

# Theoretical Overview

This chapter outlines the basic theoretical approaches that are the foundations of international relations (IR) and are critical to understanding the field. As a starting point, we will begin with realist/power politics, as articulated by Hans J. Morgenthau. This has been one of the founding tenets of IR since the end of World War II. (His seminal text, *Politics Among Nations*, was initially published in 1948.) Since then, the international political landscape has changed; new organizations tied to the notion of collective security assumed idealistically that security could best be assured not by having nations increase their power but by working cooperatively toward common goals and ends that would benefit all. Thus, a competing or (perhaps more appropriately) alternative theory of IR was born, which challenged the basic principles of realism. This new approach focused more on cooperation between and among nations rather than competition for power; it embodied many of the ideals earlier espoused by Woodrow Wilson. Referred to as “liberal theory,” it incorporates economic ideas as well as political ones, and it has grown in prominence and importance since the end of the Cold War. Hence, the changes in the international system have contributed to a proliferation of other theories, all of which were designed to explain on a macro level, or more often on a micro level, some aspect of IR.

In this chapter, we present a brief introduction to these various theoretical models (i.e., realism and structural realism, liberalism, constructivism, Marxism and its offshoots, and feminist approaches), with concrete examples of how each

can be applied to understanding the international system and world events. Note that this is not meant to be a comprehensive study, as there are a number of approaches that we will not address in this short overview, nor do we go into a lot of detail on the basic theories that we do explore. If you are interested in learning more, there are many readings you can delve into. Rather, what we want to do here is offer an introduction to the major approaches so that you can determine which of these makes the most sense to you and when and how you can apply each approach. This starting point will lead into the body of the remainder of the text.

### **WHAT IS THEORY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?**

Before we can delve into IR theories, however, it is important to set out a few basic assumptions and to situate IR within the broader field of political science. As noted in chapter 1, IR is the most macro level of all the subfields of political science. In contrast to the other subfields, such as American politics or comparative politics, IR deals with the entire international system, which generally is made up of nation-states but also nonstate actors. Most nation-states have a political structure of some type, a culture and social organization that help define their values, and individuals who influence the decisions that are made and who are, in turn, affected by those decisions. Within each nation-state there are countless other groups that play a role in the decision making process and interact with the political system in some way. This structure does not even begin to take into account the ways in which these broad entities, the nation-state or country, interact with and influence one another, although these too are legitimate questions for exploration within the area of IR.

Given this proliferation of actors and variables that can affect these actors and the international system as a whole, how can we begin to understand this complexity? That is the role of theory, which exists to provide the framework that can help guide our understanding of various events that occur within this complex system.

### **Theory and IR: Some Basic Assumptions**

Every field of study has its theories or basic paradigms, as does IR. These theories provide the framework that allows us to begin to simplify reality so that we can better address the complexities of the world. *Theory* is a linked set of propositions or ideas that simplify a complex reality so that we can *describe* events that have happened, *explain* why they happened, and *predict* what might happen in the future. In the field of IR, it is very difficult to predict with certainty, as there

are so many variables that can affect the outcome of events. Unlike the “hard” sciences, where it is possible to work in a lab and control the environment, in the social sciences in general, and in IR in particular, it is virtually impossible to control any single variable, let alone the interaction among these variables—although political scientists who employ various modeling techniques do try. This means that the theoretical perspectives are dynamic and evolve as situations change, as do the variables. Nonetheless, the main theories that have emerged allow us to identify general patterns that help us understand what has happened and why (i.e., describe and explain), and in so doing give us some indicators of what might happen in the future under similar sets of circumstances (predict). So theories are important guides that allow us to navigate the complexity of the world.

Using these theories or paradigms can help us know how to ask and answer some of the fundamental questions in the field. As a macrolevel field, IR tends to ask macrolevel questions—for example, what is war and why do countries go to war? Why did a particular country act as it did or respond to events in a particular way? How can one country influence another to engage in a particular pattern of behavior or stop it from behaving in a particular way? Why do some states appear to be cooperative and others appear to be warlike? These are but some of the general questions that we see often in the field of IR and that any number of theories and theorists have tried to answer. But how can we answer such questions in a world in which we can’t identify all the variables or hold things constant?

Political scientist Christine Sylvester provides some important clues when she writes, “In an international system filled with tensions, IR analysts are keenly interested in questions of *continuity* and *discontinuity*. States persist as key political entities, as does a world capitalist *system* of commodity production and exchange” (emphasis added). She continues, “Conventional wisdom has it that this is a world of states, nonstate actors and market transactions. It is a world in which neither men nor women figure *per se*, the emphasis being on impersonal actors, structures, and system processes.”<sup>1</sup>

Sylvester seems to be telling us that in the traditional approaches to IR, people don’t matter; IR is a field of actors, structures, and processes. But underlying this is another reality that Sylvester touches on later in her book, which gives us a more complete understanding of IR— and that is *who* makes the decisions for these actors that result in the actions that we can see. Are states monolithic entities that operate on their own? Or, put another way, what roles do individuals really play in steering the direction of a state?

This leads us to another component of our basic framework: the assumptions we have to make about nation-states and their behavior in order to arrive at generalizations (theories) about them. Whether they are accurate or not, making certain assumptions allows us to generalize, which in turn enables us to identify patterns as well as to draw conclusions based, in part, on studying cases that don't fit the patterns. These generalizations and patterns, and determining where there are deviations from these patterns and why, contribute to further information about and knowledge of the behavior of the international system.

To begin, we assume that states will behave as *monolithic* actors (that is, they will behave as if they were one single entity rather than being made up of many individuals and groups) and that they will act in a *rational* manner (that is, they will make decisions based on a process that weighs costs and benefits to arrive at a decision that allows them to further their self-interest). States might choose to act in a certain way in order to maximize their power (the realist theoretical perspective) or because they feel that they will better achieve their interests by cooperating with other states (the liberal approach). But this also suggests that states have a way to identify what is in their *national interest* and that they will then act accordingly. Again, one can easily question this assumption, as any state has a number of competing interests, all of which can be argued to be in the best interest of the state. Nonetheless, for realists especially, it is important to assume that national interest can be identified and that states will pursue policies that help them achieve that interest.

### **The Concept of National Interest**

What is *national interest*, and how do countries actually achieve it? This is one of the critical concepts in IR and one that is addressed in virtually every textbook on the subject. For example, according to political scientist Charles Kegley, “The primary obligation of every state—the goal to which all other national objectives should be subordinated—is to promote its *national interest* and to acquire power for this purpose” (emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup> Realist thinkers define national interest in terms of *power*, in the belief that only by acquiring power can a country achieve its primary goals. But some political scientists define national interest more broadly than simply the acquisition of power, such as protecting what the state sees as its core interests, which are those that involve the protection and continuation of the state and its people. For example, Barry Hughes sees core interests as those that “flow from the desire [of the state] to preserve its essence: territorial boundaries, population, government, and sovereignty.”<sup>3</sup> From

his perspective, core interest is more than simply security defined in traditional military terms, but it also means assuring a country's economic vitality, its values, and other components that are central to the essence of the state. One can argue that these are also essential to a country's security, but they fall outside the traditional definition, a point that we will return to later. So a country will pursue the policies that it deems to be in its national interest while also furthering its core interests related to its survival.

A point made by Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, is that a country might choose to pursue what it believes to be in its national interest even if that defies the wishes or norms of the international system. The example that he gives is Pakistan, which pursued its nuclear ambitions in the face of international sanctions and alienation. In his words, "There is scant evidence that sanctions can ever be made strong enough to dissuade a country from pursuing what it believes to be a *vital national interest*" (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> We can also see that type of behavior with North Korea, which continues to build and test nuclear-capable missiles despite international warnings and sanctions. Or Russia, which has engaged in cyber-attacks against the United States, including meddling in its presidential elections, which resulted in sanctions by the United States. What this tells us is that a country's perception of its own national and core interests can determine its behavior, even if doing so appears to result in international condemnation and even questions about the rationality of the decision.

Tied directly to core interests/values and a country's national interest in general is the traditional notion of *security*, since one of the core values of any country is ensuring the safety and protection of the population. But this also leads to the dangers of the "security dilemma," which is a situation in which one state improves its military capabilities as a way of trying to ensure its own security. However, in doing this, the military buildup is seen by other states as an act of aggression and therefore a direct threat. Thus, each state tries to increase its own level of protection and hence its security to meet the perceived threat coming from another state, which contributes directly to the insecurity of others. The result is often an arms race and no greater sense of security.

Generally, security is thought of in military terms. However, feminist theorists have challenged this preconception by expanding the definition to make a distinction between security defined in terms of the military and militarism and "human security," which refers to a broader set of issues necessary for human survival (core issues)—for example, protection of the environment, eradication of diseases, freedom from hunger, access to potable water, and so on. In looking

at these security issues, “feminists focus on how world politics can contribute to the *insecurity* of individuals, particularly marginalized and disempowered populations” (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> Put another way, “IR feminists frequently make different assumptions about the world, ask different questions, and use different methodologies to answer them.”<sup>6</sup>

Feminist IR theorists would argue that only by broadening the approach to IR as a field of study is it possible to get a complete picture of and accurate answers to many of the basic questions asked. As feminist theorist Gillian Youngs describes it, “In arguing that women and gender are essential to the field of International Relations, feminist scholars have had to address the *core* concepts and issues of the field: war, militarism and security; sovereignty and the state; and globalization” (emphasis in original).<sup>7</sup> In other words, while feminist theorists address the critical concepts, they inject a different perspective that should give us a more complete understanding of the issues studied.

This is not to suggest that one theory or approach is better or worse than another, or that one is right and another is wrong. What we do want to make clear, though, is that there are any number of approaches that can be used to understand IR and that it is important to be clear about the questions we want to ask and then to draw on the appropriate approach to answering those questions.

### **Role of Perceptions in IR**

One of the points made in chapter 1 was that perceptions other countries have of the United States will be translated into policy decisions, just as the way the United States perceives itself will have policy ramifications for U.S. actions. The example we used was of the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, which some countries perceived to be the fault of the United States. Even though there was no basis in fact, this affected the ways in which those countries viewed the reliability of the United States as a major power and as an ally. Similarly, we also asked how President George W. Bush’s perceptions of 9/11 affected the decisions that he made to respond to that attack. This was a function of his world view, understandings about what happened that day, and also sense of vulnerability. These are all intangibles, yet they had a very real impact on the way Bush, as president, chose to respond.

