
REALISM, THE REAL WORLD, AND THE ACADEMY

John J. Mearsheimer

Realism, with its emphasis on security competition and war among the great powers, has dominated the study of international relations over the past fifty years. Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, in particular, have towered over the field during that period. Years from now when the history of the discipline in the twentieth century is written, two books will stand out above the rest: Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* and Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*. They have few serious competitors.

Many Americans and Europeans, however, believe that realism has a dim future. With the end of the cold war, so the argument goes, international politics has changed in fundamental ways. The world has not simply moved from bipolarity to multipolarity, but instead we have entered an era where there is little prospect of security competition among the great powers, not to mention war, and where concepts such as polarity and the balance of power matter little for understanding international relations. Most states now view each other as members of an emerging "international community," not as potential military rivals. Opportunities for cooperation are abundant in this new world, and the result is likely to be increased prosperity and peace for almost all the states in the system.

Not surprisingly, proponents of this optimistic perspective argue that realism is old thinking, and largely irrelevant to the new realities of world politics. Realists have gone the way of the dinosaurs;

they just don't realize it. The best that might be said for realism is that it was helpful for understanding how states interacted with each other before 1990, but it is largely useless now that the cold war is over. Therefore, we need new theories to help us make sense of international politics in the twenty-first century.

President Clinton was a strong proponent of this view. For example, he declared in 1992 that "in a world where freedom, not tyranny, is on the march, the cynical calculus of pure power politics simply does not compute. It is ill-suited to a new era." Five years later in 1997 he sounded the same theme in defense of NATO expansion. The president argued that the charge that this policy might isolate Russia was based on the belief "that the great power territorial politics of the 20th century will dominate the 21st century," which he rejected. Instead, he emphasized that "enlightened self-interest, as well as shared values, will compel countries to define their greatness in more constructive ways . . . and will compel us to cooperate in more constructive ways."¹

This hopeful perspective is widely shared by academics. Consider two important statements that appeared in 1989, just as the cold war was coming to a peaceful conclusion. John Mueller claimed in *Retreat from Doomsday* that there is no longer a serious threat of war among the great powers, because wars of that kind have become too deadly (even without nuclear weapons) to have any political utility. "For the last two or three centuries," he wrote, "major war—war among developed countries—has gradually moved towards terminal disrepute because of its perceived repulsiveness and futility."² Like dueling and slavery, great-power war no longer serves a useful social purpose.

Francis Fukuyama made a similar claim in his famous article "The End of History?"³ He argued that "large-scale conflict must involve large states still caught in the grip of history, and they are what appear to be passing from the scene." With the collapse of the Soviet Union, "there is no struggle or conflict over 'large' issues, and consequently no need for generals or statesmen; what remains is primarily economic activity."

The claim that realism has bitten the dust is wrong. In fact, realist theories are likely to dominate academic debates about international politics for the next century, much the way they have since at least the early days of the cold war.⁴

What the future has in store for realism will be largely a function of two considerations. First, what will it tell us about events in the real world? Because the study of international politics is an empirical

science, the most important criterion for assessing the worth of any theory is how well it explains state behavior. Realism has long been recognized as the dominant paradigm in international relations—even by scholars who dislike it—because it does a better job of explaining politics among states than any other body of theories. Second, what kind of respect will academia—one of the key institutions in any society for fostering thinking about world politics—accord realism? The potential problem for realism is that academics sometimes attempt to denigrate and silence ideas they dislike, even when those ideas shed light on important subjects.

Realism appears to have a bright future in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, we still live in a nasty and brutish world where the great powers compete with each other for power. The only possible threat to realism is likely to come from inside academia, where it is frequently reviled. But any attempt to silence realism within the academy is likely to fail, simply because it is so difficult to repress or exclude compelling arguments, especially in the United States.

Realism

The realist paradigm comprises a body of theories that share a handful of core beliefs. Specifically, states are the principal actors in world politics, and no higher authority sits above them. This absence of hierarchy in the state system is commonly called anarchy, which does not mean chaos and violence, but simply that states are sovereign political entities. Furthermore, calculations about power dominate state thinking, and states compete for power among themselves. There is a zero-sum quality to that competition, which sometimes makes it intense and unforgiving. States cooperate with each other for sure, but at root they have conflicting interests, not a harmony of interests. Finally, war is a legitimate instrument of statecraft. To paraphrase Clausewitz, war is a continuation of politics by other means.

