International Relations Paradigms
By Dr. John T. Ackerman, Lt Col Barak J. Carlson (PhD), and Major Young I. Han

Introduction

The controversy between the realist and liberal paradigms parallels much of the storied history of political science in general and the study of international relations in particular. Recently, scholars of international relations have focused on what Stephen Walt has described as a “protracted competition between the realist, liberal, and radical traditions” (Walt 1998). Within the “radical” traditions, constructivism has emerged as a strong explanatory tool for international relations. As a consequence, this article will concisely investigate selected attributes of each paradigm and then explore briefly the “protracted competition” between realist, liberal, and constructivist traditions.

Initially, a short discussion of how these paradigms have evolved and some salient comments from critics will initiate this introduction. In addition, the three paradigms will be dissected into six central characteristics: 1) Key actors, 2) Central motivations, 3) Central problems, 4) Conception of the international system, 5) Conception of security, and 6) Notional security strategies. Critique, debate, and deconstruction of these theories will illuminate differences, similarities, and enhance understanding and analysis of the international environment.

Realism

In general, most realists thought in the past and today focus on a few core premises. First, many realists consider the central questions of international relations to be the causes of war and peace. Questions, for example, about the relative influence of the international political economy or the influence of norms, values, information, or ideas are always couched in respect to the primacy of their effect on conditions for war or peace (Holsti 1995; Seligson and Passé-Smith 1998).

Second, the basic structure of the international system is essentially anarchical, which infers that there is the absence of a central authority to settle international disputes (Waltz 1959; Hoffman 1965). States are also thought to inherently possess some offensive military capabilities, which make them perceived to be potentially dangerous to each other (Mearsheimer 1994-1995; 2001). Consequently, anarchy and potentially dangerous states create a “self-help” environment where states have to look out for their own security and survival, an environment that often produces security dilemmas. A security dilemma can be a situation where the actions by one state, sometimes pacific or defensive, other times offensive in nature, may lead other states to respond in kind or with more offensive actions. The ensuing increase in tension often leads to an action-reaction cycle that augments the potential for violent conflict.

Third, historically geographically based city-states, or empires were, and geographically based states are, currently considered to be the central actors of the international system. Other international entities like international organizations (IOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or multinational corporations (MNCs) are not considered very important actors in international relations (Morgenthau 1978; Waltz 1979; Holsti 1995).

Fourth, states are considered to be unitary actors. As unitary actors, states are mainly influenced by external, international forces and are less influenced by internal, domestic political
forces (Krasner 1978; Holsti 1995). States are also considered rational actors guided by logical “national interests” that are usually centered on state survival, security, or power. National interests are sometimes referred to as “states preferences” and are often considered to be fixed and uniformly conflict generators (Powell 1994; Legro and Moravcsik 1999). Thus, states are assumed to think strategically about how they can survive in the international system (Mearsheimer 1994-1995; 2001) or how they can keep power, increase power, or demonstrate power (Morgenthau 1978). Consequently, realists believe that international relations are not progressive (Keohane 1989a), but are “repetitive or cyclical” (Zacher and Matthew 1995, 108).

Fifth, realists contend that states assume they can become more secure through the accumulation of power, primarily military power (Morgenthau 1978). As a result of power maximization efforts, a gradient of power differentials in the international system has developed. Major powers and lesser powers are differentiated based on a state’s capabilities and the competition for power is a dominant and enduring characteristic of a realist international environment (Waltz 1979).

Sixth, and last, realists build security strategies around certain key principles. Deterrence of enemies through military forces is an essential foundation to creating stability in an anarchical international system. In addition, major powers and lesser powers use alliances to enhance or compensate for power differentials. States will use alliances to protect themselves and to balance against perceived threats from more powerful states. These core premises have often been updated and revised over the years.

Two prominent efforts to update realism with a more parsimonious and rigorous design have narrowed research attention to the structure of the international system. Kenneth Waltz’s (1979) book Theory of International Politics concentrated on the third level of analysis identified by Rousseau, the system level, and became the basis for neorealism (sometimes called structural realism). The other two levels were concerned with human nature (“first image”) and state attributes (“second image”) and were also discussed in Waltz’s classic neorealist work on why war occurs (1959). In addition, Robert Gilpin’s War and Change in World Politics (1981) focused on the variations in change within the international system. Even though most realists would agree with these six core premises, classical realists do have a few major concepts that differ slightly from general modern realist theory.