There are countless examples of the ways in which perceptions affect policy decisions: the Cold War in many ways was about the *perception* of the balance of power between the United States and Soviet Union. It was not about whether each side had the same number of tanks or aircraft carriers or fighter aircraft,

but which side was perceived to be the stronger and more powerful, which was the result not only of weapon systems (capability), but also the perception that it would use those weapons should it become necessary (credibility). Thus, although perceptions are intangible, they are translated into reality through the decisions that are made by a country and its leaders.

We see this clearly when we talk about national interest and security. These are intangible, yet achieving these are goals of every country and its leaders. And they are tied to the perceptions that the country has of itself and of other countries, both allies and adversaries. The point here is that when we think and talk about critical concepts such as “national security,” we have to realize that there are intangible variables that come into play and become or certainly influence policy decisions.

### **LEVELS OF ANALYSIS: A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

We noted previously that IR deals with the international system, which we can think of as being made up of nation-states but also nonstate actors, each of which has a distinct political structure of some type, a culture and social organization that help define its values, and individuals who influence the decisions that are made and who in turn are affected by those decisions. In effect, what we are referring to here are the *levels of analysis*. It is important to know more about what this concept means, as it is one of the primary building blocks for understanding IR.

We can think of levels of analysis as forming a pyramid. At the base is the *international system as a whole*, which is made up of nation-states, nonstate actors, and international/multinational organizations. If we look within the international system, we can focus on the *individual nation-state*, the major component of the international system. Each nation-state, in turn, has a *government* and a *society*, which has its own *culture*, and then the *individuals* who make the decisions (see figure 2.1).

Put another way, we can start with the individual decision maker who emerges from the society and the culture of the nation and who should reflect those norms and values. Similarly, the government makes decisions for the nation-state and is tied directly to the society and culture. (In democratic societies, the government is elected, at least in theory, by the members of the society.) Taken together, these are the primary component parts of the nation-state. Nation-states combine to create the international system. In fact, according to realist thinking, nation-states are the essence of the international system.

The logical question to ask here is, why does this structure matter? It matters because it is important when asking a question about IR to understand what level the question is really addressing so that it can be answered correctly.

For example, the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 was one of the defining events of the Cold War. We can look at that incident and ask why President John F. Kennedy made the decisions he did, which ultimately resulted in a peaceful end to the crisis. When asked that way, the focus of the question is the level of the individual decision maker, and it can be answered by reading about the processes Kennedy followed in order to make his decisions. What was he thinking? Whom did he turn to for advice?

But we can also ask how the American people reacted to what was going on at this time of heightened tension. To answer this question, we would have to look at the society and culture, which we can gauge through polls, newspaper

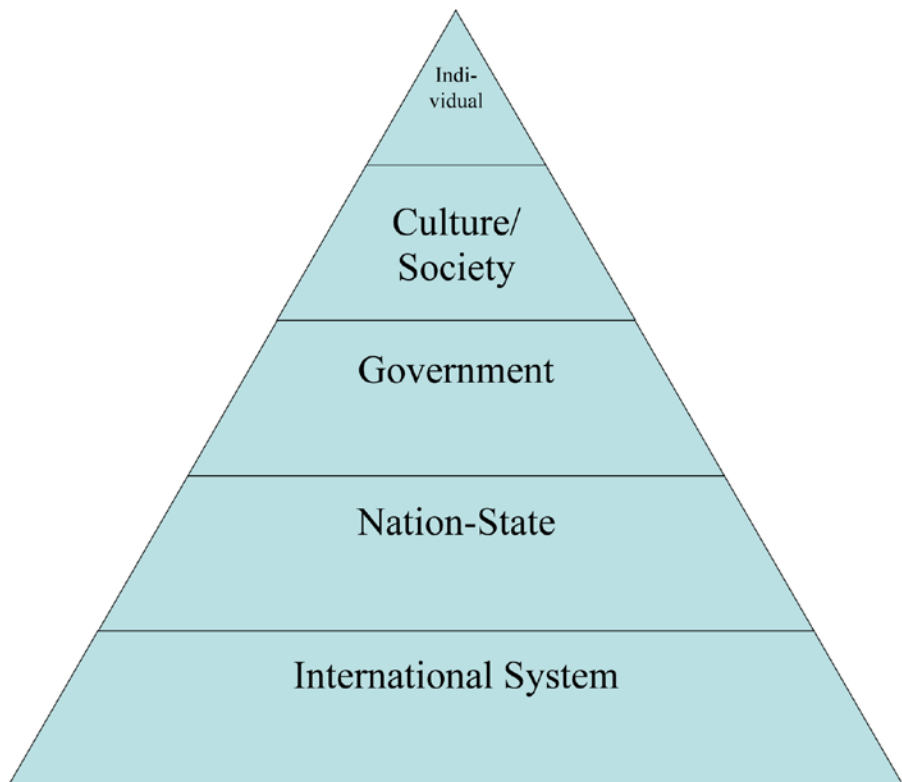


FIGURE 2.1  
Levels of Analysis



accounts, and so on. Asking what role the formal governmental structure played gives us another insight into the crisis and how it was addressed. Was the Congress involved, and if so, in what ways? Or were decisions made by a small group of advisers to Kennedy, and what does that tell us about the role of government in crisis decision making and how decisions were made?

We can ask even more macrolevel questions, such as how did the missile crisis change U.S. and Soviet relations during the Cold War? This is a question that can be answered by focusing on the nation-state level. At that level, we are looking at the United States and the Soviet Union as two major players in the international system and focusing on their reactions to one another given their tense relationship during the Cold War. And, finally, we can ask how the missile crisis affected the global balance of power. This question can best be answered at the macro level by looking at the patterns of behavior of nation-states, what took place in the United Nations, and other macrolevel indicators.

The point here is that using levels of analysis as a framework makes it possible to ask specific questions and get the answers that are appropriate to the particular questions being asked. Each of the questions asked in the previous discussion is a valid one and can be answered. Using the levels of analysis allows us to focus on one level at a time, holding the others constant, in order to simplify the reality. This is the best way we can approximate what scientists do in a laboratory. It also allows us to look at a specific event and, using the basic framework for theory, *describe* what happened, *explain* why things happened as they did, and then *draw lessons* about what that might mean for similar events in the future. (Note that we are not saying that we can predict, but we can make educated guesses.) When the answers are taken together, it is possible to get a more complete picture of the event—what happened, how, and why.

The notion of using levels of analysis as a framework for approaching IR goes back to the early 1960s and the work of political scientist J. David Singer. His article “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations”<sup>8</sup> draws on the even earlier work of Kenneth Waltz, who in his seminal book, *Man, the State, and War*, suggests that in order to really understand IR in general and to address specific questions, such as why wars occur and whether there can ever be peace, it is necessary to understand human behavior (individual level), states (nation-state level), and how they are constructed (society, culture, and government levels), and finally to then address the international level.<sup>9</sup>

What Singer does in his article is to remind those of us who study IR that until this point we have “roamed up and down the ladder of organizational

complexity with remarkable abandon,” which in turn has contributed to a failure “to appreciate the value of a stable point of focus.”<sup>10</sup> After reminding us of the importance of a model or theory (to describe, explain, and predict), Singer illustrates the ways in which approaching IR by using levels of analysis can provide a critical focal point for analysis. Furthermore, he alerts us to the fact that while the “big picture” might be lost by focusing on one level at the expense of another, what is gained is a picture that is richer in detail.

Singer describes for us the importance of being able to distinguish between levels, thereby aiding us in answering important questions. “So the problem is really not one of deciding which level is most valuable to the discipline as a whole and then demanding that it be adhered to from now unto eternity. Rather, it is one of realizing that there *is* this preliminary conceptual issue and that it must be temporarily resolved prior to any given research undertaking” (emphasis in original).<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is important to identify the appropriate level to be addressed early in the research process. But Singer also warns us of the dangers that can come with shifting between or among levels. “We may utilize one level here and another there, but we cannot afford to shift our orientation in the midst of a study.”<sup>12</sup> When the answers are taken together and a number of levels analyzed, it is possible to get a more complete picture of the event—what happened, how, and why.

### **The “System” in the International System**

In order to start applying these ideas and to be able to focus the theories most effectively, we also need to define what we mean by the concept of the *international system*. Here we can draw on the work of political scientist David Easton, who wrote in the 1960s about the concept of a “political system.”<sup>13</sup> He drew on the ideas of systems theory to view political life as a “system of behavior” that has certain characteristics that can be defined, analyzed, and therefore understood. This approach makes certain assumptions that may or may not be accurate. However, it provides a good starting point for our understanding of IR.

As Easton described it, political life can be seen as a pattern of behavior that exists within an environment that exerts influence on it and that it, in turn, influences. Components within this system are dynamic, and as each moves or acts, it affects the actions and behaviors of the other actors that also exist within the system. Because one of the primary functions of any system is to endure, the system as a whole will constantly be adjusting to changes within the environment. Another assumption is that these patterns of behavior have a certain regularity

that can be identified and can therefore be described and explained. It is the role of theory to help us do these things.

But, we might ask, is there really such a thing as an *international system*? Clearly, there are political relationships that exist within the international community that can be identified, such as the United Nations or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), both of which are made up of nation-states. But do these organizations exhibit regular patterns of behavior? Do they ensure that nation-states will do so? The only way we can answer these questions and continue to build our theories of IR is to make assumptions about the ways in which those entities or actors in the international system behave. We can then learn more by comparing the reality that we study with our assumptions to see how well the theory describes reality.

So, we can *assume* that there is an international system that can be identified, that it is made up of actors that exhibit some regular and identifiable patterns of behavior, that the nation-states that are the bases of IR will act rationally (maximize gains and minimize losses), and that they act as monolithic entities. Without those assumptions, it would be impossible to understand or address the international system/IR, let alone answer the complex questions that emerge in this field of study. And this brings us back to theory.

