



Realism: Its Relevance and Need for Renewal

Realismo: Su relevancia y necesidad de renovación

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Abstract

This paper uses the theoretical lens of realism to analyze the events of World War II generally, and the decision to use the bomb specifically to show how realism still finds salience in international relations theorizing. It shows, however, that while realism has a parsimonious and compelling explanation for how the world works, that there are limits to its explanatory and predictive power. Globalization, international cooperation and interdependence, climate change, refugee crises, pandemics and the flows of people and money across borders are all geopolitical features that realism as a theory has no adequate answer for. The world has changed significantly since 1945 and other schools of thought have emerged that also address the dynamics of the international system in which we live. Liberalism, constructivism and feminism are therefore some of the other perspectives that help us better understand international politics. Realist thinkers should therefore take the opportunity to review some of the theory's main tenets in order to better respond to its limitations.

Keywords: realism, World War II, atomic bomb, renovation

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Resumen

Este artículo utiliza la lente teórica del realismo para analizar los acontecimientos de la Segunda Guerra Mundial en general, y específicamente la decisión de utilizar la bomba atómica, para mostrar cómo el realismo todavía encuentra prominencia en la teorización de las relaciones internacionales. Muestra, sin embargo, que si bien el realismo tiene una explicación parsimoniosa y convincente de cómo funciona el mundo, su poder explicativo y predictivo tiene límites. La globalización, la cooperación y la interdependencia internacionales, el cambio climático, las crisis de refugiados, las pandemias y los flujos de personas y dinero a través de las fronteras son características geopolíticas para las que el realismo como teoría no tiene una respuesta adecuada. El mundo ha cambiado significativamente desde 1945 y han surgido otras escuelas de pensamiento que también abordan la dinámica del sistema internacional en el que vivimos. El liberalismo, el constructivismo y el feminismo son algunas de las otras perspectivas que nos ayudan a comprender mejor la política internacional. Por lo tanto, los pensadores realistas deberían aprovechar la oportunidad para revisar algunos de los principios principales de la teoría para responder mejor a sus limitaciones.

Palabras clave: realismo, Segunda Guerra Mundial, bomba atómica, renovación

Introduction

The American decision to use the atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has forever changed the dynamics of global interstate warfare. The atomic bomb's effect was quick and destructive but lasting in its impact. Debates emerged and still continue as to whether such a weapon of mass destruction should ever be used in warfare again. Questions still persist about how the United States which promotes itself as the democratic paragon of the world could use such force to make a point.² The use of the atomic bomb then, was a departure from American *modus operandi* and ushered in a new battle paradigm.

In many ways, World War II can be argued to be a culmination of Japan's expansionist intentions in Asia and the United States' response to it. Many scholars point to Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor as the catalyst for the United States' entrance into the war.³ If the bombing of Japan should be taken as retaliation for Pearl Harbor, however, then this reasoning is perplexing. Pearl Harbor is a military base and so, though attacked without war-

2 See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 245.

3 The bombing of Pearl Harbor took place on December 7, 1941. See Henry Heller, *The Cold War and the New Imperialism: A Global History, 1945-2005* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006), 21.

ning, it was an act of aggression against combatants. Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, were generally non-military towns. These bombings therefore cannot be argued to have been “just” from a moral or legal perspective based on the just war tradition.⁴ It is unclear, for example, if these bombs were used as a last resort and if the good of using them outweighed the evil consequences as the *jus ad bellum*⁵ conditions would stipulate. If we argue that they were used while the war was already in progress, then their usage also fails to meet the *jus in bello*⁶ principles for conduct during war. Indeed, many of the survivors suffered high rates of leukemia, infant mortality, intellectual disabilities and different types of cancers. The cities also continue to suffer the effects of the bombs to this day.⁷ In trying to understand what gave rise to this decision, some scholars point to the prevalence of pragmatism and power politics in that era. Realism, being the top international affairs perspective at the time also informed statecraft. Many states were therefore concerned about their security, survival and balance of power struggles with other states.

