What explains the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in international relations?

Members of the 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment Brigade Combat Team board a Continental Airlines jet bound for Kuwait in 2003 at Pope Air Force Base, in North Carolina.

3

Powerful Ideas

Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism
Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you will be able to...

3-1 Identify the nature and use of theory and describe the components of theory.

3-2 Explain the foundations of the realist approach in terms of its conception of (a) the nature of the international system, (b) its relevant actors, (c) important resources, and (d) central dynamics.

3-3 Explain the foundations of the liberal approach in terms of its conceptions of (a) the nature of the international system, (b) its relevant actors, (c) important resources, and (d) central dynamics.

3-4 Explain the foundations of the constructivist approach in terms of its conception of (a) the nature of the international system, (b) its relevant actors, (c) important resources, and (d) central dynamics.

3-5 Assess the uses and applications of each approach as contending and complementary lenses for understanding international relations.

Chapter Outline

3-1 Theory and International Relations
3-2 The Realist Perspective on World Politics
3-3 The Liberal Perspective on World Politics
3-4 The Constructivist Perspective on World Politics

EXPLAINING A “DEMOCRATIC PEACE”

Since 1945, empirical evidence presents some intriguing findings regarding regime types, the outbreak of war, and the resulting casualty counts. First, democracies have been involved in, and have even started, wars with nondemocratic countries. For example, the United States used military force 383 times between 1945 and 2000 (Howell and Pevehouse 2007). The United Kingdom and France have been involved in militarized conflicts with other nations more than any other state, and they are two of the three oldest democracies in the world.

Second, wars involving at least one democracy tend to produce more battle deaths than wars between two nondemocracies. That is, a war between two autocracies is usually much less bloody than a war between an autocracy and a democracy.

Third, nondemocratic countries have warred with each other regularly. Yet two stable democracies do not appear to have ever gone to war with each other (Russett and Oneal 2001). In addition to not fighting with each other, democracies seem less likely to even threaten each other with the use of force, and they tend to settle their disputes more peacefully and quickly. Thus, there seems to be something to the idea of a democratic peace.

1. What factors might explain these patterns?
2. If democracies are more peaceful, then why are their wars with autocracies so bloody?
3. Are democracies really more peaceful?

INTRODUCTION: POWERFUL IDEAS

The playing field of world politics is complicated, as we explained in Chapter 2. It combines a number of...
3-1 THEORY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

3-1a Thinking Theoretically

To begin, let’s first consider the meaning of theory and theorizing. As we have suggested, theory is an explanation for connecting events, actions, behaviors, and outcomes. More specifically, it is a set of analytical tools for understanding the cause-and-effect relationships between phenomena. For example, as you considered the topic of democratic peace at the beginning of this chapter, you engaged in theorizing about world politics. Indeed, people theorize every day, sometimes explicitly, more often implicitly, sometimes naively, and sometimes with great sophistication. Why didn’t I do better on a test? Why did an innocent comment hurt someone’s feelings?

Policymakers also rely on and are influenced by theories of various kinds. For example, when the United Nations authorizes economic sanctions against Iran, or NATO implements sanctions against Russia, they do so hoping that the economic pressure from the sanctions will lead those countries to change their behavior. Similarly, when the US deploys military force in response to North Korean nuclear weapons tests, that action reflects ideas about how the threat and use of force can deter or compel another state, and even broader theories about how states influence each other, or how to gain and sustain security. Each of these policy actions is based on a theory.

3-1b The Analytical Uses of Theory

As analysts, we depend on theory to explain the choices of policymakers and the consequences of policies they enact. Why did the Soviet Union seek a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany before World War II when the two countries appeared to be rivals—maybe even outright enemies—up to that point? Why did leaders believe the United States, Canada, and Mexico would all benefit from a free-trade agreement linking their economies? Why do Israeli leaders keep building residential settlements in areas claimed by Palestinians, knowing that such construction will alienate Palestinians and their supporters? Why did the Russians deploy troops into Ukraine and annex Crimea in 2014? Why did the UK begin the process of withdrawing from the European Union in 2016? We cannot answer these questions without relying on theory.

As we discussed briefly in Chapter 1, theory is a way to explain the patterns of world politics—or any other subject area for that matter—and theories help us to make strategic simplifications of the world to bring important features into clearer focus. Think of
theories as lenses, such as those you might find in a good pair of sunglasses. If it is too bright, you can't see very well, but with good sunglasses, you can see and understand the world around you. Moreover, sunglasses lenses come in different colors, and each shade filters out a different portion of the light in order to sharpen and improve vision, so each pair lets you see the same world around you in a different way. In effect, theory simplifies reality to reduce the “glare of the sun” and to sharpen the clarity of key factors. This aids in the explanation of the most important behavior and even the prediction of likely developments.

Consider another metaphor: You're sitting in a very loud restaurant. Perhaps there is loud music, crying babies, or, worse, both. The noise is so loud that you cannot hear your friends talk. The white noise in the restaurant is like a bunch of irrelevant facts. To understand the strong relationship between the United States and Canada, does it help to know that both flags have white and red or that the Canadian flag has a maple leaf on it while the American flag has stars? Of course not—while factual, that information is simply white noise. Theory simplifies reality by cutting out all of that unneeded information so that we can better understand the important forces at work in the world, just like turning down the music and quieting the unhappy babies in the restaurant would let you hear your friends better.

As a simplifying device intended to improve understanding of complex reality, theory has particular meaning for the study of the empirical—or real—world. Contrary to popular usage (e.g., “oh, that is just a theory . . .”), which often casts theory as something fictional or unrelated to “reality,” empirical theory is really just a cause-and-effect explanation of real or observable phenomena in the world that addresses “why” questions, not “what happened” questions. For example, let’s go back to our opening puzzle about peace between democracies. Theory is the explanation we offer in response to the question of why democratic countries apparently do not go to war with each other. Empirical theory links important aspects of the world to outcomes, specifies the mechanisms that link the two, and ends in hypotheses—if–then statements about empirical behavior. Importantly, empirical theory allows us to test those explanations/hypotheses against the events that happen in the real world to gauge the theory’s utility or value. Thus, empirical theory differs from normative theory, which seeks to advocate how the political world should be and is often referred to as political philosophy.

3-1c Theory and Causation: The Components of Theory

Empirical theory aims at explaining causal relationships and patterns among the phenomena being studied. This is a difficult task because of the complexity of the world and, unlike theory in other sciences, it is difficult, even impossible, to create and manage laboratory experiments that allow us to isolate cause and effect as one might do in a study of disease or nuclear physics. And one can almost never repeat an experiment to retest empirical findings in world politics—imagine the absurdity of attempting to rerun the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia!

With these difficulties in mind, social scientists stress three fundamental requirements that increase our confidence when we claim causality in the social world. Think in terms of two factors, A (cause) and B (effect), which you think are related:

- A and B must change together, or you cannot claim that one causes change in another—this is called covariance.
- A must come before B in time because causes must come before effects or they cannot be causes.

**Empirical theory:** a theory based on real-world observations and explanations.

**Normative theory:** a theory based on prescription and advocacy of preferred outcomes.
theory involves three central elements: description, explanation, and prediction. Theory also usually offers a basis for prescription, but we regard that as a by-product of these three main components. Let’s briefly consider each of these elements.

**DESCRIPTION** Theory directs attention to particular aspects of the world that are most important to the phenomenon in question. It tells us which facts are important. As such, it offers a descriptive element, but it is not mere description. Indeed, as one of our former professors used to emphasize to us, “facts without theory are trivia.” They are dots without connections. For example, if you see a man wearing a hockey goalie’s mask, carrying an axe, and running down the street, you might conclude that either he is insane or it is Halloween. Both conclusions require a theory to connect the person with your conclusion. To theorize is to move up the ladder of abstraction from simple description to selective description of those aspects of reality that are most important. In part, this requires observers to see individual events as part of classes or types of events in order to gain perspective on the enormously complicated world around us.

**EXPLANATION** Theory provides cause-and-effect explanations of the linkages between those aspects of the world on which it focuses. As such, theory explains how and why those descriptive concepts are linked. For example, the mere statement that democracies do not go to war with each other is not a theory. A theory would be constructed if you said: (a) “In democracies leaders are constrained by and answerable to the people who elect them,” and (b) “consequently, when two democratic countries are in a dispute, both leaders are constrained by their electorates and less able to go to war.” In the first case, we simply offered a description of an empirical observation: Democracies don’t fight each other. In the second case, we provided a potential explanation for why democracies do not fight one another. Explanation is fundamental to theorizing. The most important role theories play is to explain what happens in the real world.

**PREDICTION** Theory provides a basis for anticipating future events and developments. This aspect of theory is really a derivative of the first two—knowing what to observe, and understanding how things are connected. By observing and understanding the peaceful relations between democracies since World War II, we can also forecast that democracies will not fight each other. If, for example, you theorize that key characteristics of democratic governments, such as an informed electorate, lead countries with such regimes to settle their disputes peacefully, you should be able to predict what will happen in the future if (a) two democratic governments with informed electorates have a dispute (then they are unlikely to fight); or (b) democratic governments with informed electorates spread throughout the world (then there should be fewer wars worldwide). Conversely, if you theorize that the peace between democracies since World War II is a function of other factors, such as the existence of a common major enemy or high levels of trade between democratic states or the presence of a free press in democratic countries, then you would base your predictions on those things.

**A BASIS FOR PRESCRIPTION** Theory may also provide a basis for prescribing behavior or policy—that is, it may lead to normative conclusions about what should be. Because theory tells us what to observe, why things are connected, and what will happen in the future, we might be able to shape the future if we are able to control or alter certain things. For example, medical researchers have shown that moderate, regular exercise helps lower blood pressure, cholesterol, and excess body fat and increase heart and lung function—all things that increase health and life expectancy. From that we can predict that people who engage in moderate exercise will generally be healthier and live longer. Knowing those facts, causal relationships, and predictions, a government might prescribe a policy that all school-age children should be taught physical education in school in the hope that it would lead to more people engaging in moderate exercise. Businesses may find ways to encourage their employees to exercise...
more often in order to lessen their health care costs or reduce absences. Thus, understanding and predicting what will happen may allow us to prescribe actions to shape what will happen.