Theory provides the framework that allows us to begin to address the complexity of the world by providing us with a way to simplify it. But it is also important to remember that theory does not emerge in a vacuum but must be tied to reality in some way, nor can it be so grounded in abstraction as to be virtually useless. Rather, good theory draws on concrete examples to arrive at generalizations that can help us explain real-world events. Ideally, a theory should be able to be tested in order to see whether it can be proved or disproved and whether it holds up under a range of circumstances. It was in the attempt to do these things that the basic theories of IR evolved.

### **Power**

One of the assumptions of IR theories, especially within realist thinking, is that nation-states will be motivated in no small part by a desire to increase their power. Hence, power is one of the most critical concepts in IR. Simply put, *power is the ability of one actor to influence the behavior of another in order to achieve a desired end*. If we were to graph this very simply, it would look like this:

Country A wants Country B to do action X.

Country A can then use its power to “persuade” (or encourage, motivate, or even coerce) Country B to take a particular action. This example assumes that Country A is the more powerful or has power over Country B and that it can persuade Country B to take the desired action. It also assumes that Country A has determined what the desired outcome (X) is and how and why it needs Country B in order to achieve that outcome. But it is also important to remember that power is not necessarily unidirectional (Country A imposing its will on Country B), nor is it symmetrical. Or, looking at it another way, if Country A wants Country B to do X, Country B says that it will, but it wants something in exchange. In that case, there might be a negotiation that results in each country asking something of the other, and in that way, both can get what they want.

Another important point to remember when we introduce the concept of power is that it is a relative term. One country has power over another (Country A over Country B), meaning that it is relational; one has “power over” in relative terms. Although the feminist theorists have problems with this understanding of power, as noted in the following, it represents one of the easiest and most straightforward ways to think about this concept, and so we will continue with this basic approach. Given this relationship and understanding of power, a third country might be more powerful than both, in that it might have a greater number of weapons or resources than either of the two. These are the *capabilities* or materials and resources that a country has relative to others. And it is not only having the resources that makes a country powerful, but the willingness to use them, or its *credibility*. We will come back to these points in more detail in the following.

Countries have a range of policy options available to them that can be placed along a continuum from positive (rewards) to negative (punishment), which can be used in order to get a desired outcome. In all cases, Country A decides which particular course of action to pursue by weighing the relative costs and benefits. Country B can then decide how to respond, based on what Country A is asking but also on what it is offering. Like Country A, Country B will engage in an evaluation of what it wants and needs, what it can get in exchange, and what is in its best interest. Thus, we are looking at a dynamic process.

A government, acting rationally, should choose the policy option that promises to give it the desired outcome at the least possible cost. In most cases, while a country might decide to offer or grant a reward to a country unilaterally, it generally will look to other countries to support it when the option chosen is negative. Threatening or imposing economic sanctions, for example, is a far more credible threat when more than one country agrees to abide by those sanc-

tions. In deciding which option to pursue, the other thing any country must remember is that it must be credible; that is, it must have the resources and the will to follow through on the policy decision made.

Political scientist Joseph Nye identifies power as either *hard power* or *soft power*.<sup>14</sup> According to him, “Hard power rests on inducements (carrots) or threats (sticks),” whereas “soft power rests on the ability to set a political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others.”<sup>15</sup> Generally, hard power is associated with military and/or economic strength, while soft power is tied to values. Nye later built on that starting point and included the concept of *smart power*, which he defines as “the ability to combine hard and soft power resources into effective strategies.” And then he elaborates on this idea by adding, “Unlike soft power, smart power is an evaluative as well as a descriptive concept. Soft power can be good or bad from a normative perspective, depending on how it is used. Smart power has the evaluation built into the definition.”<sup>16</sup> According to Nye, then, smart power is something that is available to all states, large or small, and is a function of the policies a country develops and the ways in which a country chooses to use its resources.

Another author, Walter Russell Mead, divides power into four types: sharp (military), sticky (economic), sweet (culture and ideals), and hegemonic. Sharp, sticky, and sweet together contribute to hegemonic power, as they come together and create a whole that is bigger than the sum of the parts.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, power can be defined in any number of ways. A country is deemed powerful if it can use its power and the capabilities that make up that power (whether real or perceived) to influence the outcome of events. But this also assumes that Country A knows what it wants to achieve, has an understanding of its own power relative to the needs and power of Country B, and can determine how best to use that power in order to achieve what it wants. That assessment governs many of the interactions in international relations.

It is important to note here that not all of the patterns between and among countries are conflictual. It should be clear from figure 2.2 that sometimes the best way for a country to get what it wants is to find ways to cooperate and negotiate with other countries. Offering rewards, such as foreign aid or other inducements (i.e., “carrots”), can sometimes be a more effective policy tool than threatening or imposing economic sanctions (i.e., “sticks”). But it is also important to remember that the particular policy chosen should grow out of an understanding of the situation, the desired goals, and the relative power of each of the countries involved.

### Continuum of Actions

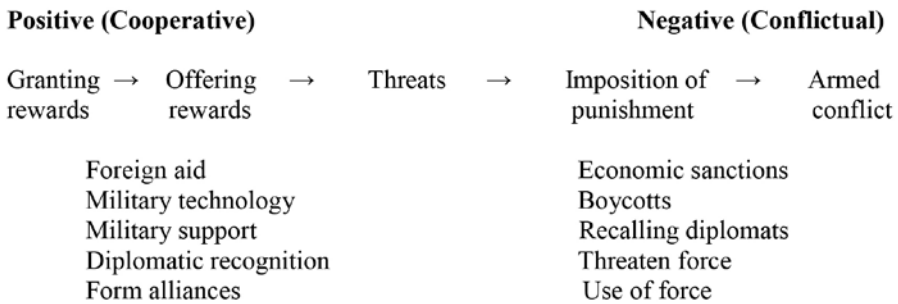


FIGURE 2.2  
Continuum of Actions

In thinking about power and the international system, it is important to think about which countries have power and what gives them their power. As noted previously, power is a relative concept, so when we talk about which countries are powerful, we mean relative to other countries with which a country interacts.

There would be little dispute that the United States is a powerful country because of its economic and military strength. Similarly, China has clearly become a powerful country, not only because of its growing economic role internationally and its military strength, but also because of its size and its population; people are a *capability* that can enhance a country's power. So are a country's size and geography and topography. But if you were asked to make a list of other powerful countries, what would that list look like? What countries are powerful?

How about a country like Sudan—is it powerful? Generally, we would say that because of its lack of resources and relatively low level of economic development, it is not powerful. But it was able to perpetrate genocide in Darfur in defiance of the wishes of most other countries in the international system, including the United States. Does that mean it has power? If so, what is the basis for that power? What about a country like Nigeria? It is politically unstable, but it has oil. Does that make it powerful? Venezuela is a similar case—is it powerful?

In other words, we can argue and make lists of what countries are powerful, as long as we have established criteria for defining *power* and as long as we see power as relative rather than in absolute terms.

When we talk about power, which clearly is one of the central concepts in understanding IR, each of the theoretical perspectives has its own way of view-

ing the concept and even of understanding how critical it is. For example, power is central to realist thinking, as we have noted. Both liberal and constructivist thinking focus less on power and more on other components of nation-state relationships, including cooperation and the structures that can hold them together rather than leading to competition. In contrast, feminist IR theorists inject some warnings into the discussion of power that are worth considering here. Specifically, they question the assumption that “power” equates to “power over” or “the ability to get someone to do what you want.”<sup>18</sup> Feminist theorists are concerned that this approach to power “emphasizes separation and competition: Those who have power use it (or its threat) to keep others from securing enough to threaten them.”<sup>19</sup> In effect, they argue that defining power in this way obscures critical aspects of relationships and does not take values into account. In contrast, they suggest that we need to think about a different definition of power that is less coercive and more about interdependence and relationships, less about zero-sum approaches and more about achieving a desired outcome through cooperation rather than conflict. In other words, it requires rethinking our definitions of basic concepts such as *security* and *power*. However, as Tickner and other feminist scholars note, “Imagining security divested of its statist connotations is problematic; the institutions of state power are not withering away.”<sup>20</sup>

When we think of many of the basic concepts in IR, such as power, they tend to fall into the *public realm* (i.e., they are considered part of the state, the government, and decision making), which tends to exclude women who generally exist primarily in the *private realm* (i.e., the home and the family). However, feminist theorists remind us, first of all, that more women are moving from the private realm to the public, thereby making women more visible. We can see this with women such as Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice, both of whom were U.S. secretaries of state, and one, Hillary Clinton, was the first woman to run for president from a major U.S. party. The United States now has its first female vice president, Kamala Harris. But sometimes for women it might mean working at a grassroots or community level, where women can often have a direct impact, rather than at the national or international level where it is not only harder to break in, but to be heard. In general, though, this suggests that women are finding ways to have their voices heard and to play more of a role in political decision making. This was not something that was considered when the field of IR came into its own, and it was certainly not part of the thinking of the realist theorists.

There are many other concepts and definitions that will come into play as we continue our study of IR, and we will review them as needed. But with the main concepts outlined, we will now turn to an introduction of the basic theories.

## INTRODUCTION TO BASIC INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORIES

As noted previously, the major role of theory is to provide a framework that will allow us to simplify a complex reality so that we can describe the events that took place in the past, try to explain them in causal terms (“this happened because that happened”), and, in doing so, try to predict or at least anticipate what might happen in the future. Each of the major theoretical approaches attempts to do this. Remember that no one theory can explain all events or sets of circumstances. Thus, which theory is the most appropriate to use is partly a function of the question(s) asked, understanding the context for the particular event, and the assumptions we choose to use. Some IR scholars believe that one theory is inherently better at answering questions than another. But others take the viewpoint that the question(s) we ask should determine the theoretical approach we use to find the answer. The main point is that theory should provide a framework or a guide to help us understand the world.

### Realism and Neo-/Structural Realism

As noted earlier, the major role of theory is to serve as a framework or a guide. In the words of one political scientist, “The realist tradition is certainly regarded by an overwhelming majority of scholars to be the definitive tradition in the field of international relations.”<sup>21</sup> Because of the importance of realist theory in defining IR, we will begin with that, and we will give a lot of attention to it. As you will see, many of the other modern theories grew up, at least in part, as reactions to realist theory. This means that realist theory should be our starting point.