This paper therefore uses the theoretical lens of realism to analyze the events of World War II generally, and the decision to use the bomb specifically to show how realism still finds salience in international relations theorizing. It shows, however, that while realism has a parsimonious and compelling explanation for how the world works, that there are limits to its explanatory and predictive power. Globalization, international cooperation and interdependence, climate change, refugee crises, pandemics and the flows of people and money across borders are all geopolitical features that realism as a theory has no adequate answer for. The world has changed significantly since 1945 and other schools of thought have emerged that address the dynamics of the international system in which we live. Liberalism, constructivism

4 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, “Just War”, *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, accessed May 13th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/58mt54uk>.

5 Derived from the teachings of St. Augustine, *jus ad bellum* refer to the moral and legal justifications for going to war. These must be met for the war to be classified as “just.” Under international law, the war must therefore be initiated for good and not selfish reasons, must be a last resort and there must be a reasonable expectation of success. See, for example, Alexander Moseley, “Just War Theory”, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed May 13th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/5n8sjx4u>.

6 *Jus ad bellum* refer to the internationally accepted standards that regulate war once it has begun. The treatment of prisoners prohibited use of poison and torture and proportional use of force would be some of the requirements.

7 International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), “Hiroshima and Nagasaki Bombings”, ICAN, accessed May 13th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/ej4kv5rn>.

and feminism are therefore some of the other perspectives that help us better understand international politics. Realist thinkers should therefore take the opportunity to review some of the theory's main tenets to better respond to its limitations.

In order to examine how realism explains World War II and the US decision to use the atomic bomb, the paper treats realism as a general theory and analyzes its main assumptions about the primacy of the state, anarchic and self-help nature of the international system, and the inevitability of war. Each of these is balanced by a discussion on how other theories address aspects of the debate that realism overlooks or does not sufficiently explain. The paper also examines the world before the atomic bomb and a post-World War II world. It argues that the multipolarity of important actors and the multiplicity of issues that compete for individual, national and global attention challenge the paradigmatic supremacy that realism has had over the years. Other schools of thought are therefore needed to balance and complement what realism offers.

The World Before the Usage of the Atomic Bomb

Realism is often lauded for its 'timeless wisdom'⁸ and for the very parsimonious way in which it describes the world. Indeed, realism is so influential that it is usually the first theory that an international politics student is introduced to. Other theories, such as liberalism, constructivism and feminism, even in their quest to be different, are often a response to, or an extension of realism. While realists were not the first to write about International Relations, some scholars such as Burchill argue that they were the first to offer a comprehensive account of the International System in practice. This means that realism as a theory has managed to codify the practice of International Relations and has therefore given direction to our thinking about the world.⁹ In Burchill's estimation, "realism seeks to describe and explain the world of International Politics as it is, rather than how we might like it to be."¹⁰ Jack

8 See, for example, Barry Buzan, "The Timeless Wisdom of Realism?", in *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*, eds. Steve Smith, Ken Booth and Marysia Zalewski (Cambridge, US: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

9 Scott Burchill et al., *Theories of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 83.

10 *Ibid.*, 70.

Donnelly who writes in “Theories of International Relations” agrees with Burchill and posits that, “realism is a tradition of analysis that stresses the imperative that states face to pursue a power politics of the national interest.”¹¹ In other words, states are socialized to believe that it is in their national interest to seek power, so much of their international relations with other states includes ways in which they can maintain or maximize their power interests over others. For many thinkers, this power-politics model remains a central part of how states operate and contributes towards making realism the most dominant theory in the history of International Relations theorizing and practice.¹² What, then, are the main tenets of realism?

Realism is used very broadly in this paper to describe several of its offshoots. These include classical¹³, strategic¹⁴, neorealism¹⁵ and neoclassical realism¹⁶. While there are nuanced differences among these types of realism, they all share certain core assumptions. The term ‘realism’ is therefore used to refer to the general school of thought and not just one type of realism.

The core assumptions of realism are that:

1. The state is the central actor in the international system
2. The international system is anarchic
3. States seek security
4. States will balance against the strongest actor.¹⁷

11 Ibid., 53.

12 Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1991).