The evidence and theory that link democratic governance and peaceful relations between countries provide a good example. If democracies do not fight each other, then a policy prescription for achieving a more peaceful world might be to promote democratization in other countries. If more countries are democratic, then there should be more peaceful relations in the world. In fact, many US and European leaders have argued exactly this idea in recent decades (see the box “Theory in Action: The Democratic Peace and Democracy Promotion”). Many other examples abound, and you can probably generate interesting policy prescriptions based on the exercise at the beginning of this chapter.

3-1d Concluding Thoughts on Theory

Let’s wrap up this overview with a few concluding thoughts. First, theory should be tested against empirical evidence to gauge its accuracy and utility. For example, we might theorize that countries with McDonald’s restaurants never fight each other (the “Golden Arches” theory described by the author Thomas Friedman), but until we test this theory with evidence, we won’t know if there is any value to it. In fact, this particular argument does not stand up well to empirical scrutiny. There have been a number of instances since 1989 in which militarized disputes between countries with McDonald’s restaurants occurred, and there are almost certainly other factors at work that determine both the presence of McDonald’s and peaceful relations between countries. Can you think of some?

Second, many scholars embrace the principle of parsimony in their efforts. Parsimony holds that the simplest explanations should be preferred over more complicated ones, all other things being equal. Detail and complexity for their own sake are of no advantage to explanation unless they really offer better explanations for how, when, and why something happens.

Third, theorizing can take place in a given level of analysis (e.g., explanations that stress system-level, state-level, or individual-level factors), or it can link explanations across levels of analysis. But good theory is clear about which approach is being utilized.

Finally, try to remember that theories are tools to be used. They are simply an explanation of the relevant facts. It may be that one or another theoretical approach is preferable to some situations, but not others. You do not necessarily have to choose one theoretical approach and ignore others. Instead, you might treat theory like tools in a toolbox: Which ones are most helpful for given situations? After all, hammers are great for pounding nails but lousy for cutting boards.

3-2 THE REALIST PERSPECTIVE ON WORLD POLITICS

3-2 Explain the foundations of the realist approach in terms of its conception of (a) the nature of the international system, (b) its relevant actors, (c) important resources, and (d) central dynamics.

Almost 2,500 years ago, the Greek historian Thucydides wrote about the conflict and competition among Greek city-states led by Athens and...
The Democratic Peace and Democracy Promotion

The belief that democracies are more peaceful in their relations with one another has long motivated democratic leaders to advocate the spread of democratic institutions to other countries. In the United States, for example, President Woodrow Wilson, in his influential “Fourteen Points” speech of 1918, advocated the spread of democracy and self-determination for all nations to make the world safer, more peaceful. More recently, every US president since Jimmy Carter in the 1970s has made a similar appeal. President Carter advocated protecting and promoting human rights and democratic governance, and President Ronald Reagan called for a “crusade for freedom” on behalf of democracy.

As the Cold War ended, subsequent administrations placed even greater emphasis on promoting democracy. President George H. W. Bush expanded US democracy promotion with such actions as the use of US military force in Panama in 1989, and with special aid to the countries of Eastern Europe (the 1990 Support for Eastern European Democracy—or SEED—Act) and the former Soviet Union (the 1992 Freedom Support Act). When Bill Clinton assumed office, the United States expanded its efforts even further. According to President Clinton, in his 1995 State of the Union address, “ultimately, the best strategy to ensure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere.”

Twenty-first-century presidents have continued the commitment. As George W. Bush stated in his 2005 inaugural address, “The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world. . . . So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture.” At a major speech in Cairo in June 2009, Barack Obama expressed his “unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn’t steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.”

Nor are these sentiments exclusive to the United States. A study examined the foreign policies of 40 countries between 1992 and 2002 and concluded that they engaged in substantial and widely varying commitments and efforts to promote democracy in other countries (Herman and Piccone 2002). Overall, these efforts by the United States and others included such things as diplomatic approaches, economic efforts such as the provision of foreign aid, and even military intervention to protect or establish democratic regimes.

1. What theoretical foundations are policymakers drawing on when they prescribe such policies?
2. What cause-and-effect assumptions do they make?
3. What happens when democracy spreads in the world? What about when it declines?

Sparta. According to Thucydides, at the heart of the conflict was “the growth in Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.” In a memorable episode of this contest between Athens and Sparta, the Athenians demanded surrender from the tiny island of Melos and threatened invasion and devastation if Melians refused. When the Melians pleaded for justice and fairness, the Athenian commander told them they were wasting their time. In matters of such import, he asserted, “The strong do as they will, and the weak suffer what they must.”

From this episode, Thucydides tied the conflict between Athens and Sparta to the core of what we now know as realist theory: their competition for power and influence, and the security dilemma it prompted between them. In the Melian tale, Thucydides reasoned that ideals such as justice and fairness were irrelevant for the relations between states. Instead, leaders must focus on security and survival, the accumulation of power needed to protect their interests. Thus, the Melians should have joined the Athenians to ensure their future security. Instead, they did not join Athens, and as a result, the Athenian military destroyed Melos to demonstrate its power and prevent the Melians from aligning with Athens’s key rival, Sparta.

Thucydides was one of the first realist writers, and although realism is the oldest theory of international relations, it is still widely accepted and used today. Realism is accepted not only as a way to understand the world but also as a policy guide.
That is, the theory explains how states act in the international system, and like the story of Athens and Melos, it also offers guidance on how states should act. Thucydides tells the story of Melos to explain what happened and, just as important, to teach leaders how to avoid the fate that befell Melos. He points out that they should have sided with Athens (or called on Athenian enemy Sparta for an alliance), regardless of whether it was the just or fair thing to do; it was the choice that would have saved their lives.

Thus, realism acts as both an explanation and a guide or prescription for policy. Particularly since World War II, realism has been the predominant approach to international relations around the world. States such as China, Russia, and the United States all tend to act as realists. We say “tend” to act as realists because complexity is everywhere in international relations. As you will see when we discuss liberalism, no state follows a strictly realist-type foreign policy.

The realist perspective traces back to thinkers and scholars such as Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Shang Yang, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Thomas Hobbes. The theory is rooted in a pessimistic view of human nature. Hobbes famously characterized the state of nature—a hypothetical situation where there was no government—as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” He argued that if there were no government to constrain people from their worst impulses, then there would be no functioning society. Perhaps the best way to imagine Hobbes’s state of nature is to think of apocalyptic-style movies, television shows, and books such as The Road, 28 Days Later, The Walking Dead, and Snowpiercer. In these stories, humans almost universally turn on each other in horribly violent ways and cooperate only out of fear. That is the world that Hobbes saw if it were not for governments to constrain people and force them to behave.

Building on these foundations, the more modern-day roots of realism include E. H. Carr, whose Twenty Years’ Crisis: 1919–1939 describes how the realities of power politics destroyed what he characterized as idealistic hopes and plans for peace and cooperation after World War I and led to World War II. They also include Hans J. Morgenthau, whose Politics Among Nations stresses “the national interest defined in terms of power” as the main factor motivating states in international politics.

Realism is the simplest of theories of world politics, which contributes to its power and pervasiveness. It rests on a parsimonious leveraging of a few key aspects of the international system and its parts to explain broad patterns of behavior and interaction. Although there are many variants and flavors of realism, they tend to be unified around a common core of ideas and assumptions. Many thousands of pages have been devoted to developing and articulating realist theories of international relations, but we can focus on a number of core elements to gain a working familiarity with the perspective and its descriptive, explanatory, predictive, and prescriptive applications.

At the risk of simplifying the nuances and subtleties, let’s consider what realism offers for (a) the nature of the international system, (b) its relevant actors, (c) important resources, and (d) central dynamics. We will adopt this scheme in our discussion of liberalism and constructivism as well to make it easier to compare and contrast these three major approaches. Since we discuss and apply these theories further in subsequent chapters, our purpose here is to provide a foundation for our efforts to explain and understand the patterns and interactions of world politics.

3-2a Realism and the Nature of the International System

According to realists, a central characteristic of the international system overshadows all others and forms the foundation of the explanations the perspective offers. That characteristic is anarchy—which quite simply means the absence of central authority, not chaos, as we discussed in Chapter 2. Although the international system is more complicated than this simple portrayal suggests, realists tend to argue that other aspects of the system are less significant and can be ignored as secondary factors, for the most part. For realists, the absence of a central government to establish order and wield power and authority establishes a fundamentally Hobbesian world in which the main players of world politics must rely on themselves and themselves alone to protect their interests and accomplish their goals. In this self-help world, power is
both a central instrument and a primary objective to ensure survival and security. Indeed, according to realists, the anarchy of the international system makes it the domain of power, not law, morality, society, or institutions. And, according to realists, this main structural aspect of the international system ensures that conflict is always possible—and is the central problem of world politics.

Anarchy as the central feature of the international system has several other consequences for the system. First, because anarchy means there is no higher governing authority above states, these main political units are sovereign—possessing the sole authority to govern within their borders. In combination with self-help, sovereignty also means that states are responsible for securing their own interests and, at least in principle, that they are not obligated to follow rules or decisions made by others unless they so choose or are coerced into doing so by a more powerful state.

Second, the international system is stratified, with different levels of resources, wealth, and power possessed by different states. Realists tend to differentiate between great or major powers and other powers, with some also identifying middle powers. This stratification is important for realists for at least two reasons. First, realists argue that states with different levels of power act distinctly due to their position in the anarchic system, with great powers having the greatest freedom of choice and action, as well as the most influence. Second, realists argue that states seek to preserve or gain power—to move up this hierarchy—as a way of securing their interests and influence. The central ingredient of these differing levels of power and state efforts to be powerful is military might, which we discuss later in the chapter.

Finally, as we discussed in Chapter 2, the anarchic international system and its self-help characteristic establishes persistent security dilemmas. Simply put, since states are responsible for their security and survival, they must take action to protect themselves. However, the actions that states take to secure themselves frequently appear potentially threatening to other states, which naturally take steps to protect their own security. The results often produce situations of greater potential danger, so the dilemma is clear: The actions a state takes to secure itself often wind up making it even less secure because of the action–reaction cycles they produce. Realists express a variety of views on this feature of international politics, from those who argue that some states have good, essentially defensive, intentions to those who assert that most states prefer dominance and actively seek it. In either case, security dilemmas arise and spur conflict and competition (see the box “Spotlight On: Variants of Realism”).