These common tenets among realist theories notwithstanding, there are significant differences among them. For example, Morgenthau maintains that states are hardwired with an insatiable lust for power, which causes them to seek to maximize their share of world power. Waltz, on the other hand, emphasizes that the structure of the system causes states to compete for power but that states should not strive to maximize power. Instead, they should aim to control

an "appropriate" amount of power.⁵ Furthermore, there are important differences between "defensive realists" (Robert Jervis, Jack Snyder, Stephen Van Evera) and "offensive realists" (myself and Randall Schweller).⁶ My goal here, however, is not to assess the relative merits of particular realist theories but rather to determine the future relevance of the more general realist paradigm.

The Real World

Despite the end of the cold war, the basic structure of the international system remains largely unchanged. States are still the key actors in world politics, and they continue to operate in an anarchic system. It is difficult to find a serious scholar who argues that the United Nations or any other international institution has coercive leverage over the great powers or is likely to have it anytime soon. Moreover, not only is there no plausible replacement for the state on the horizon, but there is little interest anywhere in the world for doing away with the state and putting an alternative political arrangement in its place. Nothing is forever, but there is good reason to think that the sovereign state's time has not yet passed.

If the basic structure of the system has not changed since 1990, we should not expect state behavior in the new century to be much different from what it was in past centuries. In fact, there is abundant evidence that states still care deeply about power and will compete for it among themselves in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the danger still remains that security competition might lead to war, neither of which has gone away with the disappearance of the Soviet Union.

To illustrate this point, consider that the United States has fought two wars since the end of the cold war—Iraq (1991) and Kosovo (1999)—and it came dangerously close to going to war against North Korea in 1994. Although the United States now spends more on defense than the next six countries combined, U.S. officials do not seem to think this is enough. Indeed, both candidates in the 2000 presidential campaign advocated spending even more money on the Pentagon. Thus, there is little reason to think that states no longer care about their security.

Furthermore, it is hard to imagine anyone arguing that security competition and war are outmoded in (1) South Asia, where India and Pakistan are bitter enemies, are armed with nuclear weapons, and are caught up in a raging dispute over Kashmir; (2) the Persian

Gulf, where Iraq and Iran are bent on acquiring nuclear weapons and show no signs of becoming status quo powers; and (3) Africa, where interstate conflict appears to have increased since the end of the cold war. One might concede, however, that these regions remain mired in the old ways of doing business and argue instead that it is security competition and war among the system's great powers, not minor powers such as Pakistan and Iran, that is passé. Therefore, Europe and Northeast Asia (NEAsia), where there are clusters of great powers, are the places where realist logic no longer has much relevance.

But this argument does not stand up to scrutiny. There is a large literature on security in NEAsia after the cold war, and almost every author recognizes that power politics is alive and well in the region and that there is good reason to worry about armed conflict.⁷ The thought of Japan seriously rearming strikes fear in the heart of virtually every country in Asia, and if China continues to grow economically and militarily over the next few decades, there is likely to be intense security competition between China and its neighbors, as well as the United States. According to one expert, China "may well be the high church of realpolitik in the post-Cold War world."⁸ Apparently the Chinese have not gotten the word that realism has been relegated to the scrap heap of history. Furthermore, the United States is in a position today where it might find itself in a war with North Korea or with China over Taiwan. In short, NEAsia is a potentially dangerous place, where security competition is a central element of interstate relations.

Possibly the best evidence that power politics is still relevant in NEAsia is that the United States maintains one hundred thousand troops in the region and plans to keep them there for a long time. If NEAsia were a zone of peace, those American forces would be unnecessary and they could be sent home and demobilized, saving the U.S. taxpayer an appreciable sum of money. Instead, they are kept in place to help pacify a potentially volatile region.

Joseph Nye, one of the main architects of post-cold war American policy in NEAsia and a scholar with a well-established reputation as a liberal international relations theorist (not a realist), made just this point in a 1995 article in *Foreign Affairs*.⁹ "It has become fashionable," he wrote, "to say that the world after the Cold War has moved beyond the age of power politics to the age of geoeconomics. Such clichés reflect narrow analysis. Politics and economics are connected. International economic systems rest upon international po-

litical order." He then made the pacifier argument: "The U.S. presence [in Asia] is a force for stability, reducing the need for arms buildups and deterring the rise of hegemonic forces." Not only do "forward-deployed forces in Asia ensure broad regional stability," but they also "contribute to the tremendous political and economic advances made by the nations of the region." In short, "the United States is the critical variable in the East Asia security equation."

What about Europe, which some writers believe is the best place to look for evidence that power politics is outmoded among the great powers? It was widely believed in the early 1990s that Russia had undergone a fundamental transformation in its thinking about international politics. Its leaders, many believed, understood that the pursuit of power was not likely to enhance Russian security and that the best way to achieve that end was to work with the West to create a peaceful order across all of Europe. Furthermore, some argued that in the wake of the cold war the European Union (EU) would provide the foundation for a stable political order in western Europe, and eventually across the entire continent.