13 Informed by thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, Thucydides and Niccolò Machiavelli. It emphasizes political survival, agility, security dilemma and political will. See Robert Jackson and Georg Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 63-71.

14 Strategic realism is seen, for example, in the work of Thomas Shelling. It ignores normative concerns and focuses instead on how strategic thinking can be used in military and foreign policy decisions. See *ibid.*, 72-5.

15 Neorealism is based on the thinking of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer. It argues that the configuration of the international system is really what matters. States balance against each other as they contend for hegemony. Small states do not matter in this system. See Kenneth Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War”, *International Security* 25, n.º 1 (2000), <https://tinyurl.com/yhy5e3j>; John Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions”, *International Security* 19, n.º 3 (1994-1995), <https://tinyurl.com/256s5yr5>.

16 Neoclassical realism combines the thoughts of classical and neorealism. It argues that leadership is important in foreign policy. It also looks domestically by highlighting how the internal composition of states affects how they operate in the international system. See Jackson and Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*, 63-71.

17 *Ibid.*, 62.

Using the case study of World War II and the usage of the atomic bomb, we will now examine how the tenets of realism help us to understand the United States' decision-making.

The State is the Main Actor

Realism gives preeminence to the role of states.¹⁸ This does not mean that it ascribes no importance to non-state actors. While these are countenanced, the state is believed to be the fundamental decision maker in the international system.¹⁹ World War II supports this thinking. World War II was a conflict between the Allies and the Axis powers. The Allies leading participants were the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Kingdom, China, France, and Poland.²⁰ Those for the Axis were Germany, Japan, Italy, Romania and Bulgaria.²¹ All of these are states. Many historians in describing the start of World War II often use the words, “the invasion of Poland by Germany.”²² Here we see that the states are mentioned as the initiators of the conflict. This gives credence to how realism sees the world, which is, interaction between and among states, especially the powerful ones. Other theories such as liberalism would highlight the cooperation and not just the conflict and competition that existed among the different actors at that time that caused them to work together. Liberalism as a school of thought would also emphasize the economic conditions of the time that may have provided the scope for this cooperation. Hence, while alliances and balancing are a part of the realist paradigm, liberalism also helps us to understand the friendly relations between the United States, Soviet Union and Britain on one hand, and with Germany, Italy and Japan on the other. Feminist scholars would also help us to better understand the conflict as they highlight the underexamined role of gender in the war, as well as the ways in which different genders were affected. Many women, for example, were able to work outside the home as they joined the armed forces and also worked in shipyards and factories. This cha-

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 History, “Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki”, *History*, July 31st, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/35cea49v>.

21 Ibid.

22 See, for example, Thomas Hughes and John Graham Royde-Smith, “World War II”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 12th, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/2ss6s7xf>; Alexandra Richie, “The Invasion of Poland”, *The National WWII Museum*, October 17th, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/4vpn73de>.

lledged the gendered norms at that time. These women, however, would face harassment, abuse and discrimination.²³ This is a critical dimension of World War II that realism fails to address. Constructivism would also help to bring to the fore the perceptions of the different actors back then and why certain actions were considered to be belligerent and therefore necessitated war-like responses.²⁴ In other words, why was Germany's actions perceived to be so threatening and required a coordinated military response? Since realism only offers a pessimistic view of the international system and not too much on actors and their perceptions, adding these theories fill gaps in the scholarly debate that realism fails to address.

Realism argues that international organizations are secondary in power to states. This means that while international organizations are supranational and appear to regulate state behavior, promote transparency and cooperation while reducing transaction costs and suspicion as liberal institutionalism argues,²⁵ realists do not see it this way. Realists such as Mearsheimer contend that states only join institutions because they find it beneficial to do so. Essentially, states being concerned about relative gains, or the extent to which other states are doing when compared to them,²⁶ often join institutions because the benefits of joining are greater than the costs of staying outside. This contrasts with the absolute gains perspective from liberalism where states are concerned about the overall welfare of all actors.²⁷ For realists, where the exclusion costs are minimized or appear to provide more utility outside of the institution, states will avoid these institutions.²⁸ Brexit, or the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union is an example of this. Here, the calculation that the United Kingdom made was that the benefits of being a member of the European Union were being outweighed by the costs and responsibilities of staying inside. It therefore felt that it was more beneficial to

23 US National Park Service, "Women in World War II", *National Park Service*, accessed May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3tn6vj6z>.

