



Realism and International Security: A Study of the Logic of Competition and Cooperation in Inter-State Relations

Peter Sunday Equere, PhD¹; Iniobong Edward Ekong (Rtd.)² & Victor Columba Daniel, MA³

¹Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria.

²Department of History and International Studies, University of Uyo, Nigeria.

³Department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos, Nigeria.

¹peterequere@aksu.edu.ng

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19344527>

Citation: Equere, P. S., Ekong, I. E., & Daniel, V. C. (2026). Realism and International Security: A Study of the Logic of Competition and Cooperation in Inter-State Relations. *International Journal of Public Relations and Social Sciences*, 2(2).

Abstract

This paper is a discourse on key features of the realist theory as one of the approaches to the study of international security. Realism places much emphasis on the currency of power, taking into due cognisance the nature and structure of the international system. This paper explores the major variants within the world of realism and their relevance to state security policies. Such a variant includes structural realism, which addresses the impact of the international system in the perspective of the behavioral pattern of states, and motivational realism, which stresses the impact of variation on the motives of states. Furthermore, the paper interrogates the arguments between the structural, offensive, and defensive realists concerning the nature of the international system in generating or adopting competitive and cooperative policies. The paper, using the analytical method of historical writing and relying mainly on secondary sources, argues that realism is a widely accepted and dominant theory of international politics. That it is largely on the basis of how realists depict the international environment that they assert the



view that states are the major actors in the international system. That the first priority for states is to ensure their survival and the most important and indispensable means of survival is self-help. In this light, the paper concludes that realism subscribes to the three Ss: statism, survival, and self-help. Statism, being the centerpiece of realism; survival, the primary objective of the state; and self-help, the most important means of survival.

Keywords: Realist Theory, International Security, Structural Realism, State Survival, Self-Help Principle.

Introduction

States are always mindful of their territorial integrity and sovereignty in the course of promoting their international security, free from external aggression or interference from other states. One of the paradigms that espouses how states achieve these goals is realism. Realism articulates what should be the best strategy that a state must adopt in this regard. The theory places at the disposal of states the choices of competitive or cooperative strategies to achieve their set goals. Competitive policies such as an arms race, searching for allies, and the use of military force as an instrument of statecraft, while cooperative policies include arms agreements and exercising restraints in adopting aggressive and offensive policies towards others, are two different approaches to international relations. Realism employs a theoretical framework to understand and explain the choices of state policies and their outcome in the international system. For the realists, the best option to understand the dynamics of the international system is through the prism of states' motives and interests using power as the prevailing currency. This paper is an interrogation of the relevance of realism to the study of international security. To this end, the paper is structured in four parts. Part one deals with the concept of realism and its major features, while part two addresses the variants of realism and their basic elements. Part three focuses on realism and war, and part four is the concluding remarks.

The Concept of Realism and Features

Realism is a broad theory and argument accepted as a dominant paradigm for explaining and understanding the dynamics of the international system. Its inquiry is driven by the most critical global issues such as state security, war and peace, state power, and anarchy, among others. Realism believes in what it is and not what ought



to be. For the realists, power and its elements are the currency of the international system in the same way that money is the currency of the economy. As a locomotive of global politics, power enhances the capacity of states to achieve their interests, which are articulated in their foreign policy objectives (John, 2001).

Major features of realism

Realism as a theory that explains the dynamics of the international political system has some basic features. These features shall be discussed below:

- i. Realism opines that the international system is anarchical because of a lack of central authority that can enforce the rules of international law, enforce agreement, and prevent the use of force. However, the said anarchy does not refer to state behavior nor to the international system being chaotic, but it simply means a lack of supranational authority.
- ii. Realism sees power as the currency of the global system. To most realists, power is the defining feature of the international system and the vital resource for states to build up arms for national interest objectives. The basic elements of power include the state's wealth, population, technological development, economic viability, and military power, among others. Because of a lack of central authority in the international system, states resort to self-help, relying on their capabilities to achieve their set goals. In this wise, power plays a vital role in enabling states to acquire these capabilities (Richard, 1978).
- iii. Realism envisions states as the main actors in the international system even though non-state actors are becoming very relevant in the extant international system. For the realists, there is a strategic interface between state and nonstate actors in the course of achieving their set goals.
- iv. For the realists, states operate in the international system that is competitive, aggressive, and disorderly. Here states assess each other in terms of power and capabilities but not on the inherent variation such as geostrategic factors, type of government, nature of leadership, ideology, among others, and
- v. Realism sees states as rational actors that are capable of making decisions in line with their national interest objectives, in view of their limited capabilities and motives. In making these decisions, states are strategic, considering how other states will react to their policies (Jervis, 1978).

