

# 3

## CHAPTER

# *Theory of Realism*

***Core thinkers: Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Kautilya, Nicholas Spykman, Reinhold Niebuhr, E H Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, Mearsheimer, Machiavelli, Rousseau***

***Concept in Realism: Power, National Interest, National Security, Conflict, Balance of Power, Deterrence***

*After reading the chapter, the reader will be able to develop an analytical understanding on the following:*

- Understand core concepts in Realism
- Idea of Human Behaviour in Realism
- Foundation of Realism in International Relations
- Origin of Realism
- Thucydides explanation of the Peloponnesian war
- Hobbes and Realism
- Application of Realism in Syrian Crisis
- Hegemonic ambitions of Iran and Realism
- Conclusion.

## **CORE CONCEPTS**

1. **Power:** The school of Realism, from Thucydides until Hans Morgenthau, has not been officially able to define what is meant by power. Some ideas, however, have emerged in how thinkers may explain the role and function of power in a context. The basic idea in power in statecraft is a situation where one state is able to control the actions of another state. In Realism, power is always used as a relational concept, meaning that power is always exercised by one state in relation to the other(s). Also, in Realism, the term power is seen as having a strong underlying military connotation. Power is the military capability of a state.

2. **National Interest:** Realists say that every state has individuals and individuals have certain values. The individuals of a state, based on shared values, are able to develop a culture and a sense of common identity. The idea of protection is not just restricted to the security of its people but also the protection of its identity and culture. If a state has to survive, then the survival of its identity and culture is its national interest. How the state uses this as its national interest in foreign policy is the objective of our study. This is

linked to the next concept.

3. *National Security*: If, as explained above, if a state needs to survive, it has to secure itself from its enemy state(s). The ruler has to take adequate steps to ensure safety, security and survival of its people. Thus, national security is one of the primary national interests of a state.

4. *Conflict*: Man by nature is conflict-mongering. It is this conflict-seeking nature of man that brings him into confrontation with others. But why is man's nature so fraught? Man is conflicting in nature because he has to ensure his own survival. Now if we apply this logic to the state, we may see that, since the national interest of the state is national security and survival, it brings one state into conflict with other states. In this situation, a state has no option but to fend for its own self as there is no one above the state in the system to help the state. There are two important observations we need to remember here. First, there is no authority above the state for its help, which consequently means that in the international system, there is complete anarchy. Second, it is anarchy in the international system that compels a state to exercise self-help. Self-help could manifest as building up of economic and military capabilities. These capabilities can give the state an edge in an anarchic global stage and ensure its survival.

5. *Balance of Power*: Since national interest of a state lies in ensuring national security, to make its survival certain, in national interest, a state will undertake weaponisation. This weaponisation will secure the state but will also simultaneously cause insecurity in another state. The other states will feel insecure as the state which undertook weaponisation endangers and undercuts their own security. This leads to the other state to form alliances. The state may undertake subversion or may compete by increasing its own power to help a check on a predatory power. This will enable it to balance out power on an international scale once again.

6. *Deterrence*: As explained before, this is nothing but Balance of Power as understood in the nuclear age. In today's world, where there is a tremendous pace of nuclearisation and an arms race constantly underway, the balance of power has got a new name, called 'deterrence'. Deterrence is nothing but a threat of punishment by one party on the other if the other party fails to behave in the way as expected by the threatening party. It is believed that the threat of punishment in deterrence is exercised by procuring and leveraging the nuclear option.

## **IDEA OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR IN REALISM**

Man by nature is egoistic. He has self interests. He loves to fulfill his interests to gain an edge over others. His most important self-interest is his survival. He has to ensure survival in a world where others are also trying to serve their respective self-interests. Thus, this brings man into conflict with others. In situations of conflict, man does not like domination but rather loves to dominate. This encapsulates the universal display of human behaviour.

## **FOUNDATION OF REALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

When we apply the concepts and idea of human behaviour envisaged by Realists to the nation state, we can understand Realism as a political philosophy. In the world, we now

have the existence of nation states. Each nation state intends to survive. The core national interest of a nation state is national security, which entails fighting for its survival. This survival is in a situation where others also intend to survive. Since each state has to survive on its own, the situation is of international anarchy. In an international system beset with anarchy, the state resorts to self-help. While self-help is undertaken, the state may expand its economic and military power. This will disturb the power equilibrium bringing the state into conflict with others. In this situation, war is inevitable. War is justified as it is fought for state survival which is also the national interest of the state. Thus, for Realism, the three things below are at its core:



## ORIGIN OF REALISM

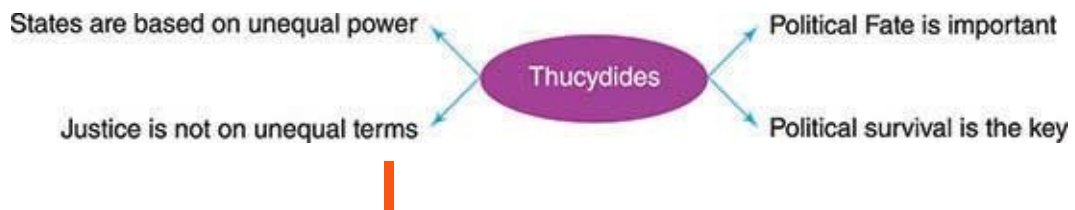
As stated in the previous chapter, Realism emerged in response to the interwar scholars. The interwar scholars had placed too much emphasis on morality and other, more idealistic goals. They neglected the core instrument of power in IR. But it will be wrong to say that Realism emerged from the ashes of WW-II. Infact, we see traces of Realism quite eloquently discussed in the ancient past, as exemplified in Thucydides's explanation of the Peloponnesian War, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and even Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. For that matter, Hobbes also talked of the security dilemma of the nation states. Separate case studies below talk of Thucydides's Peloponnesian war and Hobbes. However, we also need to keep in mind that, as is evident from our previous discussions, Realism considers the state to play primacy in IR. It relegates all other functional agencies like UN, IPCC, and WTO etc as secondary. Infact classical realists did not accept the idea of these other actors, which is accepted by Neo-Realists atleast. But neo-realists still accord primacy to state only.



### Thucydides's Explanation of the Peloponnesian War

We have already made mention of the city-state system of the ancient Greeks. As per Thucydides, who posited his explanation on the theme of conflict, competition and justice, every state needs to understand its status in the international system. He remarked that all the states were not equal and if a state wished to survive in the system, it had to understand its own position well, vis-à-vis all other states in the system. This was required as justice is not on basis of equality but on the basis of the standing of a state in the system. Between 431 to 404 BCE, the powerful city state Athens came into conflict with the city state of Melos. The city state of Melos was extremely small in comparison to the mighty and all-powerful Athens. In the course of the ensuing war, Melos put up an argument that Athens should respect the

independence and the dignity of a weak, and small yet independent city state. Thucydides's explanation was that Melos could not seek justice at this juncture as its own status in the system was not that of one which was equal to Athens. He advised Melos to understand the reality where the reality was its unequal status to Athens which could not possibly warrant justice.



## Hobbes and Realism

Hobbes took us back to the origin of humanity. He elucidated the trajectory of man turning from a nomad to a hunter-gatherer. Later he began to lead a settled life and finally he developed a community around himself. While settling into an agrarian way of life, man preferred to live in a community as it could help him feel a little more secure from the attack of wild animals and the devastation wrought by them. Gradually, as the size of his community grew, so did the frequency of emergence of other communities. Now, man's security was not merely endangered by wild animal but by other communities and the fear of attack from other men. This situation was described by Hobbes as a state of nature and a pre-civil condition. Hobbes explained that man, in the state of nature, is not secure. Thus, he progresses to create a sovereign state. This creation of a state is based on an emotion of fear, and thus, he feels his individual fears can be jointly collaborated by a security pact that can guarantee him safety. However, the problem is that if he created a sovereign state, so did other communities. This subsequently led to the fear of other states. This situation is called a security dilemma. In this situation, Hobbes states, that a man can guarantee his own individual security in a state but cannot ensure international security amongst other sovereign states, thus making war one of many available options. Thus, we can see that Hobbes also agreed that war could be a potential tool used by a state for seeking survival in the international system.

One of the other important classical realists is Hans Morgenthau. Hans says that man is a political animal and he has a certain lust for power. As the nature of man is egoistic, he craves for more power. The nature of man that makes him crave for power is called *animus dominandi*. Ironically, it is this lust for power that also makes him search for safety. His search ends in the establishment of control over a piece of territory. In this territory he establishes a state as the formation of a state gives man the needed security. But as he craves for more, this craving brings man into conflict with surrounding territories similarly created by other individuals. This explanation of man's behaviour is applied by Hans directly to the system of nations states. He says that the world comprises of states. States have a lust for power and survival. This lust for territorial expansion and the urge to control more and more land and resources bring a state at the juncture of war with another state or even multiple states. During armed conflict or wars, a defending state also displays military power. This display of military power leads to human rights violation, but this human right violation is justified by the defending state as necessary for

the protection of its national interest of survival and security. A leader of this state in this case, by displaying some wisdom and resorting to the use of military power, is perhaps able to avert a greater evil. Thus, the idea propounded by Hans Morgenthau allows a state to act in hostility for the maintenance of its national interest and survival, especially if they are under threat. The ruler shall use his/her wisdom to use force to protect the state and avert a greater evil and maintain the balance of power.

