs an ambitious leader vs an insecure leader — all respond differently to the same structural condition.

Neo-classical realism reminds us that structure sets the stage, but human beings deliver the performance.

Feminist Critiques — Exposing Masculinity

Feminist scholars argue that Structural Realism carries a hidden bias: it sees the world through **masculine** lenses. Power, dominance, aggression — these are celebrated, while cooperation, care and social reproduction are ignored. Feminist critiques highlight how the **culture of patriarchy** shapes not just society but global politics itself.

Cynthia Enloe — The Personal Is International

One of the most influential feminist voices is **Cynthia Enloe**. In **Bananas, Beaches and Bases**, she famously asks: **Where are the women?**

She shows how IR is not just about states and armies but also about:

women working on banana plantations,
women in tourist economies,
women around military bases,
women in domestic labour markets.

She highlights how **third world women become means for foreign exchange reserve**, revealing the hidden labour that sustains global politics. For Enloe, **the international is personal and the**

personal is international — a complete inversion of realist thinking.

Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy

A powerful practical example is **Sweden's Feminist FP**, which treats women as **agents of change**, not victims or footnotes.

It contrasts the **conventional understanding of security** — borders, armies, missiles — with the **actual experience of real persons in conflict**: sexual violence, displacement, hunger, loss of dignity.

This is security from the ground up, not the top down.

UN Resolution 1325 — A Global Transformation

The feminist critique gained global recognition with **UN Resolution 1325**, which formally supports the **role of women and feminist perspectives in foreign policy**. It demands women's participation in peacekeeping, peacebuilding, conflict resolution and security governance.

This is exactly what structural realism misses — that peace is more sustainable when women are creators, not observers.

Why These Critiques Matter

Together, these critiques argue that Structural Realism is powerful but incomplete. It explains fear, power and anarchy — but misses identity, gender, lived experience and human agency.

They widen IR, making it more inclusive, humane and reflective of real life.



Social Constructivist

The Power of Ideas in World Politics

Social Constructivism begins with a revolutionary message: **anarchy is not a natural condition of the world — it is a construction of realist thought**. The world doesn't force states to behave in a certain way; **states create the world through their interactions, beliefs and expectations**. This approach brings ideas, identities and norms back to the centre of IR.

Vico and Kant — Foundations of Constructivism

Constructivists draw inspiration from the Italian thinker **Giambattista Vico**, who said:

the natural world is made by God,
but **the human world is made by human beings**.
So if humans make institutions, rules and meanings, humans can also *change* them.

They also rely on **Immanuel Kant**, who argued that **knowledge is filtered through our consciousness**. We see the world not as it is, but as our minds interpret it. In IR, this means states act based on how they understand threats, identities and possibilities — not on objective material facts alone.

Nicholas Onuf — The World of Our Making

This idea is beautifully developed by **Nicholas Onuf** in *The World of Our Making*. He interpreted the **USSR-US rivalry** and even **the end of the Cold War** as part of a **world of imagination** — a world shaped by perceptions, narratives and social constructions.

Weapons did not disappear in 1991; **ideas changed**, and so did the superpower relationship.

Constructivism and the Power of Ideas

Constructivists emphasise that **ideas shape realities**, and if ideas change, **reality itself can be transformed**.

They restore the importance of **norms, values and ideas**, proposing that alternatives to conflict and rivalry are possible.

Realists say war is inevitable.

Constructivists say war is **imagined**, legitimated and normalised — and therefore it can be unimagined, delegitimised and reversed.

Alexander Wendt — Anarchy Is What States Make of It

The most famous voice of Constructivism is **Alexander Wendt**.

He challenged Realism with a simple but profound claim:

anarchy is not a natural fact; anarchy is what states make of it.

States behave aggressively only if they *believe* others are threats.

They become cooperative if they *believe* others are partners.

Wendt reminds us that **states are not prisoners of anarchy; they construct it**.

If there is lack of trust, fear grows.

If there is **lack of communication**, misunderstanding drives **conflict**.

Thus, to change global politics, we must investigate **ideas**, identities and shared meanings — not just weapons or capabilities.

The Constructivist Promise

Social Constructivism gives IR a hopeful and creative horizon. It tells us the world is not fixed, not doomed, not predetermined. It is built by human beings — and can be rebuilt through



better ideas, deeper interaction and shared norms.

Post-Modernist

Challenging the Foundations of IR

Post-modernists step into IR not with new theories of power or institutions, but with a deeper, sharper question:

What if the theories themselves are part of the problem?