The realist school puts the concept of *power* at the center of all the behaviors of the nation-state; the assumption is that nations act as they do in order to maximize their power so that they can better achieve their own goals. As described by Hans Morgenthau, the father of realist theory, “the main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of *interest defined in terms of power*” (emphasis added).<sup>22</sup>

Although it is most associated with the work of Hans Morgenthau, realist thought can be found throughout history. Early versions of this description of the competition for power can be attributed to Thucydides, whose *History of the Peloponnesian War* is seen as one of the first examples of realist thinking. The



“Melian Dialogue” between the Athenians (the stronger group) and the Melians (the weaker) describes a situation that took place during the Peloponnesian War as the great city-states of the time were vying for power. There are important lessons to be learned from this history, written almost twenty-five hundred years ago. In fact, in a recent book, Graham Allison updates this idea by focusing on the United States and China in the twenty-first century and a number of other cases in order to draw lessons for current international politics.<sup>23</sup>

The Melian Dialogue describes not only issues of power but also the role of alliances as a strategy that states can use to maximize their power or to provide additional security. In this case, the Melians hope to enlist the aid of the Lacedaemonians, rivals of the Athenians, to increase their power. When the Lacedaemonians demurred, the Melians were left on their own and were defeated by the Athenians. These are concepts that are central to the current understanding and application of realist thinking, and the same basic ideas can be and have been applied in modern times. Thomas Hobbes, who wrote in the seventeenth century, also talked about the “state of nature,” which is an anarchic world in which everyone pursues his or her own self-interest. Hobbes was heavily influenced by his time—he wrote his famous work *Leviathan* (published in 1651) while he was in exile—and he is best known for his discussion of the state of nature.<sup>24</sup> Like the realist thinkers, Hobbes begins with his understanding of basic human nature, which he believed required a strong government to keep people in check. For Hobbes, without that government, people would constantly be vying for power.

For modern realist political thinkers:

Hobbes’s description of the state of nature has been viewed as analogous to the international system. Just as in the state of nature in which individuals stand alone, so too in the international system are states driven to maintain their independence. As in the state of nature, the international system is marked by constant tension and the possibility of conflict.<sup>25</sup>

There is historical precedent for the realist approach to understanding IR and the idea of countries seeking to maximize their power using whatever means are necessary. In many ways, that understanding fits with the overall approach to the international system at a time when countries were vying for colonies, wealth, military superiority, and therefore power. When countries did enter into alliances, they were transitory and often seemed to create more problems for the countries than they gained in security, which has become the

**BOX 2.1**

## THE MELIAN DIALOGUE

Written in approximately 400 BCE, the Melian Dialogue is an example of the belief that, in the real world, basic ideals such as justice or freedom will fall to the demands of the powerful. In the dialogue, for example, the Athenians do not worry about whether they are acting in a way that is just or right. Rather, the Athenians argue that “you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, *while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must*” (emphasis added). In response, the Melians contend that “we speak as we are obliged, since you enjoin us to let right alone and talk only of interest—that *you should not destroy what is our common protection, the privilege of being allowed in danger to invoke what is fair and right*” (emphasis added).

And foreshadowing the idea of balance of power, in which one country aligns with another in order to balance the power of a superior one, the Melians also state:

You may be sure that we are as well aware as you of the difficulty of contending against your power and fortune, unless the terms be equal. But we trust that the gods may grant us fortune as good as yours, since we are just men fighting against unjust, and that what we want in power will be made up by the alliance of the Lacedaemonians, who are bound, if only for very shame, to come to the aid of their kindred. Our confidence, therefore, after all is not so utterly irrational.

In this case, the Lacedaemonians were a rival of the Athenians whom the Melians hoped to enlist as allies in their fight against the Athenians. However, the Lacedaemonians were engaged in their own battles and did not support the Melians, as the Athenians correctly anticipated (“and as you have staked most on, and trusted most in, the Lacedaemonians, your fortune, and your hopes, so will you be most completely deceived”). Ultimately, the outcome of the conflict was that the Melians were defeated by the Athenians.

*Source:* Thucydides, “The Melian Conference,” in *History of the Peloponnesian War*, chapter 17, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/melian.htm>.

more modern interpretation of an alliance. Thus, there were few opposing perspectives or understandings of the ways that states (city-states or nation-states) behaved beyond what we now know or think of as the realist tradition.

It was really after World War II, especially with the writings of Hans Morgenthau, that we saw the development of realist theory as we know it today. Realism presumes that the nation-state is the primary actor in the international system, that it will act rationally and as a unitary (monolithic) actor, that states are sovereign entities with sole responsibility to act within their borders, and that they will act to maximize their power. (We will explore the concept of the nation-state, its evolution, and the concepts such as sovereignty that are part of it in more detail in the next chapter.) To Morgenthau, states act in a way that assures their survival or their core interests, which in turn stems from maximizing their power; it is the phrase “interest defined as power” that embodies realist thought.

## BOX 2.2

### LEVIATHAN, BY THOMAS HOBBS

Nature has made men so equal, in the faculties of body and mind as that, though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body; or of quicker mind than another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit which another may not pretend, as well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger as himself. . . .

Hereby it is manifest that, during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war and such a war, as is of every man, against every man. . . .

To this war of every man against every man, this is also consequent: that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law.

*Source:* Thomas Hobbes, “Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning Their Felicity and Misery,” in *The Leviathan*, part I, “Of Man,” chapter 13 (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 104–09.

As Morgenthau assumes that the statesman and the state he<sup>26</sup> represents are virtually identical, it is logical that he would conclude that “statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power, and the evidence of history bears that assumption out.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, while understanding motives would be helpful, he does not believe that is necessary in order to understand events. In fact, Morgenthau says that what is important to know “is not primarily the motives of the statesman, but his intellectual ability to comprehend the essentials of foreign policy, as well as his political ability to translate what he has comprehended into successful political action.”<sup>28</sup> And, according to realist thinking, that necessarily ties to power.

For Morgenthau and other realist thinkers, the principles of this approach are grounded in the belief that all relationships are ultimately rooted in power. To the realists, then, the ongoing struggle for power, whether between individuals or nations, means that conflict is inevitable. It is in this basic approach to and understanding of human nature that other theorists—liberals and constructivists, especially—deviate from the realists. But realism also advocates that alternative political actions must be weighed, with their consequences assessed, evaluated, and placed within the specific political and cultural environment. This means that the concept and conditions for the uses of power can and will change and that the change must be recognized by those who make decisions.

Morgenthau and realist theory gave rise to a number of other important political thinkers, such as Kenneth Waltz (who in turn was one of the earlier theorists of neorealist or structural realist refinement, described subsequently) and John Mearsheimer.<sup>29</sup> Realist theory influenced the approach of important policy makers such as George Kennan, who was the architect of the U.S. Cold War foreign policy of containment, and Henry Kissinger, who was first national security advisor and then secretary of state under President Nixon and helped frame the diplomatic opening between the United States and the People’s Republic of China. Many would argue that until the end of the Cold War, virtually all of U.S. foreign policy was based on realist thinking—specifically, the constant assessment of U.S. power vis-à-vis Soviet power—and finding ways to ensure that power was balanced, at the very least.

### *Neorealism/Structural Realism*

Realist thinking gave birth to other theoretical approaches in IR, notably *neorealism* (also called *structural realism*), as well as a number of theoretical perspectives that grew up in reaction to it. The latter group will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.

**BOX 2.3****MORGENTHAU'S SIX FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF POLITICAL REALISM**

1. "Political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature."
2. "*The concept of interest defined as power.* This concept provides the link between reason trying to understand international politics and the facts to be understood" (emphasis added).
3. "Realism assumes that its key concept of interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid, but it does not endow that concept with a meaning that is fixed once and for all."
4. "Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action."
5. "Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe."
6. "The difference, then, between political realism and other schools of thought is real, and it is profound."

*Source:* Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, brief edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 4–16.

Neorealist thinking was led by Kenneth Waltz, who attempted to take realist theory one step further by asserting that there are general "laws" that can be identified to explain events in the international system. Waltz and other neorealists put the greatest emphasis on the international system rather than the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis. Neorealism also assumes that power within the international system will shift and that states will seek to balance that distribution of power. Hence, the structure of the international system and the distribution of power within it become determining factors in the ways in which states behave. Many of the principles of alliance theory grow from the approach taken by the structural realists.

Waltz introduces the idea of neorealism or structural realism by critiquing realist theory. He writes, "The new realism, in contrast to the old, begins by proposing a solution to the problem of distinguishing factors internal to international political systems from those that are external. Theory isolates one realm

from others in order to deal with it intellectually.”<sup>30</sup> He continues to introduce his approach to solving this problem with the modification of realism that he has just identified:

Neorealism develops the concept of a system’s *structure* which at once bounds the domain that students of international politics deal with and enables them to see how the structure of the system, and variations in it, affect the interacting units and the outcomes they produce. International structure emerges from the interaction of states and then constrains them from taking certain actions while propelling them toward others. (emphasis added)<sup>31</sup>

Thus, the essence of neorealism lies in concentrating on the overall structure of the international system, as well as understanding its various parts, in order to arrive at what Waltz claims will be a more cohesive theory of IR.

Like realist theory, the neorealists also look at balance of power, but they place this idea of balance within the structure of the international system as a whole rather than focusing just on the nation-state. The assumption of balance also contributes to the role that alliances play, as they affect the structure of the international system. One of the major assumptions of the neorealists is that peace is most assured as long as power is roughly balanced within the international system—a situation of *bipolarity*, that is, balance between two major powers.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the Cold War, despite its tensions, was also a period of stability because of the perception of a balance of power that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union.

In their way of thinking, least stable is a multipolar system, with a number of power centers and the dangers of countries shifting alliances. To many neorealists, the post–Cold War period is more dangerous and unstable than the Cold War was, with the ongoing power of the United States, but also the European Union, Russia, and more recently the rise of China, as well as any number of other countries also seeking to gain more power and international prestige. It is the jockeying for power and position that makes a multipolar system inherently unstable.