### 3-2b Realism and the Relevant Actors in International Relations

Within the anarchic system of world politics, not surprisingly, realists concentrate on the state as the central, and usually only, actor of consequence in the international system. It is not that realists fail to recognize that other players—many of which we discussed in Chapter 2—exist. Instead, realists assert that non-state actors are either of secondary importance or are derivative of states. Yes, a realist would say, there are international organizations such as the UN, but such organizations are creations of states, they serve the interests of states, and they reflect the preferences of the most powerful states. To realists, however, the states are the primary players.

As we suggested previously, in the realist simplification of world politics, these states are sovereign and self-help oriented, which means they are basically self-interested and self-regarding. As in the stag hunt example from Chapter 1, realists portray states as fundamentally selfish actors seeking their own security. That does not necessarily mean that cooperation among them is impossible. It suggests, however, that such cooperation will be highly dependent on calculations of self-interest and benefits, and so will be temporary and highly constrained by suspicion and mistrust since no state can really count on another to forego opportunities for advantages. For realists, states may join together to counter a common enemy or prevent another state from becoming too powerful, but they are unlikely to sustain that cooperation once the common threat has been addressed. Thus, the British and Americans were unable to sustain their cooperation with the Soviets after the defeat of Germany in World War II, and the United States and NATO, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, saw opportunities

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stratification: unequal distribution of power, influence, and/or other resources.
Variants of Realism

As a theoretical perspective, realism comes in many flavors:

- **Classical realism.** This variant of realism finds its roots in the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and emphasizes the aggressive, power-seeking, and selfish nature of human beings as the ultimate source of state behavior. As well-known classical realist Hans Morgenthau (2005) wrote, the first principle of classical realism is that “politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature” (p. 4). In world politics, the state is the collective reflection of individual human nature carrying out the pursuit of power.

- **Neo-realism.** This variant, by contrast, focuses on the nature of the international system rather than human nature. According to leading neo-realist theorists such as Kenneth Waltz, the anarchic structure of the international system causes the units in the system (states) to seek their own security through the accumulation of power, thus leading to balance-of-power politics. Thus, it is not greed or a selfish nature that pushed states to do what they do—instead, the system made them do it.

- **Neo-classical realism.** This variant has been advocated by theorists such as Gideon Rose and Randall Schweller, and attempts to bridge the divide between the first two variants by starting with the structure of the international system to explain broader international outcomes and patterns, and then adding in state- and individual-level factors to help explain the differing foreign policies of particular states.

We can also distinguish between defensive and offensive orientations of realism.

- **Defensive realism** stresses that states are interested in being secure from threats but are faced with security dilemmas that generate fear and uncertainty. As key advocates such as Robert Jervis and Stephen Walt suggest, defensive realists do not argue that states always seek to maximize their power or seek dominance, and that there are conditions in which states can be more or less secure.

- **Offensive realism**, advocated by such theorists as John Mearsheimer, by contrast, stresses that states (especially great or aspiring-to-be-great powers) always seek power and dominance. As Mearsheimer (2001) put it, “States pay close attention to how power is distributed among them, and they make a special effort to maximize their share of world power. . . . Given the difficulty of determining how much power is enough for today and tomorrow, great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge from another great power” (p. 34–35). In the course of these efforts, great powers naturally come into conflict with each other.

Think about how each of these variants reflects the central core of realism, and how they differ from each other. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each variant? How might each one capture and explain important parts of world politics?
The geographic location and characteristics of a country can be a significant source of power, and of perceptions of safety or vulnerability. Look at Map 3-1 and the locations of the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan. These three states share one feature in common: All three are effectively island states bounded by water from most or all of their neighbors. Although not an island, for the United States the presence of two large bodies of water like the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans separating it from other major powers in Europe and Asia has long offered a degree of protection and security, as well as freedom of movement and easy access to trade routes via the oceans. Behind these two vast moats and easy transportation avenues, the geographic size and relatively abundant natural resources of the US have also contributed to its potential power and ability to be secure. The UK and Japan both enjoy the protection of water separating them from others, as well as offering avenues for trade and economic activity. But in the case of these two countries, that separation—especially from potentially major rivals in Europe and Asia—is more limited and, in combination with their smaller size and natural resource endowments, can contribute to isolation and feelings of vulnerability, as well.

Contrast the geographic locations and implications of these virtual island states with the geography of other countries. China, for example, is surrounded by other countries and must consider what power is needed to defend its borders on all sides. China can consider neither Russia nor North Korea to be a trustworthy friend, and China’s border with India is not a settled matter in the eyes of the Indian regime. Japan’s navy and air force also must be watched carefully by the Chinese. Israel and the Palestinians cannot agree on their borders with each other, and Syria wants the Golan Heights back from Israel. What other states have geographic locations with significant implications for their power and security? What about states with mountainous borders or large deserts separating them from their neighbors? How about countries such as Egypt and Panama, whose geography and location provide transportation links between bodies of water (i.e., in the Suez and Panama Canals)? What consequences derive from these features? What about those without any obvious geographic features marking their territory?

1. How do geographic features add to and detract from power and security?

2. What power advantages have countries like the United States enjoyed because of their location and ocean borders?

3. How have changing technology and globalization affected the significance of geography for power and security?
That way we don’t need to know about the particular leaders or groups and their preferences inside the countries. These rational actors calculate their national interests and goals and take action accordingly.

Thus, in this realist simplification, states are also fundamentally undifferentiated except for power and capabilities. That is, realists filter away much of the descriptive detail of states (type of government, culture, leader characteristics, which party controls government, and the like) and assume that all states want the same things and are affected by the international system in similar ways, with the only significant difference being how much power and capability they have to act. Those states with greater power and capabilities have more opportunity to act than those without such resources. As Thucydides suggested, strong states pursue their interests and weaker states have little choice but to go along, one way or another. When China and the Philippines claim ownership of the same islands, for example, realists distinguish these states from each other by their power and resources. What is not relevant are differences in type of government, the personalities of a single leader, and other such details.

As we described in the box “Spotlight On: Variants of Realism,” different schools of thought within realism exist, of course. Neo-classical realists place greater emphasis on the individual leaders and states and their interests and the ways their choices and actions then shape the resulting international system. Neo-realists, by contrast, stress the structure of the system and its central role in shaping the general behavior and interactions of states. However, all variants tend to treat the state as a rational, self-interested actor seeking power and influence in the pursuit of security.

3-2c Realism and the Important Resources in International Relations

In the anarchic system of sovereign states seeking their own interests, realists stress the importance of power and capabilities. As Hans Morgenthau, an early and influential realist theorist in the 20th century, put it, states pursue “the national interest defined in terms of power.” Realists contend that the anarchy of the international system makes it the domain of power and capabilities. To put it simply, according to realists, power rules in world politics. States seek it and wield it. Its distribution affects how states act and the likelihood of conflict. But what is power?

There are many definitions, but a very simple starting point captures the realist concept of power very well: Power is the ability to get what you want. For realists, power in world politics is both an instrument and a goal (i.e., states seek it as both means and an end), and its acquisition and use is part of the basic fabric of state behavior and interactions. As Morgenthau’s statement indicates, the realist concept of power is that states must seek it to secure themselves and their interests in an anarchic world.

At least three key features of power dominate the realist perspective. First, power is relative and relational. For a realist, it makes little sense to discuss power except in terms of relationship. Your power compared to whom? At its heart, the realist notion of power turns on the view that what matters most is how power is distributed and how gains in power by one state compare to those of another. In effect, a realist determines power not by assessing what a state has (e.g., 100 nuclear missiles or 5 aircraft carrier battle groups) so much as what one state has compared to another (100 more nuclear missiles, 5 more carrier battle groups) and how the advantage (or disadvantage) is changing (growing, shrinking, remaining stable). This leads to what realist theorists discuss as the relative gains problem: States are more (or, at least, as much) concerned with the growth of their own power resources as they compare with another’s than they are with absolute gains, or how much of the resource they have or gain on its own. Think of it this way: A concern for relative gains suggests that a state would rather increase its power by 5 points per year if their rival gains only 3 points per year instead of gaining 10 points if their rival gains 12 points. To a realist, the first scenario means a relative gain of two, and the second means a relative loss of two.

Second, realists view power in a hierarchical fashion, with military power the most important and essential for the ability to get what one wants in world politics. Realists acknowledge that power has many sources and that many resources are

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**power**: the ability to get what you want.

**relative gains**: the comparative effect of a decision or situation on an actor relative to those of another actor.

**absolute gains**: the total effect of a decision or situation on an actor.
Military Power and World Politics

Both realists and liberals argue that military power is important to world politics. However, for most realists, military power is the sine qua non of world politics—the essential ingredient for any state’s power and security. The website GlobalFirepower.com collects data on the military power of countries of the world (45 categories of information) and then ranks countries from most to least powerful. Table 3-1 presents their ranking of the top six military powers in the world, with their figures on military personnel and defense spending drawn from their ranking system for 2017.

After looking over this information, think about the measure of power represented, but also think about the ranking of these countries as the top six most powerful countries. If realists are right, that means these should be the most powerful countries in the world. How well does this list represent power and influence in world politics? Who is not on this list that you think should be?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>ACTIVE MILITARY PERSONNEL</th>
<th>DEFENSE BUDGET</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>1.37 million</td>
<td>$588 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>798,000</td>
<td>$44.6 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>2.26 million</td>
<td>$161.7 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1.36 million</td>
<td>$51 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>204,000</td>
<td>$35 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>151,175</td>
<td>$45.7 billion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Factors such as wealth, industrial or technological capacity, and the like are also important. But, a realist would say, they are important ultimately as a means by which a state can develop and deploy military power in pursuit of security and influence. As Robert Art, a realist scholar, has stated, force is, ultimately, the final judge of world politics. From this perspective, there is a good reason why virtually all states—and all major powers—devote considerable resources to develop their military forces (see the box “Spotlight On: Military Power and World Politics”).

