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
11. 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

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(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!