They argue that **realism is not reality — it is a discourse**.

A story.

A narrative.

A way of speaking about the world that shapes how we imagine it, and therefore how we act in it.

Richard Ashley — Taking Realism Apart

One of the strongest post-modernist voices is **Richard Ashley**, who uses **deconstruction** — a philosophical tool — to unravel the hidden assumptions inside realism. He applies **double reading**:

first reading realism the way realists intend it, and second reading the contradictions, silences and exclusions buried inside it.

Through this method, Ashley exposes how realism constructs anarchy in a way that looks natural and inevitable — but is actually selective and political.

Why Anarchy Is Problematic

Ashley argues that realism's concept of **anarchy** is deeply problematic.

Theoretically, it is built by:
wilfully excluding **peace**,
excluding **cooperation**,

and assuming fear, hostility and conflict as the default nature of the world.

These are not facts — they are choices, hidden inside the theory, presented as truth.

The Practical Trap

But here is the dangerous part:

Practically, this discourse produces the very world it describes.

If states believe anarchy is dangerous, they arm themselves.

If they arm themselves, mistrust increases.

If mistrust increases, conflict becomes likely.

If conflict happens, realists say: "See? We were right."

Thus, realism becomes a **self-fulfilling prophecy**, where its assumptions lead to war, and war then **reaffirms realist views**.

Ashley calls this a dangerous cycle — theory influencing practice, and practice reinforcing the theory.

Why Post-Modernism Matters

Post-modernists don't offer a new model of IR.

They offer something more fundamental:

they force us to question the foundations, the language, the narratives, the categories we take for granted.

They ask us to rethink what is possible when we stop letting a single discourse define international life.

English School

The Middle Path of IR

The **English School**, led by thinkers like **Hedley Bull**, offers a beautifully balanced perspective in IR. It neither denies anarchy like constructivists,



nor worships it like realists. Instead, it asks a deeper question:

How can there be order even without a world government?

Their answer is elegant — through **anarchical society**.

Anarchical Society — A Powerful Idea

The English School accepts **anarchy** as the simple fact that **there is no world government**. No global police, no single authority above states.

But — and this is the crucial insight — even in anarchy, states do not behave like isolated billiard balls. They form a **society** through:

institutions,
conventions,
norms,
and **treaties**.

So the system is anarchic in structure but social in practice.

Hedley Bull's Contribution

In *The Anarchical Society*, **Hedley Bull** argued that states create order because they share common interests:

preserving sovereignty,
maintaining diplomatic rules,
respecting treaties,
balancing power when necessary,
and avoiding unlimited war.

These shared practices keep the world functioning even when there is no overarching authority.

A Society That Evolves with Human Reason

The English School also holds a deeply hopeful idea:

society keeps changing because human reason is developing.

As human beings evolve intellectually and morally, the international society evolves with them — new norms, new institutions, new expectations.

From slavery to human rights,
from empire to sovereignty,
from unilateral war to collective security —
international society grows as our moral imagination grows.

Why the English School Matters

It gives IR a middle ground:

Realism explains power.

Liberalism explains institutions.

Constructivism explains ideas.

The English School weaves all three together, showing how an anarchic world can still sustain order, cooperation and common rules.

Previous Year Questions

1. What do you mean by offensive and defensive realism? 2023, 15
2. What is the realist prescription to the States to ensure their survival in an anarchical world? 2022, 15
3. Discuss the emergence of neo-realism and its basic tenets. 2021, 15
4. Bring out the major differences between the Classical Realism of Hans Morgenthau and the Neorealism of Kenneth Waltz. 2018, 10
5. Is Realist Approach the best method to understand International Relations? Examine this in the context of Classical Realism. 2017, 20
6. Identify the major differences between the classical realism of Hans J. Morgenthau and the neorealism of Kenneth Waltz. Which



- approach is best, suited for analysing international relations after the Cold War? 2015, 10
7. Examine major principles of State centric world views. 2013, 20
 8. Write a note on Intellectual precursors of Realism. 2013, 15
 9. What are the great debates between 'classical' and 'modern' realists? Is there any thin line of continuity between these two traditions? 2012, 20
 10. Examine the post-modernist critique of Realism in international politics. 2010, 30
 11. Discuss the realist and neo-realist approaches to the study of International relations. 2008, 60
 12. Clearly explain Realist theory to the study of International Politics. 2003, 60
 13. "The Feminist approach to international politics is biased." Comment. 2014, 10