24 See, for example, Michael Barnett, "Social Constructivism", in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, eds. John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

25 See Jackson and Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*, 144-58.

26 See, for example, Robert Powell, "Absolute and Relative Gains in International Relations Theory", *American Political Science Review* 85, n.º 4 (1991), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1963947>.

27 Ibid.

28 Lloyd Gruber, *Ruling the World: Power Politics and the Rise of Supranational Institutions* (New Jersey, US: Princeton University Press, 2000).

stay outside than to continue its membership.²⁹ This exemplifies how realists see institutions.

For realists, even where institutions appear to matter, they only do so to the extent that the structure of these organizations mirrors the power configuration of the international system.³⁰ States can therefore use the institutions to get what they want, with the institution giving them the legitimacy that they would not have had otherwise. For realists then, institutions have little clout, and matter only to the extent that states use them to accomplish their goals.³¹ The League of Nations is a case in point. The League of Nations was proposed by the United States at the end of World War I.³² Its core aim was to prevent the recurrence of another world war. The fact that the United States failed to ratify the League negatively affected how much power the League had as an organization.³³ Additionally, the outbreak of another major war demonstrates the fact that an international organization though made up of great powers, could not prevent these states from going to war if they were determined to do so as they pursued their own interests. Liberal institutionalists, while agreeing with some of the realist arguments such as the primacy of states and the anarchic nature of the international system, posit that institutions have far more independent effects than realism gives credit to. Writers like Keohane and Nye, for example, highlight the complex interdependence between and among states which can foster cooperation. When these states coalesce within institutions which lengthen the shadow of the future or the possibility for iterated relationships, this can mitigate the tendency to cheat each other and instead promote more cooperative outcomes.³⁴ Constructivists, too, would also refute the realist position on international organizations, showing how these can be norm producing agents, which though lar-

29 See, for example, James Dennison, "Why Did the UK Leave the EU? The State of the Science of Explaining Brexit", in *Handbook of the European Union and Brexit*, eds. John Erik Fossum and Christopher Lord (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), <https://tinyurl.com/56awk92y>.

30 See Mearsheimer, "The False Promise".

31 Ibid.

32 C. N. Trueman, "League of Nations", *History Learning Site*, May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3xrx2azc>.

33 See, for example, Tim Dunne, "Liberalism", in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, eds. John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

34 See Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, Jr., *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (New York: Longman, 2001); Robert Axelrod and Robert Keohane, "Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions", *World Politics* 38 (1985).

gely formed by states, can develop a life of their own and have a disciplining effect on states. States, even in conflict, still therefore continue to follow the trading, postal, maritime and other principles of accepted behavior that institutions set up. This also allows for those who do not comply to be named and shamed as 'rogue' actors, hence showing the influence of institutions on states.³⁵ From their perspective, feminists would bemoan the lack or limited number of women in these organizations, with the United Nations up to 2024 never having a woman serve as the Secretary-General.³⁶ The heavy focus on war and under examination of other issues pertinent to an international *society*³⁷ and not just the international *system* would be because of the poor representation of women in these organizations. Liberalism, constructivism and feminism would therefore challenge the realist assumption about the inefficacy of international institutions.

The power configuration of the international system features heavily in the realist paradigm. Realism fails, however, to give enough credit to the first unit of analysis where individuals are critical actors. An understanding of the trajectory of World War II, however, would be incomplete without an assessment of how the different world leaders impacted the policies of their respective countries. Germany was what it was because of Hitler, Japan's perseverance in the face of defeat was due to national sentiments and concern for the fate of Emperor Hirohito, while Stalin "made" the Soviet Union in its heyday. Britain has been marked by the astute statesmanship of Churchill, while the transition from Roosevelt to Truman signals a paradigmatic shift in U.S. foreign policy.³⁸ Even today, we cannot fully understand foreign policy decisions without taking into consideration the personalities of a Barack Obama or Donald Trump of the United States, a Vladimir Putin from Rus-

35 Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change", *International Organization* 52, n.º 4 (1998), <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789>.

