



THE REALITY OF NEOREALISM

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Introduction: Neorealism, or structural realism, is a key theory in International Relations. It focuses on how states act in a world without a central authority, highlighting the importance of the international system's structure rather than domestic politics or individual leaders. Although neorealism pays less attention to internal factors, some scholars still examine how leadership and domestic politics can shape state actions within this framework. This paper discusses the main ideas of neorealism and looks at how they apply to real-world global politics.

Core Principles of Neorealism

Anarchy and Security

A main idea in neorealism is that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no global authority to enforce rules or protect states (Waltz, 1979). Because of this, states focus on their own security to survive. In this environment, mistrust shapes decisions, and even allies stay wary of possible future threats. As a result, states tend to rely on themselves and focus on security rather than cooperation.

Structure Over Human Nature

Neorealists believe that the structure of the international system, not human nature or domestic politics, shapes how states behave. Kenneth Waltz argued that similar pressures within the system lead states to act in predictable ways (Waltz, 1979). For example, both democracies and authoritarian states build up their militaries when they feel threatened. This view suggests that states spend a lot on defence mainly to survive, not because they want to be aggressive.

Distribution of Power

Another important idea is how power is distributed. Waltz described three main types of systems:

Unipolar – one dominant power

Bipolar – two major powers

Multipolar – several powerful states

Neorealists argue that how power is shared among states has a big impact on global stability. Bipolar systems, such as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, are seen as more stable because the main powers



know their respective roles (Waltz, 1979). Today, many see China's rise as a challenge to U.S. dominance, showing a shift in the global balance of power (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Defensive vs Offensive Realism

Defensive Neorealism: States seek security and avoid excessive power accumulation that could provoke others (Waltz, 1979).

Offensive Neorealism: States try to maximise power to dominate others, particularly in regional politics (Mearsheimer, 2003).

Defensive realists say that states only build enough strength to stay safe. On the other hand, offensive realists believe that gaining as much power as possible is the best way to prevent threats. For instance, the competition in the South China Sea illustrates how offensive realists view regional dominance.

Neorealism in Practice

Neorealist ideas can be seen in major world events. The war in Ukraine shows how powerful countries react when they feel their security is at risk. Many neorealists see NATO's expansion near Russia as a strategic threat. At the same time, countries in Europe and Asia try to balance power by strengthening alliances. Actions such as building militaries, forming alliances, and maintaining ongoing distrust align with neorealist thinking.

The rivalry between the U.S. and China also supports neorealism. Both countries invest in their militaries, technology, and diplomacy to gain an advantage. Smaller countries often form partnerships to balance against stronger ones. This pattern matches neorealist ideas that competition for power shapes world politics.

Criticisms of Neorealism

Even though neorealism is influential, it has critics with distinct viewpoints. Liberal theorists argue that international cooperation through institutions, economic ties, and law is a viable way to reduce conflict, in contrast to neorealists' focus on power and security. Constructivists, in turn, claim that ideas, norms, and identities also shape how states act—not just the international system's structure—offering a fundamental alternative to neorealist thinking.

Conclusion

Neorealism is an important theory that focuses on anarchy, state behaviour, and the sharing of power, providing a clear way to understand global competition and conflict. As in international relations, other theories point to cooperation or culture, neorealism shows that states often act to protect their security in a world without a central authority. Overall, neorealism is the tool for understanding ongoing uncertainty, balance, and more.



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