Furthermore, realists tend to treat power as fungible, meaning that power resources can be converted into influence easily, just as a dollar can be quickly and easily turned into many things: food, iTunes downloads, legal services, and so on. Realists see power similarly: States with power—especially military might—can turn it into positive outcomes across many issue areas, including diplomatic negotiations and trade relations. The more (military) power a state has, the more likely it is to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESOURCE</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographic resources</td>
<td>Size of territory; defensible borders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural resources</td>
<td>Arable land; raw materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic resources</td>
<td>Wealth; industrial capacity; technological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>leadership and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military resources</td>
<td>Quantity and quality of armed forces; advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>military technology; military leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resources</td>
<td>Population; education and skills; leadership;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>national image and morale</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** fungible: ** the ability to use one type of power for multiple purposes.
get its way on a whole host of issues.

One way to understand this power equation is shown in Figure 3-1. In this depiction, the application of power begins with resources like those we have already discussed. These resources are harnessed and converted into actual capabilities, which depends heavily on the abilities of society and the leaders making the decisions. Once converted, these capabilities are applied as foreign policy instruments. We can broadly classify such instruments into three categories: (a) diplomacy (which involves bargaining and negotiation, as we discussed in Chapter 2); (b) economic instruments (which involve aid, trade, and sanctions, as we discuss in Chapter 9); and (c) military instruments (e.g., the use of force, as we discuss in Chapter 6). For realists, although each of these instruments is important, ultimately military power trumps all.

### 3-2d Realism and the Central Dynamics of International Relations

From these foundations, the last element of the realist approach is easy to understand. In an anarchic world characterized by insecurity, self-help, and security dilemmas, states seek power to protect their interests and ensure their survival. Since power is relative and ultimately based on military strength, states cannot ever really have enough or trust others to be satisfied in an environment where conflict is the norm. As Hans Morgenthau once famously argued, “all states are either preparing for, recovering from, or engaged in war.” Viewed through this lens, world politics is a conflict-ridden arena where states compete with one another for power and influence. In this arena, powerful states assert themselves and seek advantage over one another, while weaker states cope with the consequences. So, states are much like billiard balls colliding with each other on a regular basis as they pursue and protect their national interests and seek and wield power. As the philosopher Thomas Hobbes wrote in Leviathan, in the absence of “a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war is of every man [or state] against every man [or state].”

In this world, realists generally view international politics as zero-sum situations. Building on their emphasis on relative gains, realists tend to argue that virtually all scenarios result in a winner and a loser, so that a gain by one state necessarily means a loss by another. For instance, in the example of the difference between absolute and relative gains, the two-point gain by the first state by definition means a two-point loss (in relative terms) by the other, not gains by each (one greater, one lesser). This tendency to see power and other interactions in zero-sum terms reflects the realist presumption of conflictual or competitive relations in world politics. As realist theorist John Mearsheimer (2001) argues, in this context the central aim of powerful states is to dominate at least their region and potentially more.

According to realists, which states, and particularly how many of them, have power greatly shapes the general patterns of world politics. Some distributions of power contribute to more conflict and war, some to less, while all distributions are

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**FIGURE 3-1**

The Application of Power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Conversion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural/geographic</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>Human skills and resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positive (rewards/inducements) and Negative (punishment and coercion)

**Applications of**
- Diplomacy
- Economic instruments
- Military instruments

---

**zero-sum**: a condition in which one party’s benefit or gains requires comparable losses by another party.

**distribution of power**: a characteristic of the international system emphasized by realists based on the number of great or major powers and how power is distributed among them in a given period of time.
subject to change as those out of power seek more of it and those in power seek to preserve it. As we discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, when we discuss conflict and causes of war, realists often categorize particular periods of international relations by identifying the number of great powers, often referred to as poles, or polarity, in the international system. The international system can be unipolar, with one great power; bipolar, with two; or multipolar, with more than two. Some realists discuss tripolar systems as an intermediate state between bipolar and multipolar systems. According to realists, each of these distributions creates different patterns, constraints, and opportunities for states seeking power and security, although there is disagreement over which distribution is more or less prone to conflict. In one example, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John Mearsheimer (2001) explains the frequency and likelihood of war as a function of the distribution of power. According to Mearsheimer, unipolar or hegemonic systems experience the fewest wars. Rigid bipolar systems, where most states are tightly aligned with one or the other of the two major powers, are more violent, but loose bipolar systems are even more prone to war. Multipolar systems, with many major powers competing for influence and security, are the most war prone. It is easy to see the central dynamic stressed by realists at the heart of explanations such as this—the competition for power and security among self-interested states.

This quite naturally leads to a central dynamic of world politics that realist theorists typically emphasize: balance-of-power politics. We discuss this dynamic in more detail in Chapter 6, but let’s note here that this term generally refers to the pattern of activity that occurs as states take action to make themselves secure by seeking power, countering the efforts of real or potential rivals to gain power advantages, and using power to counter security threats from others. According to realists, states monitor their security environment and take actions to meet perceived threats from others by seeking power. According to many realists, since all states make these kinds of calculations and take these kinds of steps, the balance of power is much like the magic of the market in capitalism: As each state pursues its self-interests in this way, balances tend to emerge.

In sum, realism directs our attention to the pursuit of power and security in an anarchic and conflict-ridden world, highlighting the role of states and their national interests (see Table 3-3 for a summary). Yet realism is not the only theoretical approach to consider. Let’s now take up its primary competitor.

### TABLE 3-3
Summary of Realism and World Politics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY FEATURES</th>
<th>REALIST INTERPRETATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature of the international system</td>
<td>Anarchic; self-help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant actors</td>
<td>States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important resources</td>
<td>Power, especially military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central dynamics</td>
<td>Conflict; zero-sum calculations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anarchy</td>
<td>Fundamental structural condition generating fear, uncertainty, and conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>States have different levels of power and competing interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity</td>
<td>Generated from stratification of power and competing self-interests of states</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**unipolar**: a distribution of power in the international system in which there is one great power.

**bipolar**: a distribution of power in the international system in which there are two great powers.

**multipolar**: a distribution of power in the international system in which there are more than two great powers.

**tripolar**: a distribution of power in the international system in which there are three great powers.

**balance-of-power politics**: patterns of shifting alliances, force, and counterforce among states as they seek power, counter the efforts of rivals, and confront security threats.

3-3 THE LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE ON WORLD POLITICS

**3-3** Explain the foundations of the liberal approach in terms of its conceptions of (a) the nature of the international system, (b) its relevant actors, (c) important resources, and (d) central dynamics.
Like realism, liberalism has a lengthy intellectual history, from thinkers such as Hugo Grotius, Baron de Montesquieu, and Immanuel Kant to the present day. To be sure, the term liberal means different things in different contexts, but in international relations theory, it is used quite differently than in domestic politics, so it is important not to confuse them. In contrast to realism, liberalism rests on a much more optimistic view of human nature and progress. Rather than the Hobbesian view of a violent state of nature, liberal theorists are more likely to embrace John Locke’s view. For Locke the state of nature (i.e., the world without central government) depicted an uncertain and often insecure world in which conflict was possible, but in which reason and reciprocity led mostly to harmonious relationships. As E. H. Carr described it in The Twenty Years’ Crisis, liberalism builds on the conception of mutual interests among states that can suffer from suspicion, misunderstanding, or ineffective institutions, but that can be overcome by reason, education, communication, institutions, and law.

Just as Thucydides illustrates realist thinking, Immanuel Kant provides a good depiction of liberal thinking. According to Kant in Perpetual Peace, states could overcome conflict and establish lasting cooperative relationships by embracing a series of norms to guide behavior. Most important, the combination of “republican” or democratic government in states, international institutions to help coordinate and guide them, and a cosmopolitan law ensuring “hospitality” and commercial relations among the states and their citizens would overcome the threat of war and establish the “state of peace” (Doyle 1986; Russett and Oneal 2001).

As Kant’s prescriptions suggest, liberal theory takes a more complicated approach to world politics that directs attention to more concerns than does realism. In fact, many liberals object that realism is not very “realistic” because it oversimplifies world politics too severely and overlooks key factors and broad patterns of behavior. Some liberal theorists point out that war is, in fact, a relatively rare occurrence when one considers the number of states, their many interactions, and the potential conflicts among them. Liberal theorists also argue that cooperation is much more common than realism suggests. Although early liberalism was heavily committed to prescriptions for peace, more recent liberal theory has emphasized explanations for the patterns of cooperation and conflict in world politics. To do so, liberal theory relaxes each of the central assumptions of realism and offers a less parsimonious set of explanations. However, liberal theory tends also to be more fragmented because it directs our attention to many more factors in world politics than does realism (see the box “Spotlight On: Variants of Liberalism in World Politics”). To better understand this, let’s consider the four elements of our comparative framework where liberalism is concerned.

3-3a Liberalism and the Nature of the International System

Most liberal theorists accept that the international system is basically anarchic, and that this structural characteristic has important consequences for international relations. However, they typically object to the realists’ emphasis and definition. To liberal theorists, it makes more sense to discuss the formal anarchy of the system, acknowledging the absence of a formal, authoritative, central government in world politics. However, unlike realists, liberal theorists usually point to one or more of several additional features of the international system that also play important roles in world politics and reduce the consequences of formal anarchy.

First, liberal theorists point to the presence of international norms and mutual interests among states that mitigate the effects of anarchy. As Hedley Bull stressed in The Anarchical Society, these shared norms and common interests create opportunities and expectations for cooperation and understanding. They also condition and temper the self-help impulses that realists ascribe to the anarchic structure. Thus states may have the right to meet their energy needs by developing

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liberalism: a major theoretical approach to international relations emphasizing the role of individuals, norms, and institutions to explain patterns of cooperation and conflict in world politics.

ternational norms: unwritten rules or expectations of acceptable behavior.
nuclear power, but a relatively sophisticated set of norms exists—called the nonproliferation regime—regarding how states should do so and how they should allay the fears of others as they develop nuclear power resources. Most states observe those norms; when states violate them, virtually the entire international system reacts negatively toward their actions—just ask Iran or North Korea.

Second, liberal theorists point to institutions as important characteristics—as well as players (see the next section, on relevant actors)—of the international system. Although liberal theorists agree that international institutions are constrained and incomplete, they typically argue that such institutions still matter and thus place greater emphasis on them than realists. According to liberal theorists, international institutions dampen and moderate the effects of anarchy by providing arenas for cooperation and communication, norm building, coordination, and problem solving. Although few liberal theorists would characterize international institutions as more powerful, more authoritative, or more important than the governments of states (especially the most powerful and influential ones), they typically see institutions playing a more significant and independent role in world politics than do realist theorists and seek to incorporate their influence into explanations of world politics.