Realism as a school has, over the decades, witnessed a shift to Neo-Realism from Classical Realism in 1980's. This shift owes to the work of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979). The emphasis on human nature of classical realists have gradually been theorised by the Neorealists into an emphasis on anarchy. They also do accept the presence of the other non-state actors in the system but continue to assert the primacy of the state. The Neorealists allege that as the international system is that of complete anarchy, it leads to nations acting in their own self-interest. This struggle for power is due to an absence of a global leviathan to protect smaller states. The Neorealists have propounded a deterministic theory, which says that the structure of the system in which a sovereign state functions causes the state to behave in the way that it behaves, which is to say, that a largely anarchic global system occasions inevitable conflict and warfare. Thus, they argue aptly that war happens in a context and the context is that of anarchy. Kenneth Waltz explains that international system consists of smaller units and the units are these nation states. IR is nothing but the study of the interaction of these units. All units in the system perform basic functions like taxation, municipal services, creation of infrastructure, and so forth. A change in the states' behaviour happens when the balance of power changes. The units are impacted when there are changes in of the interaction of great powers. The Neorealists believe that there is always an establishment of a hierarchy of states that the international system changes when great powers in the top hierarchy rise or fall. A fall or rise may break down the system but eventually paves way for the balance of power to emerge again in some or the other form. In this sense, the Neorealists are also 'Structuralists' as, for them, the structure of the overall system determines individual or collective behaviour. Neorealism is therefore a structuralist determinist explanation.

## **APPLICATION OF REALISM IN REAL LIFE**

### **Concepts of Machiavelli as Propounded in *The Prince***

We shall now try to apply the understanding of Realism in some real life examples. But before we attempt such a study, we need to have some understanding of Realism as discussed by another Realist—Niccolò Machiavelli. The imprint of Machiavelli's applied wisdom may clearly be deduced from our case studies below. Machiavelli tries to explain Realism by using analogies. He uses the allegory of a fox and a lion to present the case. Machiavelli says that the world is a dangerous place, but if the ruler has a fine mix of traits of a lion (strong) and a fox (cunning), that is, if the leader is both strong and cunning, then he can seek opportunities in this dangerous world for himself and the nation that he rules. Machiavelli is also critical of Christian ethics. He emphasise that a ruler should never follow the Christian dictum of loving one's neighbour. It is because if the neighbour is smart and strong, he may invade the ruler and as a result he shall not only lose his territory but also the faith his people had in him as a ruler. He advocates that a ruler take decisions for the protection of people and that he ensures growth and prosperity of the nation and its



citizens. The ruler, in so doing, may display power politics for ensuring safety and survival of its people and it depends upon his agility whether he shall achieve status amongst his peers.

## Syrian Crisis

In case of the Syrian crisis, the two important powers involved would be Russia and the USA. In the past few years, Russia has vetoed US sponsored resolutions on Syria at the UN. One Realist explanation is that Russia wants to pursue power politics in Syria as not only is the country the last relic of the Cold War in the Middle East but also holds the key to the balance of power in that region. This is because Syria, along with Iran, gives Russia a certain leverage to contain the US sponsored Saudi axis. The Syrians and Iranians, being Shia strongholds, act collectively as a strong balancer of Sunni domination led by Saudi Arabia and sponsored by the US. Thus, if US succeeds in effecting a regime change in Syria, the Shia–Sunni axis is going to be disturbed and the axis will tilt towards the Sunni side. Thus, Russia through Syria, pursues power to maintain a balance in the Middle East. (For detailed understanding of Syrian Crisis and issues in the Middle East, See [Section-H, Chapter-1](#))

## Hegemonic Ambitions of Iran

Under the Atoms for Peace initiative of the US since 1953, Iran began to receive support for a nuclear programme. The coming of Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1979 Islamic revolution led to a cancellation of all ongoing nuclear projects. But the subsequent Iran–Iraq war and Gulf War-I compelled Iran not only to restart its nuclear programme but have ambitions to develop a nuclear weapon. This is so because Iran knows that nuclear weaponisation will not only give it an edge in the region, allowing it to exercise hegemony, but will also tilt the power balance in favour of Iranians since Saudi Arabians do not possess any nuclear weapons. The Iranians feel such an attempt would tilt the balance of power towards the Shia axis and strengthen Shia hegemony in the region.

## CONCLUSION

The diagram below summarises the entire concept.