It seems clear, however, that things are not working out this way in Europe. NATO, not the EU, provides the basis of stability on the western half of the continent, and NATO is a military institution. Moreover, the expansion of NATO eastward has angered the Russians, who now appear to be thinking and acting like old-fashioned realists. Consider what President Vladimir Putin says in "The National Security Concept of the Russian Federation," a seminal policy document that he signed on January 10, 2000. "The formation of international relations," he writes, "is accompanied by competition and also by the aspiration of a number of states to strengthen their influence on global politics, including by creating weapons of mass destruction. Military force and violence remain substantial aspects of international relations."¹⁰

But as with NEAsia, probably the best evidence that power politics has not disappeared from Europe is that the United States maintains one hundred thousand troops in the region, and it places great importance on keeping NATO intact. If Europe were "primed for peace," NATO could be disbanded and those American forces could be sent home and demobilized.¹¹ Instead, they are kept in place, because there is potential for intense security competition in Europe, and the United States is determined to keep it from breaking out. Otherwise why would Washington spend tens of billions of dollars every year to maintain a large military presence in Europe?

It appears that many Europeans believe that the United States is keeping a lid on security competition in their region. Between 1990 and 1994, Robert Art conducted more than one hundred interviews with European political-military elites. He found that most believed that "if the Americans removed their security blanket from Europe . . . the Western European states could well return to the destructive power politics that they had just spent the last forty-five years trying to banish from their part of the continent."¹² Presumably that perspective is even more tightly held today, given that the early 1990s was the heyday of optimism about the prospects for peace in Europe.

For a closer look at how many Europeans think about the American presence in Europe, consider the views of Christoph Bertram, a former director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London and one of Germany's foremost strategic thinkers. He wrote in 1995, "To disband NATO now would throw Europe into deep insecurity. . . . It would be a strategic disaster."¹³ He goes on to say that "if the United States turned its back on Europe, NATO would collapse and the European Union would be strained to the point of disintegration. Germany would stand out as the dominant power in the West of the continent, and Russia as the disturbing power in the East. The United States would lose much of its international authority as well as the means to help prevent European instability from igniting international conflict once again."

The bottom line is that security competition and war between the great powers have not been burned out of the system. States across the globe are likely to continue competing among themselves for power. And this means that realist theories are likely to have much to say about international politics in the twenty-first century.

The Academy

The most serious threat to realism comes not from the real world but from inside universities, where dislike of realism is widespread and often intense, especially among liberal international relations theorists.

A good example of this hostility is found in a recent article in the *American Political Science Review* by John Vasquez, a member of the millennial reflections panel on realism held at the International Studies Association's 2000 convention. After assessing some of the more important realist writings of the past twenty years, he concludes that realism is a degenerating paradigm (as opposed to a pro-

gressive paradigm]. He is certainly entitled to advance this view, of course, but he goes on to suggest that research by realist scholars does not "deserve continued funding, publication, and so forth."¹⁴ He probably also believes that political science departments should not hire realists. This statement is remarkable for its intolerance. Indeed, it is hard to understand how it got past the editors at the *American Political Science Review*. Surely if someone had called for running liberal theories or formal modeling out of the scholarly world, the editors would have told the author that ad hominem attacks of that sort have no place in the flagship journal of political science. Apparently standards are different when it comes to realism.

This example is hardly unique, however, as any university-based realist knows all too well. Morgenthau, for example, speculated that he probably would not have received tenure at the University of Chicago in 1946 if his first book dealing with realist themes, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, had been in print when the tenure decision was made.¹⁵ In a 1989 book of autobiographical essays by thirty-four international relations scholars, Morgenthau's name "is more frequently cited than any other name." Yet, the editor notes, "many of the references in these pages are negative in tone. He seems to have inspired his critics even more than his supporters."¹⁶ Kenneth Waltz, the other king of realist scholarship generates similar hostility. For example, Fareed Zakaria notes that "it was a ritual, at almost every IR seminar I attended as a graduate student at Harvard, for the speaker to spend some time denouncing Waltz's work."¹⁷

Parenthetically, it is worth noting that despite realism's widely acknowledged dominance of the intellectual agenda in international relations, Harvard's government department has not employed a realist theorist since Henry Kissinger left in 1969. Moreover, it made no effort to hire either Morgenthau or Waltz, the two most influential international relations scholars of the past fifty years. Harvard's apparent antipathy toward realism is not unique. Yale's political science department has not had a realist on its distinguished faculty since 1957, when Arnold Wolfers retired.