In Chapter 6, for example, we discuss collective security, which has its foundations in liberal theory as an institutional mechanism for states to manage and prevent conflicts. As we discuss in detail in that chapter, the basis of collective security is that states form an organization like the League of Nations or the United Nations and commit themselves to joining together to respond to any attack by one member on any other member. This approach is
Variants of Liberalism in World Politics

Like realism, as a theoretical approach liberalism has a number of flavors. Because liberal theorists see a more complex international system and a broader variety of actors who matter in world politics, they also point to a variety of moving parts that drive the patterns of behavior—cooperation and conflict—in which states and non-state actors engage. Let’s consider four variants:

- **Political liberalism.** This variant stresses the importance of regime type, especially democracy, on relations between states. A good representation is the democratic peace theory, which attributes peaceful relations between democracies to the democratic characteristics of the governments and societies. Advocates point to the absence of war between democracies over time and often stress the fact that countries that have fought with each other in the past have stopped doing so once they shared democratic regime types.

- **Economic/commercial liberalism.** This variant stresses the importance of trade and economic exchange on relations between states. This tradition goes back a long way, to Adam Smith in the 18th century, and Norman Angell in the early 20th century, who argued (ironically, just before the outbreak of World War I) that trade had grown so important to European countries that war was unthinkable. More recently, scholars such as Erik Gartzke have advanced a capitalist peace argument. US presidents such as Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have reflected this variant of liberalism when advocating for extending and deepening trade with China to help maintain peaceful relations between the two countries.

- **Institutional liberalism.** This variant stresses the importance of international institutions and organizations such as the United Nations for cooperative relations between states and other actors in world politics. Advocates of this variant emphasize the role of institutions in promoting communication, building norms, and facilitating cooperation and predictability in world politics. Scholars such as Bruce Russett and John Oneal have argued that more significant institutional linkages between countries is a good predictor of peaceful relations. A good example is the role of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization in promoting cooperation and coordination on economic policy to help avoid the escalation of economic conflict into violence between states as occurred during the 1920s and 1930s when such institutions did not exist. The development and role of the European Union in integrating the conflict-ridden states of Europe into a peaceful community is often pointed to as a good example, as well.

- **Societal/ideational liberalism.** This variant of liberal theory stresses the role of shared identity, culture, norms, and societal connections on relations between societies. For example, many observers interpret the EU as an international organization created on the basis of post–World War II cooperation that was forced upon Europeans by the United States in return for Marshall Plan aid. Yet the degree of cooperation that now marks this union of states willing to cede some of their sovereignty to the larger entity seems unlikely had there not already been some shared bonds based on similar religious, cultural, and linguistic ties.

As a consequence of this general liberal view of the international system, which adds a number of potentially important characteristics to the formal anarchy emphasized by realists, liberal theorists see more opportunities for cooperation and peace in world politics. In particular, system-level dynamics such as the security dilemma tend to be viewed more as trust and communication problems than as fundamental and unalterable consequences of anarchy.
For liberal theorists, norms, interdependence, and institutions can all reduce, or even eliminate, security dilemmas.

3-3b Liberalism and the Relevant Actors in International Relations

Liberal theorists also depart from their realist counterparts on the question of which players are important. As Keohane and Nye suggested, liberals relax the two main assumptions of realist theorists when it comes to players. First, many liberal theorists relax the assumption of the state as unitary and undifferentiated actors. Instead, liberal theorists often see the importance of individuals, governmental institutions and agencies, and societal forces in shaping state behavior and interactions. Liberal theorists are far more likely to study the effects on world politics of personality and decision-making factors and processes, different types of regimes and governments, cultural variations, interest groups and corporations, and other subnational players and factors.

Second, liberal theorists tend to relax the assumption of the state as the only important actor, as well. Non-state actors such as those reviewed in Chapter 2—international organizations (IOs) such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization; nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and the International Red Cross; multinational or transnational corporations (MNCs/TNCs) such as Nike, Toyota, IBM, and Siemens; and transnational advocacy networks (TANs) like the Red Crescent Societies, the Islamic State, or al-Qaeda—are also considered significant. Many liberal theorists argue that such players are potentially important actors on a wide range of issues and frequently influence states and affect behavior and outcomes in ways that go far beyond the realist treatment of them as secondary, derivative, and mostly unimportant players. For liberal theorists, leaving these non-state actors out of explanations frequently produces incomplete or misleading conclusions. The question for liberal theorists is when and how do these players play important roles.

3-3c Liberalism and the Important Resources in International Relations

Liberal theorists are also concerned with power as a critical resource in world politics. However, liberal theorists depart from realists on the nature and characteristics of power and influence. At least three key differences have great importance in liberal explanations of world politics.

First, the liberal lens stresses the multidimensional nature of power. Much more than realists, who acknowledge the great range of power resources but stress military power as the essential and central component, liberal theorists recognize the importance of military power but argue that there are many sources of power and influence in world politics. Military might is one, and it is important in many situations. However, other sources and types of power can also be critical, and, since many of the players in world politics do not possess military power at all (e.g., NGOs, IOs, MNCs/TNCs) but still exert influence, the sources of their power are also important. Even some states have greater influence than their military power would suggest. For example, liberal theorist Richard Rosecrance has stressed the rising importance of “trading states” (e.g., Germany, Japan) and “virtual states” (e.g., Japan, South Korea, Singapore) since the mid-1980s, whose power and influence is important but fundamentally unrelated to territory and military might. Thus, for liberal theorists, economic resources, natural resources, human resources (such as skills and education), and ideas can all be important elements of power in their own right, and not merely as contributors to a state’s military capabilities.

Reflecting this liberal emphasis on the multidimensional nature of power, Joseph Nye (2005) has differentiated between hard power and soft power in world politics. Where hard power includes the realist conceptions of “the ability to get what you want” through coercive means such as military force, soft power involves “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather
than coercion.” It depends more on ideas, appeal, cooperative relations with allies, and productive connections between countries. In particular, image and credibility, reputation, and the appeal of ideas enable a state or other actor to exercise power over preferences, not just power over actions. Effective soft power results in “the ability to get another to want what you want.” According to Nye, military power (hard), economic power (hard and soft), and ideas/reputation (soft power) are all important.

Building on the multidimensional nature of power, liberal theorists tend to reject the realist emphasis on its hierarchical nature, as well. Instead, the liberal lens tends to view power as situation specific or context dependent. No single power resource is paramount in every situation. Instead, as Keohane and Nye argue in Power and Interdependence, there are multiple hierarchies of power determined by the issue at hand and other contextual factors. Having the world’s largest and most powerful military may have been the most significant source of power in the conflict between the United States and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 2003. It may not be the only or even the most important factor in relations between China and the United States or countering the threat of transnational terrorism, and it may be completely irrelevant to the threat of climate change or trade disputes between the United States and Japan. Similarly, the economic power and influence of Germany or China may be central to shaping global economic relations or climate change, but largely unrelated to confronting the Islamic State.

Even military power itself can be seen as context dependent. How else can one explain the failures of the United States in Vietnam and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, both situations in which the world’s superpowers confronted substantially weaker, poor, developing countries but were unable to translate their clear advantages in military power into success? Similarly, despite more than a decade of effort and all the military and economic resources deployed and expended by the US over that time, violence and rebellion continued in Iraq, even escalating after then as insurgents challenged the US-backed regime and seized territory. Or, as liberal theorists would argue, military power is largely irrelevant to resolve issues of economic competition and trade relations between the United States and Japan, to prevent certain countries from unsustainable whaling practices, or to convince Brazil to protect its rain forest from further destruction. Hence, liberal theorists are much more skeptical about the fungibility of power, preferring to treat issue areas separately.

3-3d Liberalism and the Central Dynamics of International Relations

From these foundations, the general orientation of liberal theorists emerges: In a formally anarchic world in which states and other actors share
(a) some common interests and goals, (b) varying levels of interdependence, and (c) connections through institutions and other channels, conflict is possible, but it is not the norm. Some situations and issues promote cooperation and reduce the likelihood of conflict, especially violent conflict. States are important actors, but their behavior and interactions are shaped by the individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions that make up their country and government, and by non-state actors in the international system. Power is multifaceted and wielded in a variety of ways. Unlike realists, who tend to see the dynamics of world politics as the unfolding of similar behavior in cycles, liberals see the dynamics of world politics more in terms of progress and change that unfolds over time in a more linear fashion.

A relatively recent example that illustrates this point is the debate over the future of Europe and NATO after the end of the Cold War in 1989. Realists such as John Mearsheimer predicted that the end of the Cold War would trigger a return of conflict and competition in Europe and the likely end to the NATO alliance, since the common threat posed by the Soviet Union was the reason for the cooperation (both between countries such as France and Germany, and between European states and the United States, in general). With the disappearance of that common threat, Mearsheimer expected the return of former patterns of conflict as the enduring forces of world politics asserted themselves. As Mearsheimer (2001) colorfully put it, “we will soon miss the Cold War.”

By contrast, liberal theorists such as Stanley Hoffman, Robert Keohane, Bruce Russett, and Thomas Risse countered that many things have changed since World War II. The spread of democracy, the development of norms against war among European countries, influential and cooperative institutions such as the EU, and shared interests and benefits from cooperative practices have all fundamentally changed relations among European states such as France and Germany, and relations between Europe and the United States, as well. With such changing dynamics and progress, these theorists argued, a return to violent conflict is highly improbable. About three decades later, which perspective has been more accurate? Are shifts in power and interests generating tensions among NATO allies and signaling its decline? Or, do the institutions, interdependence, and norms connecting NATO allies provide the glue that preserves their cooperation?

For liberal theorists, when conflict occurs, it can typically be traced to factors such as misunderstanding, miscommunication, cultural differences, bad regimes, and other such causes. Leaders, decisions, processes, regimes, and institutions shape the general patterns of world politics. So, liberal theorists are especially interested in explaining the patterns of cooperation that characterize much of world politics, while also accounting for the exceptions of violent conflict.