Classical realists are concerned with the condition of legal sovereignty, which describes the basis of a state’s authority over its territory and people and conversely, the absence of authority over territory, people, or events in other sovereign states (Snow 2000). Power for classical realists is also the most important concept in international relations research (Morgenthau 1978; Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 2001). More recent critiques of realism have added additional depth and insight to modern realist theory.

Classical realism has been criticized because it is grounded in a pessimistic theory of human nature. According to classical realists, humans are basically egotistic and self-interested or as Charles Kegley states “sinful and wicked” (Kegley 1995, 5). This view has been criticized for considering human nature a constant, instead of a variable that could add explanatory power to the actions of major international relations actors (Holsti 1995; Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 2001). Also, many critics deride the imprecision or contradictory nature of the core classical realist concepts of “power,” “national interest,” and “balance of power” (Claude 1962; Haas 1953; Holsti 1995; Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 2001). In addition to these critiques of classical realism, modern realism has also received some harsh academic attacks.
Critics, have sharply challenged modern realism via three primary complaints. First, realism is assessed poor predictive powers. The end of the Cold War did not fit with realist theory because most realists did not anticipate the peaceful demise of the bipolar, global conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States and the ensuing spread of global cooperation and regional integration (Holsti 1995; Kegley 1995; Vasquez 1997; Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 2001). Second, realism is claimed to have poor descriptive power and not always reflect reality (Vasquez 1993). For example, historian Paul Schroeder identifies numerous instances where states did not respond to threats to their survival by using the core realist concepts of self-help or power balancing (Schroeder 1994, 1994a; Vasquez 1997). Third, realism does not account for change adequately. Changes in the saliency of global issues like population growth, international trade, transboundary pollution, and global climate change have diverted decision-makers’ attention away from balance of power concerns toward anxieties over globalization and global environmental change (Myers 1993a, 1993b; Gaddis 1992-1993; Kegley 1995). Neorealism, in particular, has been the object of heated and controversial debate and subsequent modification.

Critics of neorealism have argued that Waltz’s focus on the distribution of capabilities among the major actors only allows a general explanation of outcomes in international relations and ignores the political activities within states to the detriment of political activities between states (Holsti 1995). Specifically, some critics of neorealism have stressed the disregard for the impact of domestic politics and in particular, individuals on international relations, where an individual person “holds the potential to be the master of structures, not simply the object” (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 2001, 97). Neorealism is also faulted for not focusing enough attention on the social aspects of power and too much attention on the role of the state-as-actor aspects of international relations (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 2001). However, recent work by realists has produced major works modifying and advancing neorealist thought.

Joseph Grieco’s 1988 article, “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique,” contested the explanatory power of neoliberal institutionalism (discussed in the next section on Liberalism) versus the predictive capabilities of neorealism, (Grieco 1988; also see Baldwin 1993; Mearsheimer 1994-1995; Kegley 1995 for more on the neoliberal – neorealist controversy). Additionally, Robert Gilpin and Stephen Krasner investigated international regimes and found that their existence and activities could also be explained in realist terms (Gilpin 1975; Krasner 1976, 1983). Realism is not alone in attracting a wealth of academic and scholarly discussion and criticism. Liberalism too has a fascinating history that has led to debate and critiques.

**Liberalism**

Early liberal thought was committed to a process of steady, even if uneven, growth in human freedom. Human freedom was and is assumed to be expanding due to the economic, social, and political policies and programs that emerge from democratization and market capitalism. This process is enabled, enhanced, and aided by human reason and technological developments (Zacher and Matthew 1995). Two important early variants of liberal thought are represented by laissez-faire liberalism and democratic or interventionist liberalism (Zacher and Matthew 1995).

Laissez-faire liberalism was originally based on the political theory of John Locke and the economic theory of Adam Smith (Pease 2000). The basic premises were support for limited
government based on the consent of the governed, emphasizing restrained interference in the private sector by the central governing forces. The state’s primary functions were limited to “enforcing a minimal set of laws, adjudicating disputes, and defending property and individual rights, especially against foreign aggression” (Zacher and Matthew 1995, 111). Additionally, moral and ethical principles were assumed to operate independently and have little influence on political processes (Zacher and Matthew 1995).