36 UN, "Former Secretaries-General", *United Nations*, accessed May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/4kakt477>.

37 The international society approach to international relations takes a middle ground between realism and liberalism by focusing on the 'society of states.' It therefore examines how human activity influences foreign policy, negotiations, diplomacy, espionage and other aspects of statecraft. See, for example, Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Richard Little and John Williams, eds., *Anarchical Society in a Globalized World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

38 See John Lukas, *1945: Year Zero* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1978), for an outline of the different personality types in World War II. See also Oklahoma Historical Society, "Important Leaders in World War II", *Oklahoma Historical Society*, accessed May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2kbpuaabp>.

sia, Angela Merkel and Olaf Sholz from Germany and a Kim Jong Un from North Korea. In this regard, by failing to highlight how integral individuals can be to statecraft, realism undervalues a chief component of the international system. Realism, however, would refute this thinking, arguing that state leaders are vested with power to act on behalf of their states and do not act in their personal capacities. Their actions and those of the state are therefore synonymous from the realist perspective. Other theories challenge this rebuttal, showing how the trajectory of states vary based on the leadership of the day. Including the individual as a unit of analysis is therefore important.

In terms of the decision to use the atomic bomb, realism as a general school of thought would frame it as the competition that existed among the United States, Germany, Soviet Union and Japan to acquire the nuclear technology to get the weapon, with Britain largely cooperating with the United States.³⁹ This keeps the decision at the state and international levels and examines the rivalry among states for supremacy. Human nature realists such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Morgenthau would include in this analysis the *animus dominandi* or 'lust for power' that humans have⁴⁰ and how this creates a security dilemma in that attempts to make ourselves more secure can arouse suspicion in other states, leading to counter movements and a net loss of security.⁴¹ Structural realists like Waltz and Mearsheimer, however, would dismiss the nature of individuals as well as the role of domestic politics in shaping global politics. Instead, their level of analysis would be the power configuration of the system at that time and how it affected the options and ultimate choices available to the states.⁴²

To fully understand the decision to use the atomic bomb, however, we also have to examine the work of the scientific community, some of whom had migrated from Germany to the United States. Albert Einstein, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Leo Szilard and Hans Bethe as well as the others who worked on the Manhattan Project would all feature in this discussion.⁴³ If we were to follow the assumptions of realism, we would consider the competition that led Roosevelt to begin working on the bomb, but not give enough attention

39 US Air Force, "The Story of the Atomic Bomb", *US Air Force*, accessed March 11th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/mu7z6whs>.

40 See Jackson and Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*, 63-71.

41 *Ibid.*, 68.

42 *Ibid.*, 75-82.

43 Norwich University, "Who Were the Manhattan Project Scientists?", *Norwich University*, accessed May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/4m9eundp>.

to other individuals as well as the domestic sentiment that would have affected the decision at that time. Importantly, Truman's role in authorizing the bomb also points to the strengths and limitations of realism. On one hand, neoclassical realism attempts to reconcile the deficiencies in some strands of realism by merging the statecraft ethics of leaders with the foreign policy tools that are available to them. From this perspective, Truman would be motivated by the responsibility to Americans to end the war decisively while preserving American dominance.⁴⁴ Critics of realism, however, would argue that this does not go far enough. Foreign policy approaches in international politics would therefore include how Truman's personality characteristics and belief system affected the choices that he made.⁴⁵ We could also analyze the bureaucratic structures that supported and funded the project,⁴⁶ as well as how the rational actor model⁴⁷ informed the outcome as Truman weighed the consequences of his actions. Groupthink, or the consensus around decisions even when those are not the best approaches⁴⁸ would also help us to analyze why there was not greater dissent against Truman's decisions at that time. Realism by itself, though it attempts to reconcile its limitations with neoclassicism by combining the human nature of the leader with the ethics of statecraft and their foreign policy goals still does not give us the full picture of how the world works. We therefore have to also incorporate other schools of thought if we are to fully appreciate the decision to use the atomic bomb.