However, and in large part as a consequence of the liberal conception of power (i.e., its multidimensionality and situation-specific nature) and the international system, liberal theorists tend to see world politics as a positive-sum game rather than a zero-sum game. Because of mutual interests and goals, the possibilities of trade-offs across issue areas, and the multidimensional nature of power and influence, liberal theorists see many more possibilities for win-win scenarios and often argue that absolute gains rather than relative gains is the relevant perspective for most actors most of the time. The 2015 Iran nuclear deal provides a recent example of a seemingly win-win scenario. Major powers like the US, the UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany were concerned with the prospect of Iran’s nuclear energy program being used clandestinely to produce a nuclear weapon. Iran’s unwillingness to allow international inspections of its nuclear facilities fed those concerns. For its part, Iran wanted to have a nuclear program and wanted access to significant financial assets frozen in foreign bank accounts. A deal was struck. The other countries (known as the P5+1) secured Iran’s agreement to delay for some years its ability to produce a nuclear weapon (by sending 98% of its enriched nuclear fuel abroad, getting rid of about two-thirds of its centrifuges used to enrich nuclear fuel, and allowing limited international inspections, and other concessions). In exchange, Iran received international recognition of its right to have a peaceful nuclear program and regained access to about $100 billion of its own money in frozen accounts. Each

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**positive-sum**: a condition in which all parties to an issue can benefit or “win.”
side wanted the absolute gains the deal provided. Table 3-4 summarizes the key features of liberalism.

**TABLE 3-4**

Summary of Liberalism and World Politics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY FEATURES</th>
<th>LIBERAL INTERPRETATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature of the international system</td>
<td>Formal anarchy; with interdependence, shared norms, and international institutions linking the players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant actors</td>
<td>States and non-state actors (e.g., international institutions, multinational or transnational corporations, international nongovernmental organizations, transnational advocacy networks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important resources</td>
<td>Multidimensional and situation-specific power; hard and soft power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central dynamics</td>
<td>Cooperation, competition, and conflict; positive-sum calculations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anarchy</td>
<td>Meaningful characteristic of the international system, generating security dilemmas and complicating cooperation and coordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>State and non-state actors, with different perspectives, values, institutions, and preferences struggle to cooperate and communicate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity</td>
<td>Webs of connections between states and societies create both opportunity and challenges for world politics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**3-4 THE CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE ON WORLD POLITICS**

> **3-4** Explain the foundations of the constructivist approach in terms of its conception of (a) the nature of the international system, (b) its relevant actors, (c) important resources, and (d) central dynamics.

Constructivist theories of international relations find their foundations in the field of sociology and thinkers such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Nicholas Onuf may have been the first international relations scholar to use the term **constructivism**, arguing that we live in “a world of our making,” but Alexander Wendt is probably best known for this approach, which sees “facts” as “socially constructed.” In other words, ideas and facts mean what we as members of a social group agree they mean. This perspective challenges the basic assumptions of both realism and liberalism by asking fundamental questions about such concepts as anarchy or the nature and meaning of power and linking ideas and shared understanding of them to actions and relationships in world politics. For example, is the international arena like the violence as portrayed in *Westworld* or *The Walking Dead*, the school playground without teachers, or a large family just trying to get along?

Both realism and liberalism make several assertions about the international arena. They both claim, for example, that anarchy—the absence of central government—is the prevailing condition in the world. Realism asserts that states are the primary actors. Liberalism also emphasizes states, but it expands the list of actors to include non-state actors. What do these assumptions mean? Does the anarchy that defines the international system necessarily mean a violent, fearful environment like Hobbes described or an environment more like a troop of chimpanzees where there is real structure, cooperation, and altruism? In contrast to realism and liberalism, constructivism directs our attention to the meanings behind ideas and actions and the ways that interactions shape expectations and behavior.

**3-4a Constructivism and the Nature of the International System**

As we have said, anarchy does not mean chaos, but simply the absence of central government. Even in anarchy, we see both order and structure in world politics, and the existence of institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and others make that clear. But what about the world Hobbes described? Think about the way that Hollywood movies depict the American West during US territorial expansion. Almost universally, everyone either carries a gun or lives in fear of subjugation by those with guns. The Old West is often depicted as a true Hobbesian world in which everyone lives in fear of others and life is “nasty, brutish, and short,” at least until the hero saves everyone by killing the villain. The moral is quite simply that one must
provide for one’s own security (i.e., self-help). This depiction is generally how realists see the world. States must defend themselves or be subjugated by more powerful states. Certainly, during the era of colonial expansion, imperial wars, and gunboat diplomacy, this description appeared accurate. Powerful countries like the United Kingdom took over weaker countries like India, and the powerful countries fought with one another (e.g., the UK and France). Is this how the world works today?

According to prevailing international norms, outright military conquest is no longer acceptable, at least for the purposes of owning another country. That is why Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 was so contentious: The Crimeans voted to join Russia while disguised Russian troops stood by. (Was that a “free and fair” election?) Further, Russian troops have been found in the eastern Donbass region of Ukraine, which remains beyond the control of the government in Kiev. By contrast, the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan (authorized by the UN for collective security) and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq were officially aimed at removing an international threat. In neither case was the US goal to retain control of those territories. Neither was colonized the way they might have been before the middle of the 20th century.

So what has changed? The international system is still formally anarchic. There is no world government with a true enforcement mechanism, and the UN does not have any authority that is not first granted to it by individual member states. Yet, what is considered acceptable behavior by states is different now than it was just 60 years ago. Instead of the Wild West, the international system seems to be more like a somewhat unruly family. Some members of the family get along very well (e.g., the UK and France). Is this how countries like India, and the powerful countries fought with each other (e.g., the UK and France). Is this how the world works today?

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This change in perspective and behavior is at the heart of what constructivists emphasize in their explanations of the patterns of world politics. Thus, rather than treat anarchy as a given condition, political scientist Alexander Wendt (1992) provided the constructivist view, arguing that “Anarchy is what states make of it” (p. 395). That is, anarchy is socially constructed, not determined by the environment. Social construction simply means that a concept is created by the ideas and interactions within a society. For example, fashion is a social construction. The clothes worn in the 1970s were considered very good-looking then, but jokes were made about them in the 1980s (and today, for that matter). There is nothing about the clothes that are or are not inherently fashionable. Instead, society’s opinion changed and redefined what was fashionable and, as important, those ideas led to behavior and actions (what clothes are made and sold and what people wear). Something that is not a social construction is rain. The environment, specifically the level of moisture in the sky, determines whether or not it will rain. Society’s opinion has no influence over the rain. Realists and liberals see anarchy like rain—something that is determined by the environment. Social constructivists like Wendt see anarchy like fashion—something that the actions and opinions of a society create.

According to Wendt, we can identify three ideal types of anarchy, each with very different implications for action:

- In Hobbesian anarchy, the system is much like realists depict, where states are adversaries and conflict is a normal part of their competition for power and survival.
- In Lockean anarchy, the system is more like liberals describe it, with states viewing each other as rivals, but in which cooperation, competition, and conflict occur.
- In Kantian anarchy, states see each other as friends and no longer fear each other or consider using force against each other. Instead, they find peaceful ways to settle their disputes and support each against other threats. Thus, “anarchy” itself is what states make of it and it does not determine state behavior.

If a central characteristic like anarchy is something that is constructed by the actions and opinions of states and non-state actors in the international
system, then the meaning and characteristics of anarchy can change over time. During the colonial era, it was acceptable to conquer small states and thus make war for profit. In the current, postcolonial era, war for profit is not considered acceptable. This change is the result of a different social construction of what anarchy means. Just as fashions have changed over the years, so have the rules that states generally follow. Thus, the patterns of behavior that stem from “anarchy” in world politics will evolve and change, and will be different for different groups. For example, anarchy means something very different for the states of the European Union or the NATO alliance than it does for the states of Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia.

In the first groups, anarchy does not mean self-help, security dilemmas, and competition at all, but in the other groups, it often does.

3-4b Constructivism and the Relevant Actors in International Relations

Like liberalism, the constructivist perspective sees a more complicated array of players in world politics. Of course, constructivists pay attention to the state as a major player—some, like Wendt, treat world politics as an essentially state-centric system. But constructivists tend to see states more like liberals than realists: as complicated, multifaceted entities rather than as unitary, rational actors. Moreover, because constructivists emphasize the role of norms and ideas, they tend to stress the importance of people, groups, and cultural factors within states as very important. These are where the ideas come from and are held.

Like liberals, constructivists see significance in a variety of non-state actors and organizations, including international institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and transnational advocacy networks. Moreover, constructivists pay close attention to cultural groups in world politics—nations or ethnic groups and their experiences, ideas, and values. Finally, constructivists emphasize the importance of the identities and interests of the players as central to understanding their behavior. As we have just described, though, these aspects of the relevant actors are also socially constructed. Hence, what “Russia” means to the United States is shaped by US culture and experience, but also by the patterns of interactions and shared experiences between the two countries. “Russia” meant something particular during the Cold War between the two countries (rival, enemy); something else in the post–Cold War environment (vanquished? partner?); and, perhaps, something else again in the wake of the aggressive actions taken against neighboring states such as Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) and interference in the elections of the United States and other European allies in recent years. (See the box “Foreign Policy in Perspective: Russia and Its Neighbors” for more on Russia’s actions.)

For example, constructivist scholars such as Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore stress the importance of state identities and interests and the way the norms of the international society shape them. In particular, Finnemore argues that these norms are shaped, supported, and spread by international organizations that help guide states toward particular behavior and understandings of their interests. Constructivist scholars like Peter Katzenstein emphasize how domestic culture and groups within states shape their identities and interests, and the norms and behavior they embrace. Finally, constructivist scholars such as Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink point to the role of transnational actors in shaping state interests about a variety of things, often serving as “norm entrepreneurs” who advance particular values and expectations and influence state behavior (see our discussion of transnational advocacy networks in Chapter 1).