The second variant, democratic or interventionist liberalism, espoused less optimism that limited government inventions into private activities would be beneficial to freedom and the welfare of individuals. Philosophers in the vein of Jean-Jacques Rousseau supported government activities in education and redistribution of wealth and power to overcome some of the negative effects of free markets and self-interested individuals (Rousseau 1968). However, both of these variants and most early liberal international relations scholars construed a more limited role for liberal values and ideas in the politics of international relations, where it was believed that both self-interest and power would dominate (Zacher and Matthew 1995). Yet, not all early theorists were as dour in their assumptions that liberal values, ideas, and theories did not apply to foreign policy and international relations.

Immanuel Kant, writing in the 18th century, in a more optimistic view, foresaw the possibility of the interaction of republican states (essentially democracies), cosmopolitan law, and international trade creating the right conditions for world peace. Specifically, he identified three principles of conflict resolution applicable to global relations. The first principle involves “republican constitutions,” which are the heart of representative democracies that support and defend freedom, equality, and separation of power. The constitutions of the republican democratic states in turn create the moral base for the second principle of a “pacific union” of free states. The union of states is held together by international treaties, laws, and organizations, (cosmopolitan law) which further promote the third principle of “commerce and free trade.” Free international trade among democratic states ensures and enhances international ties, bound together not by force, threats, or coercion, but by economic incentives (Kant 2001; Russett and Oneal 2001, 29). Together, these three pillars encourage citizens to oppose war because of the dreadful costs in lives and resources (blood and treasure), to increase norms of cooperation and peaceful relations, and to enable citizens and states to reach accommodations over a broad range of issues, without resorting to war and violence (Russett and Oneal 2001). The forces that would drive the creation of the three pillars have gradually evolved over time and have led to modification of liberal concepts and theories.

In the nineteenth century, liberal theorists like David Ricardo, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, Richard Cobden, Benjamin Constant, and Herbert Spencer all built upon Kant’s theory. Specifically, they looked at what would be the catalysts that would spark the creation of Kant’s pillars of peace. These modern theorists concluded that free trade operated best outside the public realm and consequently was dependent on a lack of governmental interference that only democratic regimes could ensure. Additionally, they held that a robust private sector would be the “engine of human progress” that ultimately would yield global cooperation, prosperity, and peace, the presumed products of free trade (Zacher and Matthew 1995, 114). However, historical events and changes led modern liberal thinkers to slightly modify these views.

The end of World War II began a dark period for liberalism as a worldview and its relevance and validity were challenged by the rise of fascism, national socialism, and communism. These often extreme, intolerant, and violent social movements seemed to disprove the explanatory powers of liberalism during this chaotic episode. Thus, the end of World War II
until the end of the Cold War realism had been the dominant international relations worldview (Baldwin 1993a, Holsti 1995; Vasquez 1983; Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 2001). Nevertheless, scholars of liberal theory have still been able to broaden, deepen, and modernize liberal concepts, principles, and explanatory precepts.

After World War II liberal and constructivist challenges to realism still arose from many different sectors of political science. One example is David Mitrany’s treatise (1966) on functionalism, where he argued that cooperation in technical venues was much easier to achieve than collaboration in political or security related areas and that once some cooperation had occurred, more cooperation would ensue, spilling-over into other non-technical, political, or security related arenas. These networks of cooperation would work together to make war highly unlikely by causing adjustments in loyalties that would enable national loyalties to be displaced by international loyalties (Mitrany 1966; Zacher and Matthew 1995). Ernst Haas’s (1958) expanded Mitrany’s initial functionalist concepts with his development of neofunctionalism through his studies of successful European integration during the 1950’s. Neofunctionalists concluded that pressure for more cooperation and integration from labor unions, political parties, trade associations, or supranational bureaucracies (Grieco 1988) would spill-over into other issue areas as civil societies” motivations are altered by the impacts of forces for institutional change (Haas 1958; Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998). This appeared to be borne out as the 27 members European Union evolved from the original six members of the European Coal and Steel Community. Liberal studies took another unique turn during the 1960s and 1970s as investigations into transnational relations, linkage issues, regimes, and institutions began to dominate liberal research.

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye’s early work on interdependence became the cornerstone for neoliberal institutionalism concepts (Keohane and Nye 1972, 1977). Institutions, it was concluded, are able to reduce transaction costs, improve the quality or quantity of shared information, enable tradeoffs in different issue-areas, activate ethical concerns, and facilitate enforcement of agreements or compromises (Zacher and Matthew 1995). Institutions increased the level of interaction between states and consequently the level of interdependence. Liberals believe that the greater the levels of interdependence between states, the more international institutions there are, the greater the likelihood of peaceful cooperation (Keohane 1984; Russett, Oneal, and Davis 1998; Russett and Oneal 2001). Finally, recent work by John Oneal and Bruce Russett into the “liberal peace” among democracies (Oneal and Russett 1997, 2001; Russett and Oneal 2001) adds an extremely strong quantitative dimension to liberal theories and concepts that was previously mostly qualitative. Their conclusion that democracies do not go to war with one another has become a cornerstone of international relations and in particular liberal foreign policy studies.