Beyond these similarities, there are some differences in their postulations and dispositions. One of these differences is the strand of realists' view that emphasizes the impact of the international system and the one that stresses the impact of states' motives and goals. The structural realists believe that the limitations and opportunities created by a state's international environment are the prism to understand the behavioral pattern of states. For these realists, states are interested in the sovereign control of their territory, and this encourages the buildup of arms and sometimes resort to war because of the pressure created by the nature of the international system.

On the other hand, for the motivational realists, the inherent desire of states for expansion is the main explanation for competition and conflicts in the international system. Some realists call these kinds of states 'greedy states' that are interested in territorial expansion when they are secured and comfortable in the status quo. For instance, Germany under Hitler was regarded as a greedy state that was motivated to expand primarily based on racial and ideological beliefs that called for territorial expansion. In contrast, Germany before the First World War was characterized by insecurity because of its belief that it was surrounded by hostile powers and it was becoming relatively weaker than some of them (David, 2000). To describe the realist's views on international security, the paper takes these explanations based on the various strands within the realist family. The paper discusses the positions of structural realism, offensive realism, defensive realism, and motivational realism vis-à-vis state security (John, 1991).

Structural Realism and International Security: The structural realism lineage begins with Thucydides, who posits that power politics is the law of human behavior. For him, the drive for power and the will to dominate are held as the fundamental aspects of human nature. The behavior of states as self-seeking egoists is understood to be a reflection of the characteristics of the people that comprise the state, and human nature explains why international politics is essentially power politics. This reduction of realism to a condition of human nature is one that frequently appears in most scholarship on realism (John, 2001). One of the most outstanding structural realists is Kenneth Waltz. Ken's work 'Theory of International Politics' caused a shift in the mode of explanation towards the international environment. He began with the idea that states give priority to their survival, besides other goals. For him, survival is a good motive, and its essence is not to take what belongs to others but to protect what



one already has. He opined that the nature of the international system drives states into competition even when there is no conflict of interest (Steve, 1986). Kenneth argues that the anarchy in the international system put states in a position of 'self-help' because of lack of international authority capable of protecting them. Self-help here implies that states will go for their unilateral but competitive goals to protect their interests (Kenneth, 1999).

In light of these imperatives, states are compelled to pursue policies and goals that enhance their capabilities for self-defense. The reality that force can be used as an instrument of national policy to weaken or destroy other states makes competition almost inevitable in international relations. This tendency toward competition is further reinforced by the uncertainty surrounding the future intentions and motives of other states. Uncertainty about others' intentions makes cooperation very difficult because when a state is not certain about others' motives or intentions, a state will be worried about whether cooperation will pay off or which state will gain more or less. In some cases, where cooperation may pay off, the state might reject it if it will make its adversary gain more, and such an adversary state might use such gains to increase its capability to attack or coerce the state (Kenneth, 1999).

Structural realism argues that the key to state security is for the state to have the wherewithal to protect or defend itself from attack. States must place a premium on power, secured territory, population, a viable economy, and strong military might, among others, because it empowers them to defend themselves from external aggression. For these realists, power is the most important instrument for achieving state security. A strong and viable economy provides the state with the means of building deterring military capability that the state can use to defend itself in case of any aggression. They also opined that states have two options for acquiring adequate power and the capability to defend themselves. The first option is external balancing, such as forming alliances with other states, enabling such states to gain from the resources of other states. The second option is internal balancing, such as increasing its economic viability and resilience, backed up by strong military capability. This strategy is the best to achieve state security in a bipolar world order. The case of the then Soviet Union and the United States speaks volumes of this strategy. In a multipolar world order, states have a choice between searching for allies and building up arms. In this instance, major powers will go for one or both. Alliances have the advantage of cutting costs the state would have incurred for security, though they are



laced with the risk of a state's allies failing to meet their commitments and obligations, making the state vulnerable to attack. Its commitment to the alliance may also drag a state into a war that it would have avoided (Paul, 1997).

However, the structural realists provide an alternative to balancing alliances. This is called a bandwagoning alliance. In a balancing alliance, a state joins the weaker side to offset the power advantage of the stronger side. In contrast, in a bandwagoning alliance, the state joins the stronger side. The flip side of bandwagoning is that on the stronger side is the danger that the state may be attacked by one of its allies because being on the stronger side, the state is like an irrelevant pawn on the alliance chessboard of the strong states. However, if the state's motive of bandwagoning was to satisfy its selfish motives, such a move may sometimes be more attractive than balancing. The Soviets' decision to ally with Hitler's Germany before the outbreak of World War Two underscored this option (Michael, 1986).