A unipolar system with one major power (*hegemon*) potentially can be stable if the dominant country is strong enough to enforce rules and keep the lesser powers in check. However, realist political scientist John Mearsheimer warns that “great powers” are always vying with one another as each strives to become the hegemon or dominant power. In the current international system, Mearsheimer warns, the dangers come not from global hegemons but from competition among regional hegemons, which could in turn lead to conflict or

war.<sup>33</sup> We can see that with the rise of China in Asia and its aggressive behavior in the South and East China Seas. According to this theory, China's actions are a result of its asserting itself as a power within its region. That assertion of power will lead to conflict, although not necessarily to actual warfare, as we can see with the increase in tensions between China and the United States vis-à-vis the South China Sea.<sup>34</sup> The relationship between China and the United States and what that means for the international system is explored more deeply in Case 4 in chapter 6.

Clearly, realists and neorealists see power as the core concept of their theoretical approach to understanding IR. Where they diverge is in identifying the principal actors and the underlying assumptions governing their behavior.

#### *Limitations and Critique of Realism and Neorealism*

In looking at realism and its offshoots, we can argue that both realism and neorealism offer insights into understanding some aspects of IR. Both approaches clearly put forward their assumptions and the central role that power plays. Both make it clear that they are not really looking within the nation-state but rather only at the *decisions* made by or the policies of the nation-state and trying to deconstruct the reasons behind those decisions. And both assume prescriptions for foreign policy decisions. One of the other advantages of the realist and neorealist approaches is that they are relatively straightforward and easy to understand.

That said, both approaches have weaknesses or limitations as well. Both of them are premised on the importance of power, but power is a relative concept, not an absolute. In many ways, it is intangible and tied to perceptions as much as it might be tied to any actual measure. Whether pure realism or neorealism, the concept of national interest is assumed to be of great importance, although this too is an intangible that cannot be clearly identified or measured. As a result, as students of IR we are left to wonder how we know that a state really acted in its own self-interest. For example, was the U.S. decision to go to war with Vietnam in its own interest? What about the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003?

Furthermore, there are questions about how applicable realist or neorealist thinking is in a globalized, post-Cold War world in which countries are increasingly interdependent economically. As we saw in chapter 1, a globalized world suggests the need for countries to work together, which speaks to the liberal approach, rather than seeing nation-states compete with one another, as would be suggested by the realist approaches to IR. Also associated with the application of Realpolitik,<sup>35</sup> many see realist politics as having a negative connotation, as it

suggests that states will do anything in order to gain power. However, rather than thinking of it in that way, as either negative or positive, it is more important to think of realist perspectives as offering one explanation as to why states act as they do.

Finally, feminist IR theorists, such as Tickner, would argue that neither the realist nor the neorealist approach takes gender into account, claiming that “virtually no attention has been given to gender as a category of analysis,” nor has any attention been paid to “how women are affected by global politics or the workings of the world economy.”<sup>36</sup> If realism is tied to certain assumptions of human nature and behavior, are they truly generalizable to all men, let alone women? This is not to suggest that women or women’s experiences need to be injected into all aspects of IR theory. But it does mean that we need to be aware of the ways in which these theories are framed if we are to understand their weaknesses.

These critiques or limitations do not mean that realism and/or neorealism cannot be applied to help us understand some aspects of international events. And in fact, they can and do help us explain some of the actions that states take. The warnings mean that we must be aware of the assumptions, and we must apply these theoretical approaches carefully.

### **Liberalism as a Theoretical Model**

We just looked at realism and neorealist theory, both of which posit a world and an international system in which power is one of the primary driving forces, if not the single force, that determines how states behave and why they act as they do. We are now going to turn to other theoretical models that enhance our understanding of the international system by approaching it, and the actors within it, differently. We will begin with the liberal model, also known as the pluralist approach. The liberal theoretical model should not be confused with the popular labels *liberal* and *conservative* pertaining to political ideology. Rather, in this case, the concept of liberal thinking grows out of early nineteenth- and twentieth-century approaches to understanding international economics as well as politics. Thus, this theoretical approach blends economics and politics, which is one of the reasons it seems to fit well with our current globalized international system.

Within the field of IR, liberalism really emerged as an important theoretical construct in the 1970s as a critique of realism with its focus on power and conflict. “Liberal scholars pointed to the growth of transnational forces, economic interdependence, regional integration, and cooperation in areas where war



appeared unlikely—trends and issues not amenable to realist analysis.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, liberal thinking grew up to fill the theoretical void emerging in an increasingly globalized and interdependent world. This approach relies heavily on the confluence of economics and politics in its belief that everyone and all states will benefit from the flourishing of free markets, trade, and the open exchange of ideas. In many ways, liberalism is tied heavily to a belief in the importance of both capitalism and democracy and to the notion that free trade will create interdependence among states that will result in greater benefit for all.

Liberalism starts with different assumptions about the world than does realism, and it believes in pursuing policies that can be termed to be in the common good rather than what is good for the individual state. In fact, early hints of this idea of idealism can be found in the description of the Peloponnesian War, referenced previously under “Realism and Neo-/Structural Realism.” However, in this case, it was the Melians who called upon the Athenians to practice “what is fair and right,” and, in the spirit of cooperation, they asked the Athenians “to allow us [the Melians] to be friends to you and foes to neither party, and to retire from our country after making such a treaty as shall seem fit to us both.”<sup>38</sup> Liberalism is also tied directly to twentieth-century ideas of idealism embodied by Woodrow Wilson and to the belief that wars can be avoided if countries work together cooperatively. Because of its broad worldview and its acceptance of interdependence, there are many in IR who think that the liberal model is more appropriate than realist theory in describing and explaining IR in a globalized, post-Cold War world.

Like realism, liberalism has many offshoots. In fact, political scientist Michael Doyle, one of the preeminent liberal theorists, describes it this way:

There is no canonical description of liberalism. What we tend to call *liberal* resembles a family portrait of principles and institutions, recognizable by certain characteristics—for example, individual freedom, political participation, private property, and equality of opportunity—that most liberal states share, although none has perfected them all. (emphasis in original)<sup>39</sup>

Like realism, liberalism builds on the work of earlier philosophers and theorists, including economist Adam Smith, and sees mutually beneficial exchanges, especially economic exchange, as central. But unlike realism, liberalism looks both within the nation-state to understand the impact of domestic politics and also at the system as a whole, in order to understand the growth and role of international

organizations, for example. Taken together, they provide a more complete picture or understanding of a state's actions. Thus, liberalism covers more levels of analysis than realism does, while also making its own assumptions about the ways in which states behave and why.

Further, unlike realism, which starts with power as its major concept and assumes that states are motivated by a desire to increase their power, liberalism starts with the premise that the *individual* is the critical actor and that human beings are basically moral and good. Hence, liberalism injects a normative perspective into its basic starting assumptions. Because of this assumption, it follows that evils, such as injustice and war, are the products of corrupt institutions and/or misunderstandings or misperceptions among leaders. Thus, there is no assumption of the inevitability of international events, such as war. Rather, the assumption is that war and conflict can be eliminated or mitigated through cooperation, reform, or collective action initiated by individual leaders. In these assumptions, liberalism also draws on the work of eighteenth-century political philosopher Immanuel Kant, who argued that "a world of good, morally responsible states would be less likely to engage in wars."<sup>40</sup> This also assumes that international cooperation and engagement are possible and that if all states adhere to basic global norms, war can be avoided and peace will result.

This approach to studying IR also assumes that there will be multiple actors who interact in some way other than competing with one another. While liberal theory recognizes the importance of states, clearly it also sees other actors as important; those within the nation-state (i.e., the individual decision makers, people within the political system), the broader international system, and the various multinational organizations all play a role. Liberal theorists look at a world that they believe is truly global in order to account for actors that go beyond any single set of borders.

At the level of the individual, liberalism assumes that individuals are rational beings who understand and accept basic laws that govern human beings and society, and that in understanding these things, individuals can work to make them better. Thus, war is a product of people not understanding these basic laws or interactions, or not working to do anything to improve these conditions. Furthermore, this approach also assumes that individuals can satisfy their needs in rational ways, often by working together in cooperation so that all benefit. It is out of this approach that the idea of collective security and international organizations had its origins.

Also implicit in this theoretical approach, because of its focus on the individual and the inherent worth and goodness of individuals, is the assumption that democracy will be the best and most effective form of political system because it allows for individual freedom and choice. As noted earlier, economics is tied heavily to liberal political thinking, and the assumption is that capitalism, especially democratic capitalism, will help lead to peace. The political side of this approach is embodied in what has become known as Wilsonian idealism, the principles put forward by Woodrow Wilson that have become one clear stream of U.S. foreign policy. The desire to encourage countries to pursue democratic forms of government that was advocated by President George W. Bush is an example of this type of approach put into practice, but using U.S. military might to accomplish his goals. However, in that case what Bush advocated was something that he called “practical idealism,” or the belief that “America’s national security is tied directly to the spread of free and open societies everywhere.”<sup>41</sup>

Many of these same ideals can be found embedded in the charter of the creation of the United Nations, and they pervade major security alliances, such as NATO. For example, the preamble to the treaty creating NATO states:

The parties to this Treaty affirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and governments. They are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. . . . They are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defense and for the preservation of peace and security.<sup>42</sup>

Hence, liberalism stands in contrast to realism in its understanding of human nature and human good and how that gets translated into actions. The underlying assumption is that when nations work together, the result will be a more peaceful and cooperative world. This approach gained increased credibility after the Cold War ended for a couple of reasons. Partly it is due to the spread of democracy and capitalism in the countries that had formerly been under the wing of the Soviet Union. Liberal thinkers saw the democratic and capitalist movements that swept the countries of Eastern Europe starting in 1989 as vindication that the socialist/communist/Marxist approaches could not be sustained. Rather, when given the chance, the will of the people was to promote a democratic system of government coupled with a capitalist economy. These furthered the integration of the former Soviet states into the international political and

economic systems to the benefit of the states and the people within them. Tied to this, then, is the thesis that the integration of these states contributes to globalization, which in turn assumes interdependence that will contribute to peace. This suggests that all will benefit if states work together for the common good. The Cold War world, with its boundaries between East and West, communist and capitalist, precluded such an interaction.