Constructivism

Constructivism is an extremely useful means of understanding the formation of interests through its emphasis on the social nature of international relations and the importance of identities and norms in the constitution of national interests. Constructivism complements liberalism in its depiction of the shared interests and peaceful behavior of democratic states toward each other. What liberals characterize as democratic values are viewed by constructivists as shared interests and norms. According to Ned Lebow, realism, neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism all share a common core premise based on egoistic, autonomous states (Lebow
2003). However, while both realism and neoliberal institutionalism emphasize material factors in the formation and maintenance of regimes, constructivists generally believe international relations are governed by shared ideas. The constructivist core asserts reality is social rather than material. As a result, the outcome of state relations can be attributed to the influence of ideas instead of such material factors as wealth, geography, and military technology.

In *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, Peter Katzenstein and others argue that norms play an important role in world politics, shaping both cooperation and conflict in ways that are not accounted for by theories that focus either on material structural forces or on individual choice (Katzenstein 1996). Norms “serve as collective understandings of appropriate behavior, which can be invoked by the participants in a discourse to justify their arguments” (Katzenstein 1996, 369). Shared principles and norms eventually become internationalized by the actors involved, thereby reshaping the perception of interests (Rittberger 1991). Andrew Hurrell similarly finds that states comply with international regimes “not based on external sanctions or the threat of them but based rather on the existence of shared interests, of shared values, and of patterned expectations” (Rittberger 1990, 190). In the international environment, the perceived legitimacy of rules and their underlying norms influence the willingness of international actors to comply (Barnett and Finne more 2004). Regimes are thus credited with being self-enforcing in that they manage to socialize their members into compliance (Young 1979).

The constructivist emphasis on social factors can be employed to generate new understandings regarding the formation of interests and the pursuit of security. Barry Buzan concurs with realist assertions that individuals and states seek security, but he views the concept of security as more complex and multifaceted than the straightforward pursuit of power. Buzan also challenges the realist depiction of states as functionally equivalent, noting that states differ not just in their physical characteristics, but in terms of their organizing ideologies and their legitimacy among their own population (Buzan 1991). The pursuit of national security involves reducing vulnerability and threats, which may be military, political, economic, societal, or environmental. In his work with Ole Waever and Jaap Wilde, Buzan describes the process of “securitization” (Buzan, Waever, and Wilde 1998). An issue becomes securitized when it is deemed an exception to the normal political processes. Securitization follows the logic of constructivist speech-act processes, wherein an actor designates a referential object as an existential threat and an audience accepts this claim. Buzan’s work provides a useful account of how individuals, states, and communities pursue security in a complex manner that may involve many issues and interests.

Buzan, Waever, and Wilde also introduce the concept of a “security complex” to explain changes and variations in state behavior as it relates to the pursuit of security. Security complexes are shaped by the balance of power and interactions among actors that result in patterns of cooperation and conflict. A security complex is a “set of units whose process of securitization is so interlinked that security problems cannot be resolved apart from one another” (Buzan, Waever, and Wilde 1998, 19). In some of their more recent work, Buzan and Waever suggest that regional security complexes are increasingly useful to an understanding of state behavior (Buzan and Waever 2003). Regional security complexes, such as NATO, exist as “miniature anarchies” when states’ geographical proximity and history of interaction motivate them to put added emphasis on their relations with selected states. The authors recognize a tendency to greater integration within regional security complexes, which is a step towards forming a security community. This is particularly relevant to relations among European states,
which have gradually formed heterogeneous complexes across numerous issue areas embodied in international regimes such as the European Union (EU).

One result of positive experiences with interstate cooperation can be the formation of an international community. Andrew Hurrell states, “The aim is to identify a conception of international society consistent with self-interest and with the realities of power. Yet, at the same time, there was the awareness that international society could not be understood solely in these terms and had to be rooted within the cultural and historical forces that had helped shape the consciousness of society and had molded perceptions of common values and common purposes” (Rittberger 1990). Constructivists commonly view states as agents having a collective identity, based on common elements of their national identities. States form their collective identity based on how they see themselves in relation to other states in international society, and this identity affects the way they determine their interests.