Offensive Realism and International Security

John Mearsheimer is one realist who offered another strand of structural realism called "offensive realism." He argues that as long as states are uncertain about other states' motives and intentions, these states should prepare for the worst about these intentions. He advised states to focus on the capabilities of states they are competing for power with and increase their power whenever it is possible. For the offensive realists, states should maximize their power because the more powerful a state is, the better its prospect for protecting and defending itself from external attack and aggression. For them, a state is most secure if such a state is the dominant hegemon with the capability of pursuing competitive goals and policies to maintain the status quo. For offensive realism, maximization of power by state is a mean to an end because survival is one that all states should strive to achieve, and the best way to realize this is through optimal maximization of power (Robert, 1998). However, Kenneth Waltz has a contrary opinion on the need for states to maximize power. For Waltz, states should not place a premium on maximizing power because such effort is likely to fail, as balancing coalitions will offset the advantages in power, and such a state may be attacked for going to war to acquire more territories. Conscious of the possibility of this opposition, Waltz advised states to protect and maintain the power they already have and forgo the desire to acquire more. For Waltz, going for more power, though desirable in some circumstances, will prompt opposition from other states, thereby making such a mission infeasible (Kenneth, 1999).



Other scholars within the structural realist tradition are less persuaded by Waltz's postulations regarding the pursuit of additional power. They contend that balancing alone does not constitute sufficient grounds for viewing territorial expansion as infeasible. In their view, potential allies are often geographically distant, which can limit their capacity to assist one another and consequently diminish the effectiveness of balancing. In addition, states may be slow to balance because of their disagreement on the modalities of coordinating their efforts and sharing the cost of fighting. States may also refuse to balance against an expansionist state because for them, the state threatened may be able to defend itself or other allies may come to its aid. Instead, a state may choose to buck-pass. For instance, the United States and the United Kingdom were slow in opposing Germany during the Second World War (John, 2000).

In light of these arguments, the differences between Waltz and proponents of offensive realism appear minimal. Both perspectives portray the international system as inherently competitive, where its structure continually drives states to compete for power and security. This view rests on the premise of power maximization and the competitive character of the international system (Kenneth, 1999). They also acknowledge that balances are sometimes very slow to evolve, that states often pass the buck, and that states sometimes make mistakes that could lead them not to balance as and when due. Considering the benefits of maximization of power, a state that is conscious of maximizing power may be more inclined to maximize its power as a means to maximizing its prospects for survival. On the other hand, Mearsheimer argues that although major powers always go for more power, they are conscious of the limitations imposed by the international system and therefore reluctant to do so. They are careful considering the balance of power and the reactions of other states. If the benefits are not greater than the risk, they maintain the status quo, waiting for the appropriate time to do so (John, 2000).

Defensive Realism and International Security

Defensive realism is of the opinion that cooperation and restraints should be a state's best options in the face of diverse conditions. In contrast to the arguments of structural realism, defensive realism posits that the international system does not create conditions for competitive behavior because under certain conditions, states are secured. In defensive realism, the security dilemma plays a vital role because it can exist when the military forces deployed by a state to increase its security are also relevant in attacking a potential adversary. In such a scenario, the state's ability to

defend itself can make the adversary less secure. To understand the argument of defensive realism, there is a need to highlight its major features of the security dilemma. One, the uncertainty of the nature of their adversary, whether it is a security-seeking state or a greedy state, is an important element of the security dilemma. Once a state is confident that other states are security seekers and that they will so remain, then other states' capabilities to attack would not make them insecure. Two, the security dilemma is the key to understanding the competition between states that are security seekers. If states could build forces that provided the wherewithal to defend but not to attack, then security seekers could increase their security without making other states insecure. In this wise, the international system would not generate insecurity or competition (Paul, 1991).