### *Neoliberalism*

Like realism, liberalism has also given rise to other perspectives, including *neoliberalism*, which is a refinement of the liberal approach. Neoliberalism recognizes the role of actors other than nation-states and places greater emphasis on the role that nonstate actors play in understanding IR. Like realists, neoliberal thinkers start with the assumption of the state as a unitary actor that will act in its own best interest. However, here the two approaches diverge. Rather than assuming that the inevitable result will be conflict, as the realists do, the neoliberals conclude that cooperation will be in the state's interest. Thus, even in an international system without a single central authority, states will work together cooperatively because it is in their best interest to do so. Using that logic, security can best be achieved through the emergence of agreements, enhanced trade, and other cooperative ventures that will benefit all states involved.

In another variation of liberal/neoliberal thought, *neoliberal institutionalists* also factor in the role that international and intergovernmental organizations play in world politics. They too look at security as an important variable, but they arrive at a different conclusion as to how best to ensure it. In this case, neoliberal institutionalists believe that security and cooperation can best be achieved through the creation of international *institutions*. In this variant, it is the international institutions that are created by individual leaders to represent states that ensure that there will be interaction on a range of issues—political, economic, security, environmental, and so on. The assumption here is that these institutions, which states enter into voluntarily, provide the framework for cooperative and peaceful interaction even in an anarchic international system.

### *Limitations and Critique of Liberalism*

Like realism, liberalism and its variations also have their limitations. As noted previously, liberalism and to a lesser extent neoliberalism assume the best of human nature, and they assume that this “good” behavior will ensure cooperative and beneficial relations among nations. This presumes that an individual can,

## WILSONIAN IDEALISM

President Wilson believed in the important role that values played (or should play) in determining the ways in which states act. In his speech in his declaration of the U.S. entrance into World War I, he said:

The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedoms of nations can make them.<sup>1</sup>

This ideal was further embodied in the Fourteen Points, when Wilson addressed the Congress in January 1918 (during World War I) and said:

We entered this war because violations of right had occurred which touched us to the quick and made the life of our own people impossible unless they were corrected and the world secure once for all against their recurrence. What we demand in this war, therefore, is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us. The program of the world's peace, therefore, is our program; and that program, the only possible program, as we see it, is this. . . .

I. Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view. . . .

XIV. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.<sup>2</sup>

### NOTES

1. U.S. Declaration of War with Germany, April 2, 1917, at [https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson%27s\\_War\\_Message\\_to\\_Congress](https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson%27s_War_Message_to_Congress).

2. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, January 8, 1918, at [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/wilson14.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp).

in effect, steer a nation. While it is true that in some cases the individual can have an impact, in most nation-states today, governing or policy making is the product of a group of people who comprise the government. In parliamentary systems, there is also the opposition. So, while there might be some general agreement as to ideology or the direction of the nation, it is determined by more than any single individual.

Moving beyond the role of the individual, the liberal perspective also assumes that nation-states will benefit from cooperation, which in turn will affect the ways in which they behave. Thus, countries will join together to create organizations such as the United Nations as a way to promote cooperation and stability in the international system. Yet a counterargument to that is the point that international organizations really exert only minimal impact on the behavior of nation-states. Or, put another way, nation-states will only remain in these organizations and conform to their policies if it is in their national interest to do so, which takes us back to the realist idea. Thus, there are questions about how effective international institutions, which are the backbone of this approach, really are unless states give them the power to act. An international organization like the United Nations will only be as effective as countries allow it to be. And then one has to question whether—or how much—power states will surrender to these institutions. Thus, to critics (especially those in the realist school), it is virtually impossible to move beyond the basics of states and power.

The reality is that international organizations cannot force sovereign nation-states to behave in any particular way<sup>43</sup>; rather, nation-states behave in a certain way because they perceive it as beneficial for them to do so—that is, in their national interest. Thus, questions remain about whether countries really will work together unless they perceive that it is in their own interest to do so. Or, put another way, will they really do something simply because they perceive that it is “good”? Liberal thinkers imbue states and individual leaders with making those moral judgments. But does that assumption really reflect reality?

Furthermore, some critics of liberalism say that it focuses on the areas of “low politics,” such as human rights or the environment, rather than “high politics,” primarily security. In a globalized world, countries have become more aware of the fact that decisions made within one country affect others, which reinforces the liberal perspective. In cases such as the environment that do not respect national borders, liberal theorists would say that *all* countries benefit from cleaning up their environments; it is in their common interest to do so and to cooperate. But the theory does not account for “free riders”—countries that do

not take action but benefit from the action of others. Furthermore, ultimately a country's survival hinges on ensuring its security, which is a core interest and in the category of "high politics." Unless a country is assured of its own survival, the other values become secondary.

### **Constructivism**

*Constructivism*, also known as *social constructivism*, is one of the newer theoretical approaches, really coming into prominence in the 1990s. According to two political scientists who wrote about this theoretical approach as it fits within introductory IR classes, it:

is now the main theoretical challenger to established perspectives [i.e., realism and liberalism] within the discipline of international relations. This approach . . . rose to prominence as an alternative to the dominant paradigms by challenging their positions on the nature of the international system, the nature of actors within it, and indeed, the nature of social/political interaction in general.<sup>44</sup>

This, in turn, requires a solid grasp of the other "dominant paradigms" in order to really be able to understand the social constructivist approach and how it differs from the others.

Social constructivism focuses on international issues and questions as they exist within a larger social and political context and the ways in which those relationships help a state frame its policies. It also stresses the importance of ideas and the ways in which states socially construct reality and then act upon their constructions of reality. Alexander Wendt, one of the first political scientists to define and advocate for this approach, describes it as follows: "Social theories which seek to explain identities and interests do exist. . . . *I want to emphasize their focus on the social construction of subjectivity.* . . . I will call them 'constructivist'" (emphasis added). He then notes how many of the theoretical approaches "share a concern with the basic 'sociological' issue bracketed by rationalists—namely, the issue of identity-and interest-formation."<sup>45</sup>

For constructivists, where institutions are relatively stable and set, relationships between states are more fluid. States, like people, may have multiple identities. They will respond to the actions of other actors depending, in part, on how the state views itself, as well as the ways in which it views the other actor, whether that is a state, a nonstate actor, an individual, etc. Clearly, this is dynamic and will change over time depending on the interactions between those states and the

ways in which they perceive themselves and the other country. So these perceptions will constantly be redefined as circumstances change. It is this dynamic and the ways in which states alter their actions in response to differences in context that makes constructivism relatively unique.

For example, one can ask why the possibility of Iran's acquiring nuclear weapons is a threat to the United States. China has nuclear weapons already and, realistically, with its size and military might, should pose more of a threat than Iran. Yet, despite periods of tension between the United States and China, it is Iran that is seen as relatively more threatening and potentially destabilizing. Why?

To look for an answer to that question, constructivist theorists would look first at the relationship between the United States and China, which is built

### BOX 2.5

#### ALEXANDER WENDT ON SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

Wendt elaborates on some of these ideas when he writes:

Constructivism is a structural theory of the international system that makes the following core claims: 1) states are the principal units of analysis for international political theory; 2) the key structures in the state system are intersubjective, rather than material; and 3) state identities and interests are an important part *constructed by their social structures*, rather than given exogenously to the system by human nature or domestic politics. (emphasis added)<sup>1</sup>

Thus, states form ideas about and understandings of the world around them based on the structures with which they interact, and they then act on the perceptions that they form. Wendt also writes, "A fundamental principle of constructivist social theory is that people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them."<sup>2</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (June 1994): 385.
2. Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 396–97.



on economic interdependence and areas of mutual cooperation (e.g., the two countries worked together to try to counter the possible threat from a nuclear North Korea), despite periods of tension. That stands in contrast to the difficult relationship that the United States and Iran have had since the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the taking of hostages at the U.S. embassy in Tehran. In looking at these two cases, constructivists would argue that it is important to understand the full extent of the relationship, their identities, and their interactions and to use that as the context for understanding the nature of the threat. In addition, constructivists would argue that China's behavior will be relatively constrained by international norms. China wants to be regarded as an important player internationally and therefore will adhere to basic international guidelines and structures. In contrast, Iran is seen as less rational and less willing to accept those same norms, thereby making it potentially more dangerous and threatening. Thus, where realists would respond to this question by focusing on the destabilizing effects of Iran's nuclear weapons, constructivists would respond differently. Ultimately, their focus would be on the perceptions that the United States has of Iran and of the idea that Iran is acting in a way that is outside the accepted or appropriate mean of behavior in the international system. In other words, Iran's behavior flies in the face of established and/or accepted structural norms.

Like realists, constructivists see states as the principal units/actors in the international system, but what becomes most important about them is their interaction with other actors and structures that also exist within the international system, that is, the context. Thus, constructivists see the actors in the international system as existing within their environment, which influences them and changes them. The behavior of states, therefore, is shaped by a number of factors that are *socially constructed*, such as the attitudes and beliefs of the decision makers, social norms, and identities. Furthermore, it is characterized by the belief that these various actors not only respond to this constructed system but change it through their actions. Therefore, constructivism looks at a system that is inherently dynamic.

Although its focus is on the state, like the liberal perspective, constructivist theory crosses levels of analysis to look *within* the state, but it also suggests that what happens at one level, such as the individual or societal level, directly shapes the actions of the state. So as the interests or values of the components of the state change, ultimately the behavior of the state will change as well. Therefore, a new leader coming to power with a different worldview can alter significantly the behavior of a state. And like realism, constructivism acknowledges the importance

of power as a concept, but it defines the term more broadly than just military or economic power. Rather, this approach sees power as tied to broad concepts and ideas that feed into the notion of “soft power” discussed earlier. Hence, negotiation and persuasion, rather than threats or acts of political violence, become important tools of foreign policy.

### *Limitations and Critique of Constructivism*

Among the criticisms leveled at this approach is that it really is not a theoretical model, but it exists more as a set of concepts tied to individual ideas and understandings that can change. In fact, one of the basic premises of constructivism is the need to address structural change. Because the very basis of the approach is tied to dynamics, questions arise about how to account for these changes. Is it possible to generalize beyond any single case in order to build a model of behavior? And if change and dynamics are an inherent part of this approach, how can we use it to predict what might happen in the future? While constructivists value the social structures that make up nation-states and the international system, the approach raises questions about what changes these structures and what those changes ultimately mean for the international system.