Constructivism portrays international relations as a social process made up of agents and structure. The world is constructed through the actions of agents. These actions occur based on the meanings that the objects and situations have for them. The structure of the system consists of the identities of these agents and the ideas that give meaning to their material capabilities. The process of identity creation is continually shaped by the interactions of actors and their experiences.

Constructivism emphasizes the important role of identity in the formation of actors’ interests. According to Alexander Wendt, both realism and neoliberal institutionalism regard state interests and identities as “constant and exogenously given” (unchanging and externally derived) while constructivists view them as “endogenous to interaction” (malleable by internal events/activities) (Wendt 1994). A recognition that identities and interests may be treated as dependent variables endogenous to interaction allows constructivists to “treat collective action not merely as a problem for changing the price of cooperation for self-interested actors, but as a process of creating new definitions of self” (Wendt 1994, 387). He and other constructivists argue that interests cannot simply be deduced from assumptions about anarchy, but are rooted in identity. Wendt finds that any cohesive group (whether national, subnational, or transnational) will be built around some type of collective identity. State interactions continually produce and reproduce conceptions of “self” and “other,” resulting in the continuous redefinition of identities and interests. In this way, state interests and identities are co-constituted along with the social structures of the international system.

In A Social Theory of International Relations, Wendt acknowledges that anarchy exists in the international system, but he finds that collective identities may influence anarchy (Wendt 1999). He derives three alternative cultures of anarchy: enmity, rivalry, or friendship. The collective identity of states determines the dominant culture of anarchy and the levels of conflict and cooperation will vary accordingly. Collective identity formation is influenced by a number of variables, including interdependence, common fate, homogenization, and self-restraint. While realists view regimes as a product of changes in power or threat, constructivists view regimes as emerging out of collective identities. Identity is therefore a critical element in social and political interactions, aiding in an understanding of how individuals come together to form groups and how states come together to form international regimes.

Summary
Theories of international relations can be extraordinary valuable analytical tools for military professionals to examine and explore the dynamic international environment. Military professional can use these paradigms to help them understand the motivations and objectives of the policy-makers they interact and often work for. In particular, realism, liberalism, and constructivism offer insightful, complex, and multifaceted pedagogical tools for evaluating the actions of various actors on the global, regional, and domestic stage. The three theories also specify differing central motivations and problems for these actors. Extending from the contested motivations and challenges are differential views of the current international system and how security is manifested, attended, and extended. The disparate views often yield contrasting security strategies that contest even what is considered security or what needs to be secured. Together, the three theories can be used to deconstruct international and national affairs to clarify significant incidents of cooperation and conflict, contested national interests, and the primal stimulants for how the actors react to international security challenges and opportunities. Together, the three theories offer military professionals critical diagnostic weapons in the battle to understand the evolving international arena.
Table 2. Core Assumptions of Current Dominant Worldviews (Modified from Holsti 1995, Hughes 1997, Snyder 2004, Williams 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Realism</th>
<th>Liberalism</th>
<th>Constructivism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key actors</td>
<td>Geographically based units (tribes, city-states, and nation-states, etc.)</td>
<td>Highly permeable nation-states plus a broad range of non-state actors, including IOs, IGOs, NGOs, and individuals</td>
<td>Agents and structures that create ideas, norms, values, and social identities; „Self” and „Other(s)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central motivations</td>
<td>Security; Power; Autonomy; Status quo</td>
<td>Freedom; Security; Economic well-being; Progress</td>
<td>Shared ideas; Norms; Values; Social Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central problems</td>
<td>Causes of war; Conditions of peace; Change or progress in international relations</td>
<td>Broad agendas of social, economic, and environmental issues arising from gap between demands and resources</td>
<td>Causes of change in key actors and structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conception of current international system</td>
<td>Structural anarchy; Self-help system; Material and static</td>
<td>Global society; Dynamic; Significant influence by Kantian variables</td>
<td>Socially constituted through intersubjective interaction; Change is possible but difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Accumulation of power to protect the security of the state</td>
<td>Integration, cooperation, and interdependence needed to secure individuals/humans</td>
<td>A social construction; Primacy of non-material and ideational factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notional Security Strategies</td>
<td>Balance of power; Military deterrence; Control of allies, regimes, and institutions</td>
<td>Democratization; Peaceful conflict resolution; Rule of law; Interdependent free trade</td>
<td>Contestation and negotiation of shared ideas, norms, and identities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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