On the risk of competition, defensive realism opines that the adversary's insecurity is a potential problem because states place a premium on their adversary's security, as the adversary's insecurity may in turn reduce the state's own security. This interaction can operate under three conditions. One, in response to the state's acquisition of new military capabilities, the adversary may react by building its own forces to increase its security. The adversary's buildup may offset the state buildup, and these buildups may make both states less secure because their new forces may afford them the ability to attack rather than to defend, leaving them more vulnerable to attack. Two, the adversary's insecurity can lead it to pursue goals that may lead to crisis and war. Under certain circumstances, expansion could enhance the adversary's security by augmenting its power, diminishing the state's power, or offering valuable territories that could bolster its defensive capabilities. Due to insecurity, the adversary is more inclined to pursue risky goals and policies to regain its security. Consequently, the state is more insecure. The adversary's buildup can lead the state to believe that it is more likely to confront greedy states, which prioritize territorial expansion over their own security. Because a greedy state is ready to pay more for expansion and therefore harder to deter, the state concludes that it is more insecure and can go for more competitive goals and policies. In addition, as a state increases its assessment that its adversary is greedy, cooperation becomes riskier, making competitive policies more attractive. These interactions can lead to degeneration of political relations, thereby fueling crisis in the international system (Paul, 1991).

Concerning the benefits of cooperation, defensive realism posits that because competitive policies can have negative impact, a state must give consideration to the

pains and gains of cooperative policies such as arms control and self-restraint. Arms control treaties that limit the capacity of deployed forces can provide protection against losing an arms race. An arms control agreement that limits forces that are effective for attacking can enhance both states' ability to defend and deter, leaving both more secure than if they had competed using offensive weapons. To enhance a state's military capabilities, cooperative policies can improve their diplomatic relations and in turn improve their security. By cooperating, a state can convey its motives and intentions, making the adversary conclude that the state is more likely to be a security seeker. Cooperative policies can generate positive impact because once a state is fully aware that its adversary is a security seeker, cooperation becomes less risky but more attractive. Sending this signal requires the state to embark on action that is less costly for a security seeker than for a greedy state. Arms control agreements can serve as a costly signal because forgoing the possibility of winning an arms race is more costly for a greedy state than a security seeker. A state can also send a costly signal by single-handedly limiting the size and type of forces it deploys. However, unilateral restraint is riskier than arms control because the adversary may continue its buildup, thereby undermining the state's capabilities (Michael, 1986).

However, cooperating is not without its inherent risk. Obviously, an adversary may play pranks on a treaty, increasing the state's vulnerability to attack. The option open for other states is to design and agree to monitor arrangements that provide timely information on violations. If that arrangement pays off, the risk posed by the adversary's funny behavior can be less than the one of losing an arms race. Another misgiving is in the possibility of the adversary being a greedy state because, in this case, cooperation may lead to testing the state's political will. If facing a greedy adversary, the state should be less bothered about the adversary's insecurity and be more concerned about whether cooperating would prompt the adversary to question the state's decision to protect its vital interest. Thus, cooperation under the atmosphere of uncertainty is very risky (Paul, 1991).

In relation to threats and balancing, defensive realism offers a different perspective of the conditions that may compel a state to form alliances. Instead of focusing entirely on power, defense focuses on the danger posed by a potential adversary (Waltz, 1987). For them, threat is a reflection of the adversary's capabilities and intentions. Threats increase with the adversary's offensive capabilities and with the probabilities that the adversary is greedy to the extent of its greed. Defensive



realism also places much emphasis on a state's assessment of others' motives. Defensive realism argues against assuming the worst about others' motives or disregarding them entirely. It suggests that states that overlook the information they possess regarding the motives of other states are likely to make irrational decisions. They conclude that while there is risk in my cooperating with a state that might be greedy, there are also prices to be paid in competing with a state that might be a security seeker. States must take into consideration the cost of choosing between competitive and cooperative policies and goals (Paul, 1991).

Motivational Realism and International Security

Unlike structural realism, motivational realism's central thesis is on the importance of variation in states' motives and goals. Specifically, motivational realism argues that the key to understanding competitive and conflictual international behavior lies in the nature of the individual state and its greedy motives but not in the international structure. On the one hand, in a world in which all major powers are security seekers, cooperation, peace, and stability may prevail, but on the other hand, in an international system in which one or more are greedy states, competition and war may likely be the rule of the game. For the motivational realists, the nature of the international system does not really matter because the structure itself is not the cause of competitive behavior. Instead, the structure only influences the ability of the state to expand but does not affect their desire to expand. The thesis of motivational realism is at variance with the postulation of Waltz, representing the argument of structural realism. If the postulations of Waltz have anything to offer by arguing that the international system elicits competition, then variation in states' motives means little or nothing. All said, security seekers and greedy states would adopt competitive policies, sacrificing opportunity for cooperation and unilateral restraint.