If one of the goals of theory is to describe, explain, and predict, another critique that can be leveled at the constructivists is that if identities and perceptions can change over time, how can we predict what might happen? Constructivists might recognize the fact that identities and interests are always evolving through the process of interacting with others. But that makes this approach less useful to determining what might happen because of the number of variables. It also makes certain assumptions about the state, including the central role of the state’s identities (plural, as there are many). Yet, while acknowledging that these are always in flux, the approach does little to help us understand where these come from or even how they evolve.

Where this approach has made an important contribution to the field, however, is in reinforcing the uncertainties and complexities of understanding IR, acknowledging the fact that there are dynamics that can and do change, and providing certain guidelines and assumptions that help us in dealing with these many factors.

### **Other Theoretical Approaches: Marxism**

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was a German philosopher and social theorist who saw the world in economic terms that have political implications. His emphasis was on the “dialectic,” the often conflicting or contradictory patterns that

emerged within societies. Much of his work was premised on the idea of unequal relationships that exist across economic classes, which would eventually lead to conflict both within and, ultimately, across states. Marx believed that the more powerful classes would oppress the less powerful, leading eventually to some form of class warfare as the less powerful rise up against the established order and try to gain power for themselves. At an international level, Marxism sees relations between countries as similarly characterized by class struggle, with the richer oppressing the poorer and the poorer struggling to gain power. This approach also suggests that domestic and economic factors shape the country's external relations, thereby blending both domestic and international attributes in a way that contrasts with most traditional IR theories. Hence, Marxist thought injects economics into our understanding of world affairs, specifically in its suggestion of capitalism as a dominant economic phenomenon and in its certainty that those who are oppressed by capitalism will rise up against it.

The underlying premise has to do with the control and distribution of wealth. While Marx developed his theory specifically to address what he saw going on within countries, it was then adopted as a framework for understanding relationships across countries. It can be seen in the development of socialism and communism, as political and economic systems within countries, and then more broadly to explain the conflict between capitalist and communist systems across countries.

Marxist approaches have to do with the unequal distribution of wealth and power. From the perspective of IR, this approach gave rise to dependency theory (introduced in chapter 1) and the idea that the wealthy countries benefited at the expense of the poorer and less powerful countries that they colonized and exploited. Those less developed countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia then became dependent upon the very countries that had colonized and exploited them. Or seen another way, the developed countries of the Northern Hemisphere gained their wealth at the expense of the less developed and exploited countries of the Southern Hemisphere, also known as the North-South divide. This thinking helps explain the revolutions of the South as the workers (those without the wealth and power) rose up against the existing order in order to break loose from the system and to establish themselves as the ones with the power. This can be seen to have happened in some cases, such as China under the leadership of Mao Zedong, who in effect led a peasant rebellion to overthrow the existing—and corrupt—order. However, in reality, it was not until China started to become a more market-oriented economy that it really started to develop economically.

EXCERPTS FROM THE *MANIFESTO OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY*, BY KARL MARX AND FRIEDRICH ENGELS

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. . . .

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other—Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. . . .

The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat.

. . . We have seen above, that the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy.

The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e., of the proletariat organised as the ruling class; and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible. . . .

In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things.

In all these movements, they bring to the front, as the leading question in each, the property question, no matter what its degree of development at the time.

Finally, they labour everywhere for the union and agreement of the democratic parties of all countries.

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

Working Men of All Countries, Unite!

Source: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm>.

Looking at it another way, the rhetoric of the inevitability of conflict between the capitalist economies, such as the United States, and the socialist or communist systems led to the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. Rather than a class struggle, this became a political and military as well as an economic conflict that lasted for almost fifty years and defined many aspects of modern international politics.

In addition to dependency theory, Marxism also contributed to the growth of a number of other theoretical approaches that tried to explain IR through the lenses of economics (especially capitalism) and the distribution of power relationships. All of these can fall broadly into what is generally called the “radical critique” or “radical perspective.” Another offshoot of this approach is world systems theory, in which the world is seen as divided not just into rich and poor, developed and less developed, but into a core of strong and well-integrated states; a periphery, or states that depend largely on an unskilled, low-wage labor pool; and a semi-periphery of states that embody elements of both. This approach also assumes that the core group of nations exploits those at the periphery. But it also stresses the rise and fall of those at the core, as technological innovations and capital flows change the dynamics among the group.

From the perspective of IR, though, Marxism and the radical critiques it inspired continue to serve as an alternative to mainstream theories.

#### *Limitations and Critique of Marxist Theory and Its Offshoots*

In theory, as noted in chapter 1, globalization should have started to equalize the economic and then power divisions that exist among countries, as interdependence should have led to fairer exchanges among them. In reality, this has not been the case, thereby calling into question some of the premises of this group of theories. As long as countries remained agricultural and tied to the land and as long as the international economic system remained under the control of the developed (wealthy) countries, inequalities continued, and there were “have” and “have not” countries.

Feminist theorists also raise the critique that the economic interpretations and assumptions of the Marxist and other “radical” theorists do not take gender into account as an explanatory factor.<sup>46</sup> While the other theories do not do so either, they also do not presume to speak for the powerless, which these variants do. Thus this becomes a significant omission limiting its explanatory power.

### Theory Continued: Feminist Perspectives

Most of the traditional approaches to IR theory have certain assumptions, tend to seek answers to particular questions, and draw on specific methodological tools in order to answer those questions. Just as it is important to understand the levels of analysis and know which theoretical perspective is appropriate to help guide the answer to questions at different levels, by making these assumptions and using these tools, we are ignoring or not taking into account whole areas of international politics. Thus, in order to get a more complete picture, we need to refocus our thinking so that it specifically includes women, and gender becomes a variable that is part of our ongoing understanding of IR. In other words, we need to look at IR through gender-sensitive lenses.

It is important to note that not all questions might involve gender, nor is it appropriate to artificially include gender or insert it into our analysis of IR. However, what the feminist approach reminds us of from the beginning is that we need to be aware of the role of women, the impact of decisions on the people within the nation-state, and the ways in which women and gender affect our theoretical understanding of the international system. If we then choose *not* to include gender in our questions or analysis, at least it becomes a conscious choice and not an oversight. Thus, in our overview of IR theory, we are going to give some additional attention to this approach because it is so often overlooked in traditional IR, and yet without consciously addressing women and gender, we cannot get a complete picture.

When we speak of gender and IR, or “gendering world politics,” what we are referring to is the introduction of the concept of “gender,” which refers to “socially learned behavior and expectations that distinguish between masculinity and femininity. Whereas biological sex identity is determined by reference to genetic and anatomical characteristics, socially learned gender is an acquired identity.”<sup>47</sup>

So what does this have to do with international politics? According to political scientists V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan, “The dominant masculinity in Western culture is associated with qualities of rationality, ‘hardheadedness,’ ambition, and strength. . . . Similarly, women who appear hard-headed and ambitious are often described as masculine.” Also, the traits associated with masculinity “are perceived as positive and admired traits that are in contrast to less desirable feminine qualities.”<sup>48</sup> Ann Tickner notes that a widely held belief is that:

military and foreign policy are arenas of policy-making least appropriate for women. Strength, power, autonomy, independence, and rationality, all typically associated with men and masculinity, are characteristics we most value in those to whom we trust the conduct of our foreign policy and national interest. Those women in the peace movements . . . are frequently branded as naïve, weak and unpatriotic.<sup>49</sup>

Therefore, generally when we look at qualities associated with international relations and foreign policy—power, politics, military might, strength—the assumption is that men are present and women are absent. Furthermore, we also assume that we can explain decisions by looking at the ways in which *men* are engaged in these activities.

By looking at the world through gender-sensitive lenses, we are able to understand how women are also present, even though they are often obscured by the focus on men. “Through a gender-sensitive lens, we see how constructions of masculinity are not independent of, but dependent upon, opposing constructions of femininity.”<sup>50</sup> Understanding this can then give us a more complete picture about and understanding of international relations.

The introduction of the feminist perspective has its origin in the 1980s, and it has become more prominent in the last ten-plus years. To give you an idea as to how far we have come, remember that Morgenthau referred to “statesmen” in his book *Politics Among Nations*, and there is no entry for “women” in the index. Kenneth Waltz, who wrote *Man, the State, and War* in 1954, has one entry for women in the index: “Women, role in government.” If you look at the entry, it is found within Waltz’s discussion of peace and trying to understand human behavior in order to help understand what leads to war. This illustrates clearly the set of assumptions that have swirled around the study of IR, which in many ways grow out of social beliefs about the nature of men and women: men are warlike, militaristic, and competitive, while women are peace loving and inherently cooperative by nature. All of this obscures or muddles our understanding of IR. So the real questions become, what roles *do* women and gender play in our understanding of international relations, and how should we draw on them to help us describe/explain/predict? Perhaps more important, where does the feminist perspective fit as a valid theoretical approach to understanding international relations?

What Ann Tickner, Spike Peterson, Cynthia Enloe, and other feminist thinkers have done is to force us to consider the presence and roles of women

in IR. They have allowed us to better understand how decisions are shaped by gender and the ways in which political decisions affect men and women. This allows us to look at the roles women have played in various ways that affect the international system and at the contributions they have made. It also allows us to understand that it is no longer acceptable to study scholarly areas, especially those pertaining to important policy decisions, without acknowledging women and gender in some way.

So let us see how feminist theory fits within our understanding of IR. Tickner begins by saying that we need to step back and really understand the way in which the world is constructed, to move beyond the stereotypes and assumptions and look at how women and gender fit within the field of IR. But she also warns us that:

feminist theories must go beyond injecting women's experiences into different disciplines and attempt to challenge the core concepts of the disciplines themselves. . . . Drawing on feminist theories to examine and critique the meaning of these [key concepts, such as power, sovereignty, and security] could help us to reformulate these concepts in ways that might allow us to see new possibilities for solving our current insecurities.<sup>51</sup>

Feminist thinkers such as Tickner and others argue that it is no longer possible to examine the new questions of security that we are now grappling with using the traditional theoretical approaches. The changes that have taken place in the international system since the end of the Cold War especially have led to the growth of new questions about what has been happening and why. And feminist IR thinkers argue that it is time to find theoretical approaches that are more appropriate for answering these new questions.