3-4c Constructivism and the Important Resources in International Relations

Like liberal theorists, constructivists take a more complex and multidimensional view of power. Constructivists accept some of the material or tangible aspects of power that both realists and liberals stress, but they push further than both of those perspectives to stress the ideational aspects of power and influence. In effect, they push the conception of “soft power” even further than liberals. In this conception, ideas, norms, identities—ways of thinking about yourself and others—and statements are an important part of what constitutes power and influence. Constructivists call this discursive power and stress that the meaning of things is an important element of power as well as the empirical nature of things. According to constructivists, discursive power

ideational: emphasizing the centrality of ideas and norms in shaping behavior and interactions.
Russia and Its Neighbors

In recent years, Russia has increased its efforts to exert influence in its geographic neighborhood. For example, in 2008 Russia used military force against its neighbor, Georgia, to support breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which it has occupied since. In 2014, Russia used force and other methods to accomplish the annexation of Crimea, part of Ukraine, and to support the rebellion of Russian-speaking groups in eastern Ukraine. Russia has also engaged in political interference in other countries around its perimeter over the past decade or so, trying to manipulate elections and support pro-Russian parties and leaders, among other things.

In January 2015, Russia led some of its partner states of the former Soviet Union, Belarus and Kazakhstan, to establish the Eurasian Economic Union, building on and extending existing trade agreements to further integrate the countries of the region along a variety of dimensions, including labor, investment, and energy. Kyrgyzstan and Armenia also joined, and Moldova became an official observer in 2017. The Eurasian Economic Union is open to other states around Russia’s perimeter as well, most of whom are being actively courted by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Motivated by President Putin’s vision of a trade and political bloc capable of challenging the United States, China, and the European Union, the Eurasian Economic Union is characterized by some observers as “a new geopolitical force capable of standing up to Russia’s competitors on the world stage” (Neyfakh 2014). According to Putin (then prime minister) in 2011, when the foreign policy initiative was first announced, “We suggest a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world” (Putin 2011). The implications of this foreign policy initiative were not lost on Western leaders. Then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton characterized it as the possible resovietization of the region in December 2012. Western concerns increased after the Russian annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and other aggressive actions in the years since.

In light of the theoretical perspectives discussed in this chapter, how should Russia’s actions in its neighborhood and, in particular, the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union be interpreted and explained?

1. Why would Vladimir Putin seek to establish a new Eurasian Economic Union?
2. What would realists, liberals, and constructivists offer to explain the initiative and its likely consequences?
3. What foreign policy responses from the United States, China, and the states of the EU are most likely, according to these three theoretical perspectives?

Consider, for example, the photo of the nuclear missiles at the beginning of this chapter. To a realist, these missiles are a tangible example of the most important aspect of power—military strength. To a liberal, the missiles may represent power and influence, but they are not likely to be relevant in the relations between the United States and Canada, or between the US and Japan. To a constructivist, social construction does not mean there is a question about whether or not there are missiles. Instead, the meaning of the missiles depends on the players’ identity, interactions, and interests. So, such missiles, possessed and
deployed by the United Kingdom, are not a threat to the United States and are not even particularly relevant to the relationship between the US and the UK. However, these same missiles, deployed by Russia or North Korea, take on an entirely different meaning for the power and security of countries such as the US, South Korea, and Japan, and they result in a very different pattern on actions and interactions.

Indeed, most Americans probably think that it’s okay that the United States, the United Kingdom, and France have nuclear weapons. During the Cold War, nuclear weapons in the hands of the British and French were not viewed in anything like the same way as those controlled by Soviet leaders, but instead were interpreted as contributing to American power. Now, since the end of the Cold War, some people may also be comfortable with Russia and China having such weapons. Further, most people outside of North Korea probably think it’s not okay that North Korea has a nuclear weapon. What about the nuclear arsenals of India, Pakistan, and Israel?

If you live in Iran or another predominately Muslim state in the Middle East, you probably think it’s really bad that the Israelis have nuclear weapons. If you are Israeli, you probably think it is not only a good thing but also necessary for your survival, and that the real negative scenario would be the possession of nuclear weapons by neighboring states. Why else would the Israelis conduct military strikes on suspected nuclear program sites in countries such as Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007 and 2017)? On the surface, one can understand why these two different views can exist. In effect, Syria and Israel are historically enemies and each side would see the other as threatening. Iran and Israel similarly view each other with great suspicion and hostility. That is exactly the point of constructivism. Security is defined or constructed by each country. Thus, although Iran may see itself as a good state that has a bellicose and nuclear-armed neighbor, Israel probably sees itself as a good state whose neighbors—although militarily weaker—threaten its survival and can’t be allowed to possess such weapons.

3-4d Constructivism and the Central Dynamics of World Politics

Since a central idea behind constructivism is that all social relationships are constructed by people and therefore are subject to change, it follows that the central dynamics of world politics are subject to great variation over time and among different pairs or groups of states. The historically intense hatred between the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland provides a useful example. Northern Ireland has been a part of the United Kingdom since 1921, and in 1971, civil violence broke out between the Protestant-controlled government and the Catholic Irish Republican Army (IRA). For decades, the violence raged between these two groups and the
division between Protestants and Catholics widened. Like all conflicts, the causes are complex and multiple. Economic disparities between the two groups and a lack of political representation by the Catholics contributed to the divisiveness. However, it is also important to realize that the hatred between the two groups was fostered by a social construction. There were no visible differences between these two groups. They spoke the same language. They lived in the same country. Within the Irish Catholic community, however, there was the belief—created by the Irish Catholic community—that the Protestants were not really Irish and should not be governing Northern Ireland; further, they thought Northern Ireland should be reunited with the Republic of Ireland. Conversely, the Irish Protestants believed that the Catholics were trying to drive them from their homes and would stop at nothing to rid Northern Ireland of their presence. To be sure, there was some truth to both of these beliefs—the IRA and the Northern Ireland government (and British armed forces) were fighting. However, if there had been a reason for the hatred beyond their partially misinformed beliefs, such as the enslavement of one group by the other, then compromise would not be possible. In that case, the two sides would prefer to continue fighting until one side lost.

Instead, a peace process slowly began in 1994 and ended with an agreement that provided for a governing body based on consociational democracy—that is, guaranteed representation for both Protestants and Catholics. Although problems continue, there has been a shift in the social construction of the two sides. They are no longer bitter enemies, but perhaps cordial opponents. The shift involved years of diplomatic debate but also a shift in how the two communities perceived or socially constructed their views of each other.

You might ask if the peace in Northern Ireland is simply the result of the two sides getting tired of fighting. If that were the case, you might expect only a negative peace, the mere absence of fighting. Instead, there is real cooperation in Northern Ireland, suggesting that there is a positive peace between the two groups. Also, if groups that defined themselves as enemies simply grew tired of fighting, then how could we explain the continual fighting in the Middle East between the Israelis and their Arab neighbors? To end a conflict and build peace, the two sides must no longer define each other as enemies.

Another perhaps more stark and sad example that highlights the constructivist view of the central dynamics of world politics is Rwanda, home to two main ethnic groups: the Hutus and the Tutsis. The two groups date back approximately 2,000 years and were perceived by colonial powers to have slightly different physical features. Supposedly, Hutus were shorter and Tutsis had a narrower nose. After a long history as a German colony, Rwanda came under Belgian control after World War I. In 1935, Belgium issued identity cards identifying each Rwandan as either Hutu or Tutsi—considered by the Belgians to be different races. After almost 2,000 years, however, lineage was difficult to determine (can you trace your relatives back that far?). So the Belgians based the identity of the two races on physical differences, and when that was not apparent, the number of cattle owned by the family would determine their race (families with more cattle were determined to be Tutsis) (Chretien 2003).

Unfortunately, determining a person’s ethnicity based on his or her economic status had fatal consequences. The 1935 identity cards artificially constructed two groups that competed for political and economic power and left the smaller group, the Tutsis, in control of the country. Over the years, the competition intensified to the point of open conflict and revolt. In 1994, the Hutu-controlled government and militias began murdering both Tutsis and politically moderate Hutus on a massive scale. In the end, the Rwandan...
genocide claimed the lives of approximately 800,000 people, many of them hacked to death by their neighbors using machetes.

The root of the genocide was the socially constructed race division put in place by the Belgians. To be sure, the genocide was preceded by a conflict that took years to develop and in which both sides played a part. For the Belgians’ part, they did not anticipate such a horrendous outcome. However, the division was socially constructed, and it killed almost a million people. For a chilling representation of the Rwandan genocide, watch the film *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) or alternatively, the documentary *The Ghosts of Rwanda* (2004). Both films will leave you horrified.

The relationship and interactions between the United States and Russia offer another example of the importance of changing social constructions and their effects on the central dynamics of world politics. Consider what happened in 2010, when 10 people were arrested by US authorities who suspected them of spying for Russia. During the worst days of the Cold War (say, in the 1950s or early 1960s), such a scandal would have provoked much attention and a serious confrontation. But in 2010, then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (a former career Soviet intelligence officer with the KGB) denounced the arrests as “unfounded” on the day they were announced in the press, but the Russians said and did nothing much beyond issuing that statement. Less than two weeks later, Russian and American airplanes met on the tarmac of a Vienna airport where the 10 individuals arrested in the United States were swapped for four Russians previously imprisoned on charges of spying for the United States or the United Kingdom.

Why didn’t these matters provoke a more serious confrontation? Perhaps the answer lies in changes in the relationship between the two countries after the end of the Cold War. In 2010, US President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev communicated frequently and sought to find ways for their states to cooperate and put past rivalries behind them as best they could; we can say they created a new social construction of friendship and cooperation. Thus, “friends” might minimize their reactions to negative situations such as spy scandals, but “rivals,” “enemies,” or “opponents” will not. Neither Medvedev nor Obama was willing to let a minor espionage case sabotage an emerging positive relationship.

Now think about the more recent situation. Since 2010, Russia has engaged in aggressive actions against Ukraine, including annexation of Crimea and the use of military power to support rebellion in the eastern part of that country. Russia has also aggressively interfered in democratic processes in the US and other European countries. For example, the US concluded that Russia hacked into computer systems and engaged in information warfare designed to influence the 2016 presidential election. These interactions have raised the prospect that the “rival” or “enemy” construction of the relationship will return. How would a spy scandal like the one in 2010 be treated today?

Yet another good example of the power of social construction came in 1967. During the Six-Day War pitting Israel against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, a US naval vessel was attacked. The USS Liberty was in international waters north of the Sinai Peninsula where Israeli and Egyptian forces were fighting when it was attacked by Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats. What if the Soviets had done this to a US ship during the Cold War?