Motivational realism does not require a comprehensive explanation of the motives behind greedy states. Rather, it focuses on the strategies that these states are likely to adopt based on the international environment in which they operate. With that said, the theories of notable realists like Hans Morgenthau can offer valuable insights into these motives. Hans Morgenthau has argued that the states' pursuit for power is rooted in human nature, characterized by a strong lust for power as an end in itself that knows no limit (Michael, 1986). Morgenthau posits that state greed is a reflection of a wide range of other factors, such as the state's desire for wealth and prosperity and the urge to spread its ideology or religion. For Morgenthau, there are certain conditions



under which a greedy state may choose competitive goals, but security seekers may go for cooperation. For instance, whereas a security-seeking state may prefer to cooperate when there are chances of winning or losing an arms race, a greedy state may prefer to compete, as it will see greater value in the military advantage provided by winning the arms race because these advantages are needed for its expansionist goals. In addition, the greedy states might see low cost in the negative political impact in the arms race because of its understanding that its goals may be at variance with ethical diplomatic relations. In the same vein, a greedy state might start a war when a security-seeking state would not (Michael, 1986).

A greedy state may not always pursue competitive policies because it may be deterred from expanding, considering the high cost and risk, especially where the prospects of winning are low. Greedy states may also make different alliances than security-seeking states (Robert, 1998). This is so because they have a higher incentive to bandwagon as they place greater value on gaining power. In response to the arguments of motivational realists, structural realists assert that at the minimal level, the motivational realist's thesis underestimates the would-be impact of the international structure; specifically, the anarchic nature and security dilemma can be the driving force behind a state's decision to compete. This said, it is safe to submit that it is not out of place for structural realists to concede to the fact that greedy motives are a strong factor in assessing state security policies and goals when states decide to go for aggressive competition and war (Michael, 1986).

Realism and War

The above discourse is based on the logic of competition and cooperation, translating to arms competitions and alliance choices. However, it may be pertinent to spice up the discourse with the realist's thesis on the cause of war. Some realists have raised issues concerning the likelihood of war in a bipolar or multipolar world order. Some realists have argued that war is not likely in a bipolar world order, but in a multipolar system, states may likely buck pass, which is capable of undermining effective balancing and creates an enabling environment for expansion. Relatedly, in a multipolar system, there is higher uncertainty about the size and commitment of opposing coalitions. Even if opposing states are going to balance, a potential attacker can underestimate the true likelihood of balancing, which makes war more attractive. In addition, there is a likelihood of war in a multipolar system because there are more major power dyads across which war may occur.



The counterargument to the above assertion is that balancing in a multipolar system creates a large power advantage for states coming together to defend the status quo, whereas in a bipolar setting, the balance of power between the major powers equally makes war attractive. The second argument about war is on the impact of changes in state power positions. A state that is declining can have incentive to start war (Davidson, 2000). A state that prefers peace to war may go for war when it is stronger than when it is weaker. In deciding whether to launch a preventive war, a state must consider shifts in the balance of power and the likelihood that a rising state's future intentions may pose a threat. This makes the decision a highly complex calculation and may push states toward war. The inability of a rising state to credibly assure others that it will not use its growing power against a declining state is an inevitable consequence of anarchy in the international system, and it often underlies the occurrence of preventive wars (Davidson, 2000).

Conclusion

From the above discourse, it is safe to say that realism, though having many strands of major assumptions, is a theoretical framework that articulates salient issues in the international system, including the logic of competition and cooperation among state actors. Realists have consistently held that the continuities in interstate relations are more important than the changes. Realism is very relevant as a guide to understanding the interplay of national interests beneath the rhetoric of universalist sentiments. These strands of arguments highlight the positions of the structural realists, offensive realists, defensive realists, and motivational realists, all focusing on the dynamics of the global order, specifically on power as the currency of the international system, the nature of the system and what makes a state be security-seeking or greedy, and the relevance of competition, balancing, and power maximization. The study also discusses the security dilemma and its variations, including concepts such as inefficient balancing and buck-passing. It addresses the risks associated with competition and the advantages of cooperation, as well as the dynamics of threats and balancing. In the light of these issues, the paper posits that the state's choice of security policy depends on the personality of the political elites, the motives and the goals of the state, and the nature of the international order that the state has to grapple with. All said, the paper submits that there are excellent reasons for thinking that the twenty-first century will continue to be a realist century. Despite the efforts of the liberal scholars to rekindle the idealist flame, states continue to be guided by their national interests and not united by a



common good. Many of the idealists' assumptions, which underpinned the post-war international order, such as human rights, democracy, and rule of law, among others, are increasingly viewed as nothing more than Western ideas backed by economic dollars, but what drives the international order is the currency of power. This highlights the reality that international politics will persist as power politics, rooted in the realist tradition.

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