Tickner provides examples of the types of questions feminists would ask—and then how to answer them. For example, she notes that:

whereas IR theorists focus on the causes and termination of wars, feminists are as concerned with what happens *during* wars as well as their causes and endings. Rather than seeing military capabilities as an assurance against outside threats to the state, militaries are seen as frequently antithetical to individual security, particularly to the security of women and other vulnerable groups. (emphasis added)<sup>52</sup>

Like liberalism and constructivism, feminist approaches generally focus within the state, looking at the role of the individual within the social structure.



They look at questions such as the ways in which an unequal structure constrains or affects women's as well as men's lives, and how this inequality can be addressed. They ask how women's voices can be heard within a political system that is generally patriarchal as well as hierarchical, and how the lack of women's voices affects the decisions that are made. This must move beyond the notion of "peace as a women's issue" to focus instead on how any country can best use and represent *all* its citizens and be aware of the impact of decisions on those citizens as well.

When we discuss feminist IR and seek to understand the role that gender plays in the field, it is also important to note that not all work that deals with women is inherently feminist, nor do we need to assume that all women's political action is feminist. For example, there are groups of women who work for peace at the community level in countries in conflict, such as Northern Ireland or Israel and Palestine. When asked, these women do not think of their work as "feminist" action per se, or even necessarily political. They simply look at it as working to make their community and their country a better place in which to live and to raise their children. However, looking at their activities seriously takes into account the fact that women have an important role to play in issues of peace and conflict without judging their motives.

Like the other theoretical approaches in the field, Tickner notes there are many strains of feminist thought within IR. There is *liberal feminism*, which claims that "discrimination deprives women of equal rights to pursue their self-interest; whereas men have been judged on their merits as individuals, women have tended to be judged as female or as a group."<sup>53</sup> This approach assumes that women have the potential to be participants in the political system but that it would take work and a restructuring of that system. Furthermore, liberal feminists do not necessarily agree that the inclusion of women would change the nature of the political system.

*Radical feminists* claim that "women were oppressed because of patriarchy or a pervasive system of male dominance, rooted in the biological inequality between the sexes and in women's reproductive roles, that assigns them to the household to take care of men and children."<sup>54</sup> Thus, women are blocked from participating in the public sphere, where policy is made, and are relegated to the realm of the private sphere, which is seen as far less important. Yet women have shown that they can have an impact and make a contribution to important policy discussions, such as about war and peace, by glorifying their roles as wives and mothers. While this runs the risk of "essentializing women" (that

is, identifying them based on their traditional roles), it also acknowledges the contributions they can make.

The main point here is the acknowledgment that women's lives, roles, and experiences are different from those of men who are the primary decision makers, and therefore that they must be considered, if not as central to, certainly as part of our understanding of international relations. Therefore, understanding the structure of the state and the political system, and specifically introducing gender as a concept, should give us another and broader understanding of the state and therefore of the international system.

### *Limitations and Critique of Feminist Theory*

One of the major criticisms leveled against the feminist IR theorists is that there really is no single theory, but rather it is more a critique or series of critiques of the primary theories in IR. As noted earlier, even within the feminist perspective there are significant differences in approaches and understanding regarding the roles of women, specifically the role of feminism as a motivator of women in the political sphere. Does it really matter whether women's political actions are a feminist statement or are the result of a desire to right a wrong? Are all women's political actions feminist by virtue of the fact that they are women? And, more important, how do the answers to these questions help us understand IR?

Another issue that needs to be considered in injecting the feminist perspective is whether doing so essentializes women. That is, women's actions are defined because they are women, or, put another way, it reduces them to a single common denominator. For example, in understanding issues of war and peace, it is easy to look at peace as a "women's issue" because of the underlying assumptions about women's nature, whereas men are presumed to be warriors and more warlike. This oversimplification minimizes the roles of *both* men and women in international relations.

### **SUMMARY**

This chapter offered an introduction to ways of understanding IR and some of the theoretical approaches and frameworks that help you understand the international system. As has been stressed throughout this chapter, it is important to remember that no one approach is right or wrong and that no single approach will give you a broad or complete understanding of IR. Rather, the point that we want to make is that the particular approach you choose should be dependent

on the questions you want to ask. The theory, in turn, can then help guide you to an answer to those questions.

Box 2.7 provides a grid that gives some guidance to each of the theoretical approaches and what they can tell you. Remember that the answer to any question you ask is only as good as the material and approach you use to answer it.

**BOX 2.7**

COMPARISON OF THEORETICAL APPROACHES

<i>Theoretical perspectives</i>	<i>Realist</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Constructivist</i>	<i>Marxist</i>	<i>Feminist</i>
Assumptions	Human nature; seeks power	Humans are cooperative	Dynamic relationship between the state and the environment	Dialectic and class struggles	Need for "gender-sensitive lenses"
Individual	Decision maker, affected by quest for power	Critical actor; basically moral and good	Range of important players with own identities		Impacted by decisions
Culture/society			Affect the context within which decisions are made	Class struggle	Who is affected by decisions?
Government		Liberal democratic			Who makes the decision?
Nation-state	Primary actor; monolithic	Cooperative	Relationship with environment	Rich versus poor; dependency	Role that women play
International system	Stability comes from balance of power	All benefit from cooperation, trade, and interaction	Dynamic with relationships shifting	Inevitability of conflict between rich and poor, powerful and powerless	

## FURTHER READINGS

These additional readings are worth exploring and elaborate on some of the points raised in this chapter. This list is not meant to be exhaustive but only illustrative.

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2. Charles W. Kegley Jr., *World Politics: Trend and Transformation* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), 28.
3. Barry Hughes, *Continuity and Change in World Politics: The Clash of Perspectives*, second edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994), 79.
4. Richard Haass, *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 129.

5. J. Ann Tickner, *Gendering World Politics: Issues and Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 3.
6. Tickner, *Gendering World Politics*, 3.
7. Gillian Youngs, "Feminist International Relations: A Contradiction in Terms? Or: Why Women and Gender Are Essential to Understanding the World 'We' Live In," *International Affairs* 80, no. 1 (2004): 77. In a footnote attached to the title of the article, Youngs also states that "the aim [of the article] is to stimulate productive debate about the nature and contribution of feminist approaches to International Relations." Youngs, "Feminist International Relations," 75.
8. J. David Singer, "The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations," *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (October 1961): 77–92.
9. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954).
10. Singer, "The Level-of-Analysis Problem," 78.
11. Singer, "The Level-of-Analysis Problem," 90.
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13. See David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: Wiley, 1965).
14. See Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
15. Nye, *Paradox*, 8–9.
16. Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 22–23.
17. See Walter Russell Mead, *Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk* (New York: Knopf, 2004).
18. V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan, *Global Gender Issues in the New Millennium: Dilemmas in World Politics*, fourth edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2014), 82.
19. Peterson and Runyan, *Global Gender Issues*, 82.
20. Tickner, *Gendering World Politics*, 47.
21. Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 27.

22. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, brief edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 5.
23. See Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).
24. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm>.
25. Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi, *International Relations and World Politics: Security, Economy, Identity*, fourth edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), 59.
26. It must be remembered here that virtually all references to statesmen are tied to the assumption that diplomats and generally decision makers will be male. In fact, in Ken Waltz's *Man, the State, and War*, women are only mentioned once and in a rather gendered way: "And J. Cohen, another psychologist, believes that the cause of peace might be promoted if women were substituted for men in the governing of nations." Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 46.
27. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5.
28. Morgenthau, "Six Principles of Political Realism," *Politics Among Nations*, 6.
29. John Mearsheimer is a prolific author who remains one of the most prominent realist thinkers in political science today. His published works are too numerous to list here. For more detail, see his website at <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu>.
30. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Realism and International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 73.
31. Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, 73–74. It is well worth reading Waltz's entire essay, "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory," for his critique of realist theory and as a way to better understand the evolution of his thinking regarding neorealism. See "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory," in *Realism and International Politics*, 67–82.
32. See Kenneth Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," in *Realism and International Politics*, 99–122.
33. See John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001). Also see Allison, *Destined for War*.
34. This is the argument that Graham Allison makes in his book *Destined for War: Can American and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* where he looks at the dangers posed by the rise of China threatening to displace the international power and role of the United States.

35. Realpolitik is a German term that refers to foreign policy tied primarily to power and practical considerations in decision making. When he was secretary of state, Henry Kissinger was known for pursuing U.S. foreign policy based on Realpolitik.
36. J. Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 14.
37. Tickner, *Gendering World Politics*, 24.
38. Thucydides, "The Melian Conference," in *History of the Peloponnesian War*, chapter 17, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/melian.htm>.
39. Michael W. Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (December 1986): 1152.
40. Viotti and Kauppi, *International Relations and World Politics*, 92.
41. Tyler Marshall, "Bush's Foreign Policy Shifting," *Los Angeles Times*, June 5, 2005, <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/jun/05/world/fg-democracy5>.
42. Preamble to the North Atlantic Treaty, April 4, 1949, <http://www.nato.int>.
43. The concept of sovereignty and what it means to and for the nation-state will be explored in more detail in chapter 3.
44. Alice Ba and Matthew J. Hoffman, "Making and Remaking the World for IR 101: A Resource for Teaching Social Constructivism in Introductory Classes," *International Studies Perspectives* (2003): 4, 15.
45. Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 393.
46. Tickner, *Gender in International Relations*, 16–17.
47. V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan, *Global Gender Issues* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 5.
48. Peterson and Runyan, *Global Gender Issues*, 7.
49. Tickner, *Gender in International Relations*, 3.
50. Peterson and Runyan, *Global Gender Issues*, 7.
51. Tickner, *Gender in International Relations*, 18.
52. Tickner, *Gendering World Politics*, 4.
53. Tickner, *Gendering World Politics*, 12.
54. Tickner, *Gendering World Politics*, 13.