*The USS Liberty after Israeli patrol boats and aircraft attacked it, killing 34 US sailors*  
Bill Ray/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images

Six-Day War: the 1967 war between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Israel won the war and took control of the occupied territories (the Gaza Strip, West Bank, and Golan Heights).
boats. The ship was heavily damaged, 34 on board were killed, and 170 were injured. Had this involved an attack by the Soviet Union or one of its allies during this Cold War era, severe military reprisals would have resulted, perhaps even leading to World War III. Yet in this case, the Israelis said it was an honest mistake in wartime, President Lyndon Johnson did not question that explanation, and the Israelis ultimately paid $14.5 million in compensation to the families of the dead and injured and for damages to the ship itself. It may have been an honest mistake on Israel’s part, but it also may have been intentional. The Liberty was a spy ship operated by the US National Security Agency (NSA) and was engaged in eavesdropping on battlefield communications during the war. The Israelis may have simply wanted to prevent others from having access to that intelligence information. Had President Johnson not seen the Israelis as “friends,” their explanation might not have been accepted and the more sinister motive might have been attributed to them. In hindsight, it seems highly likely that the social construction of the US–Israeli relationship as one of “friends” rather than of “rivals,” “competitors,” or even “enemies” made a considerable difference in the US response.

These examples show the power of the social construction of ideas as a way to explain the dynamics of world politics (see Table 3-5). Political realism would be unable to explain these episodes, due to its emphasis on states as unitary actors rationally pursuing their national interests defined largely in terms of military power. Liberalism recognizes that substate actors exist and can matter but would be unequipped to explain the intrastate violence in Northern Ireland or Rwanda or the lack of interstate violence between the United States and Israel. Social constructivism provides a different lens through which these real-world situations can be explained.

**CONCLUSION: DUELING THEORIES?**

The three major approaches to understanding and explaining international relations each simplify international reality, although they do so in different ways, highlighting different features and elements of the international system, its relevant actors and their resources, and the major patterns and dynamics that emerge (see Table 3-6). Recent events since the turn of the century appear to pit the three perspectives against each other once again. Realism, liberalism, and constructivism have been cast as contenders and as complementary explanations for different situations. Consider what you now know about theory in general, and these three major theoretical approaches in particular: Is the current context an example of the consequences of hegemony (the dominance of one state), with rivals and challenges to the dominant power (the United States) emerging? Or is it an example of the dynamics of liberalism, with zones of peace and zones of turmoil in the world? Could it be the ideas, interests, and interactions that shape the behavior of states have developed to establish new norms and patterns of behavior? Or are elements of all three perspectives at work at the same time? At the end of the day, we must theorize to arrive at answers. But hold on: If you find these theoretical approaches to be a bit inadequate, there are others to consider, and they are the focus of the next chapter.

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**SUBSTATE ACTORS:** groups within a state such as political parties, insurgents, or ethnic groups.

**HEGEMONY:** domination of the international system by one country.
TABLE 3-6
Comparing the Theories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEATURE</th>
<th>REALISM</th>
<th>LIBERALISM</th>
<th>CONSTRUCTIVISM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature of the international system</td>
<td>Anarchic; self-help</td>
<td>Formal anarchy; with interdependence, shared norms, and international institutions</td>
<td>Socially constructed, dynamic anarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant actors</td>
<td>States</td>
<td>States and non-state actors</td>
<td>States, organizations, people, ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important resources</td>
<td>Power, especially military</td>
<td>Multidimensional and situation-specific power; hard and soft power</td>
<td>Determined by social construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central dynamics</td>
<td>Conflict; zero-sum calculations</td>
<td>Cooperation, competition, and conflict; positive-sum calculations</td>
<td>Conflict, cooperation, but changing patterns from state to state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anarchy</td>
<td>Fundamental structural condition generating fear, uncertainty, and conflict</td>
<td>Meaningful characteristic of the international system, generating security dilemmas and complicating cooperation and coordination</td>
<td>Structure of the international system that is determined by ideas, interactions, and statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>States have different levels of power and competing interests</td>
<td>State and non-state actors, with different perspectives, values, institutions, and preferences, struggle to cooperate and communicate</td>
<td>Different social definitions of the world and other actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity</td>
<td>Generated from stratification of power and competing self-interests of states</td>
<td>Webs of connections between states and societies create both opportunity and challenges for world politics</td>
<td>Fashioned by the changing social constructions of the world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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KEY CONCEPTS

3-1 Identify the nature and use of theory and describe the components of theory.

Theory involves a set of concepts, specifies their interrelationships, and, most important, explains the reasons for those relationships. A theory links these concepts, relationships, and explanations with hypotheses: “if . . . then . . .” statements about particular relationships and outcomes that should be observable in reality if the explanation is useful. Theory involves description, explanation, and prediction. It usually offers a basis for prescription as well.

3-2 Explain the foundations of the realist approach in terms of its conception of (a) the nature of the international system, (b) its relevant actors, (c) important resources, and (d) central dynamics.

For realists, anarchy—the absence of a central government to establish order and wield power and authority—establishes a fundamentally Hobbesian world in which sovereign states, the main players of world politics, must rely on themselves to protect their interests and accomplish their goals. In this self-help world, power—the ability to get what
you want—is both a central instrument and a primary objective to ensure survival and security. Realists assume that all states want the same things, with the only significant difference among them being how much power and capability they have to act. Because power is unequally distributed, the international system is stratified, with different levels of resources, wealth, and power possessed by different states. Realists view power as relative and hierarchical, with military power the most essential for the ability to get what one wants in world politics. Since power is relative and ultimately based on military strength, states cannot ever really have “enough” or trust others to be satisfied in an environment where conflict is the norm. The distribution of power among countries affects how they act and the likelihood of conflict. Realists generally view international politics as zero-sum situations and consider conflict to be the normal dynamic in an anarchic system.

3-3 Explain the foundations of the liberal approach in terms of its conceptions of (a) the nature of the international system, (b) its relevant actors, (c) important resources, and (d) central dynamics.

Liberal theorists begin with the formal anarchy of the system, acknowledging the absence of formal, authoritative central government in world politics. But liberal theorists also recognize the importance of one or more additional features of the international system that reduce the impact of formal anarchy, such as international norms, mutual interests among states, interdependence, and institutions. Since these characteristics tie states together, liberal theorists see more opportunities for cooperation and peace. System-level dynamics such as the security dilemma tend to be viewed more as trust and communication problems that can be reduced by norms, interdependence, common identity, and institutions rather than as inalterable consequences of anarchy. Liberal theorists also view differences in states—in type of government, and other features—as important for their behavior and they see the importance of individuals, governmental institutions and agencies, non-state actors, and societal forces in shaping state behavior and interactions. The liberal lens stresses the multidimensional nature of power, recognizing the importance of military power but arguing that there are many sources of power and influence in world politics. Liberals differentiate between “hard power” and “soft power” and tend to reject the realist emphasis on the hierarchical nature of power. Instead, they tend to view power as a situation specific or context dependent. In a formally anarchic world in which states and other actors share some common interests and goals and are interdependent and connected through institutions and other channels, cooperation, competition, and conflict are all possible. Conflict, however, is not the norm, and world politics is often a positive-sum game. Progress and change are both possible and likely.

3-4 Explain the foundations of the constructivist approach in terms of its conception of (a) the nature of the international system, (b) its relevant actors, (c) important resources, and (d) central dynamics.

States do not, as suggested by realism, constantly engage in conflict or preparation for conflict. Social construction simply means that a concept is created by the identities and interactions of societies. Anarchy is the absence of central government, but what it means for state behavior varies according to the players’ ideas and shared experiences and interactions. For constructivists, states are important, but they consist of people with identity and values. Other actors are also important, including international institutions, non-governmental organizations, and transnational advocacy networks. Moreover, constructivists pay close attention to cultural groups in world politics—nations or ethnic groups and their experiences, ideas, and values. To constructivists, the basis of power is not in the material power of states or institutions, but rather in the ideas that people believe in and the shared understandings they develop. It is not that the material world and tangible resources of power do not matter, but that their meaning depends on shared ideas, norms, and interpretations. Since a central idea behind constructivism is that all social relationships are constructed by people and therefore are subject to change, it follows that the central dynamics of world politics are subject to great variation over time and among different players in world politics.

3-5 Assess the uses and applications of each approach as contending and complementary lenses for understanding international relations.

Because realism, liberalism, and constructivism stress different characteristics, players, and dynamics in world politics, they offer contending, and sometime complementary, explanations of the patterns of world politics. Realism is the simplest perspective, focusing on the reasons for conflict. Its relevance to the balance-of-power patterns of the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries is clear, but how well does it capture the changing patterns of behavior among great powers and others after World War II? Liberalism and constructivism are much more complex explanations that reduce the emphasis on conflict, but they may capture the forces underlying cooperation and change in world politics, especially after World War II.

**KEY TERMS**

- democratic peace, 59
- empirical theory, 61
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chapter 3  powerful ideas

review questions

1. What is theory, and what are its central purposes?
2. What are the main areas of agreement and disagreement between realists, liberals, and constructivists in their conception of the international system?
3. What are the main areas of agreement and disagreement between realists, liberals, and constructivists in their conception of the relevant actors in international relations?
4. What are the main areas of agreement and disagreement between realists, liberals, and constructivists in their conception of power and influence in international relations?
5. What are the main areas of agreement and disagreement between realists, liberals, and constructivists in their conception of the major patterns of behavior and interaction in international relations?

think about this

peace in europe after 1945

For centuries Europe was among the most violent places in the world. In the early 20th century, this pattern of persistent warfare culminated in the two largest wars of world history, World Wars I and II. However, since World War II’s end, this region has enjoyed persistent peace. Large-scale warfare appears as a thing of the past, and much of Europe is now united and cooperating in the European Union. In 2012, the EU was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, an act that would likely have been unimaginable less than a century before. Consider this dramatic change in fortune for Europe before and after 1945 in light of the three theoretical perspectives we discussed in this chapter.

How would realists, liberals, and constructivists explain peace in Europe after World War II, and which explanations do you find most and least helpful?

for more information . . .


