

Realism

**I. Assumptions
and Approach**

**II. Classical
Realism**

**III. Structural or
Neorealism**



Realism: Core Assumptions

- 1. States are the most important actors in world politics
- 2. States are Unitary Actors
 - "Politics stops at the water's edge"
- 3. States are Rational Actors
 - Rational calculation of national interest
- 4. National Security is the Overriding Concern of States
 - Military & Strategic Issues = 'High Politics'
 - Economic & Political Issues = 'Low Politics'

Realism: Approach

- 'Rationality' as defined here means:
 - (A) **Instrumental**: logical connection between means and ends
 - (B) **Subjective**: national interest self-defined by states
 - Can include acts that we commonly describe as 'irrational' (Nazi Holocaust; bin Laden's terrorism)
- 'Unitary, rational actor' is assumption, not reality (in all cases)
- 'National Interest' shaped by international system
 - Anarchy and self-help
 - National interest defined in terms of POWER

II. Classical Realism

- Machiavelli (right), Hobbes, Clausewitz, Kissinger
- Negative View of Human Nature
- Hobbes: “A war of all against all”
- Primary goal:
 - Get power to defend themselves!
- **Security Dilemma:** By striving to increase their own security, states make others feel less secure; thus defensive actions spur offensive response



II. Classical Realism (cont.)

- Realist arguments are based on (a) human nature; (b) fundamental structure of international system (anarchy)
- IR essentially unchanging
- How to prevent war?
 - Balance of Power
 - *Realpolitik* (foreign policy focused on power politics)
 - Realism and morality (*raison d'état*)

Problems with Classical Realism

- Key concepts not clearly defined
 - **Power**: already discussed ambiguities
 - **National Interest**: Objective or subjective?
Just view of current leaders?
 - **Balance of Power**: can mean...
 - a. An **actual balance** between relatively equal powers
 - b. **Any distribution** of power among states (just an assessment of the 'balance')
 - c. A **policy** aimed at achieving a balance of power
- Grounding in Human Nature
 - Hard to explain change

III. Structural (or Neo-) Realism

- Grounded in the structure of the international system
- IR as a 'Prisoners' Dilemma' Game
- KEY: Structure of the situation key in determining outcomes
- Cooperation extremely difficult (relative gains)
- Polarity of power determines stability
 - Hegemonic Stability Theory
- Change occurs via war and change in balance of power

The Prisoners' Dilemma

Prisoner B's Choices
(Payoffs)



Prisoner A's
Choices
(Payoffs)



	B	Keep Quiet	Squeal
A			
Keep Quiet		(1/2, 1/2)	(3, 0)
Squeal		(0, 3)	(3, 3)

(Prisoner A's Sentence [Years], **Prisoner B's**
Sentence [Years])

Problems with Structural (or Neo-) Realism

- Focus on distribution rather than sources of power
- Predicts very little international cooperation
- Cannot explain the end of the Cold War

Summary of Realism

- States (unitary, rational) are KEY actors in IR
- Structure of the system drives state to focus on national interest, which is defined largely in terms of military security
- States must be primarily concerned with their relative power, making cooperation unlikely
- **BIG PICTURE:** IR is a struggle for power among competing nation states!