Robert Gilpin, a realist who taught at Princeton until recently, maintains that "liberal intolerance" of realism, which has a long and rich history, has increased recently because realists refuse to "believe that, with the defeat of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war, the liberal millennium of democracy, unfettered markets, and peace is upon us."¹⁸

There is certainly much evidence of realism bashing in the aftermath of the cold war. To cite a few examples, a 1995 article in *International Studies Quarterly* not only predicted the imminent demise of realism but concluded that future research should "explore why for the past several decades the discipline of international politics remained mesmerized by a false theory!"¹⁹ A prominent British scholar argued in 1994 that "many of the central themes of realism appear as (domesticated) descendants of the militaristic and racist Social Darwinism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century."²⁰ Finally, Stanley Hoffmann, a Harvard professor, told the *New York Times* in March 1993 that realism is "utter nonsense today."²¹

There is little reason to think that such hostility toward realism will subside anytime soon. Nevertheless, this intolerance is unlikely to put an end to the realist research agenda, mainly because realism offers too many important insights about international politics to be silenced for long. Try as they may, realism's detractors will find that it is almost impossible to suppress sound arguments in the United States. The American university system is large and decentralized, and serious scholars with controversial ideas can always find a few institutions willing to support them. Realism might be abandoned if it ceased to say anything important about international politics, but as discussed, that is unlikely to be the case. As a result, people who care about the real world will continue to rely on the insights that realist theory provides, and students will continue to be impressed by realism's compelling explanations of state behavior.

Realism will disappear only if there is a revolutionary change in the structure of the international system, but that is not likely to happen anytime soon.

Notes

1. William J. Clinton, "American Foreign Policy and the Democratic Ideal," campaign speech, Pabst Theater, Milwaukee, Wisc., October 1, 1992; "In Clinton's Words: 'Building Lines of Partnership and Bridges to the Future,'" *New York Times*, July 10, 1997.
2. John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 4.
3. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3-18. The quotations in this paragraph are from pp. 5 and 18. Also see Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

4. For evidence that realism has always been the dominant paradigm in the discipline of international relations, see Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).
5. Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory," in *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 40.
6. See Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, preface to *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security*, ed. Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), ix-xii; and Benjamin Frankel, "Restating the Realist Case: An Introduction," *Security Studies* (special issue: "Realism: Restatements and Renewal") 5, no. 3 (1996): xiv-xx.
7. See, for example, the many articles on Asian security published over the past decade in *Foreign Affairs*, *International Security*, and *Survival*. Some of the best pieces from *International Security* are published in Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, eds., *East Asian Security* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).
8. Thomas J. Christensen, "Chinese Realpolitik," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 5 (1996): 37.
9. Joseph S. Nye Jr., "East Asian Security: The Case for Deep Engagement," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 4 (1995): 90-102. The quotations in this paragraph are from pages 90-91, 102.
10. The document was originally published in *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye* on January 14, 2000. For key excerpts, from which this quote is taken, see "Russia's National Security Concept," *Arms Control Today* 30, no. 1 (2000): 15-20.
11. The phrase "primed for peace" was coined by Stephen Van Evera to describe post-cold war Europe. See Stephen Van Evera, "Primed for Peace: Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (1990-91): 7-57.
12. Robert J. Art, "Why Western Europe Needs the United States and NATO," *Political Science Quarterly* 111, no. 1 (1996): 5-6.
13. Christoph Bertram, *Europe in the Balance: Securing the Peace Won in the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, 1995), 17-18, 85. Also see pp. 10-11.
14. John A. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997): 900.
15. See "Bernard Johnson's Interview with Hans J. Morgenthau" in *Truth and Tragedy: A Tribute to Hans J. Morgenthau*, ed. Kenneth Thompson and Robert J. Myers (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1984), 371.
16. Joseph Kruzel, "Reflections on the Journeys," in *Journeys through World Politics: Autobiographical Reflections of Thirty-four Academic Travelers*, ed. Joseph Kruzel and James N. Rosenau (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989), 505.
17. Personal correspondence, October 7, 1999.

18. Robert G. Gilpin, "No One Loves a Political Realist," *Security Studies* (special issue: "Realism: Restatements and Renewal") 5, no. 3 (1996): 3.
19. Bahman Fozouni, "Confutation of Political Realism," *International Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1995): 508.
20. Fred Halliday, *Rethinking International Relations* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1994), 11.
21. Quoted in Thomas L. Friedman, "Friends Like Russia Make Diplomacy a Mess," *New York Times*, March 28, 1993, sect. 4, p. 5.