The International System is Anarchic

Anarchy in the international system means that there is “no higher, overarching authority; no world government.”⁴⁹ To conceive of the world as anar-

44 See, for example, US Office of the Historian, “Atomic Diplomacy”, *Office of the Historian*, accessed May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/mscyxm38>.

45 See, for example, Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, US: Princeton University Press, 1976), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77bx3>.

46 For a similar analysis, see Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, US: Little, Brown and Company, 1971).

47 See, for example, Steve Yetiv, *Explaining Foreign Policy: US Decision-Making and the Persian Gulf War* (Baltimore, US: Johns Hopkins Press, 2004).

48 Jackson and Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*, 268.

49 *Ibid.*, 66. See also Avery Goldstein, “Parsing China's Rise: International Circumstances and National Attributes”, in *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics*, eds. Robert Ross and Zhu Feng (New York: Cornell University Press, 2008), 55.

chic is to embrace the view that there is no global police or international 9 11. This means that there is no one that a state can call upon for rescue in cases of distress as we would in society. In this self-help world, states are therefore at the mercy of each other in times of crisis. A situation like this makes war inevitable if we are to follow the realist school of thought.⁵⁰ The many wars, battles and squabbles leading up to the end of World War II⁵¹ reflect the fact that weaker states had to acquiesce to the will of the stronger, while stronger states fought each other to demonstrate might. Liberalism would push back at this using present day examples to show how high levels of vulnerability through interconnectedness and interdependence⁵² make war less likely between countries like the United States and China. The trade wars between these two countries therefore show that even with these tensions, the possibility of physical conflict is likely. Scholars like Karl Deutsch would point to the strong transnational ties between these states that make war unlikely,⁵³ while others like John Burton would point to the cobweb model of relations that these countries have. This contrasts with the billiard ball model that realism advances which suggests that states are always jostling against each other.⁵⁴ From a liberal perspective, it is also difficult to see the United States going to war with the European Union, or with Canada. Deutsch would explain this by showing that a security community has been formed between these countries where they have become so integrated that they resolve their conflicts by means other than war.⁵⁵ For constructivists such as Alexander Wendt, it is not that war is evitable as realism suggests, but that different countries have different cultures of anarchy between them where they see each other as enemies, rivals or friends based on the Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian world views. These ‘cultures of anarchy’ affect how states perceive each other and consequently, whether they will go to war or not.⁵⁶ Feminists would also refute

50 Ibid.

51 Examples of these include the Battles of Britain, Stalingrad, Berlin, the Bulge, Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. See History Learning Site, “Famous Battles of World War Two”, *History Learning Site*, accessed May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/559hcj76>.

52 See, for example, the views on complex interdependence in Keohane and Nye, *Power and Interdependence*.

53 Karl Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton, US: Princeton University Press, 1957).

54 John Burton, *World Society* (Cambridge, US: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

55 Deutsch et al., *Political Community*.

56 Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics”, *International Organization* 46, n.º 2 (1992).

the realist thinking to posit that there are other interests that states have outside of power and so every conflict does not have to end in war.⁵⁷ Moreover, feminists would be more interested in the gendered configurations of power that allow for the subjugation and exploitation of one gender at the expense of the other and how these manifest in relations in the international system.⁵⁸ The push for women's rights, voting rights, equal pay, access to food, education and water would therefore be some of the 'power' concerns that feminists have and not the heavy reliance on armed conflict as realism does.

States Balance Against the Strongest Actor

The composition of the world at the time of World War II reflects balancing and counter balancing. Realism posits that automatic balancing occurs because the presence of a strong actor elicits that kind of response from other powers.⁵⁹ Interestingly, we do not see balancing against a single actor in the same way that several states balance against the United States globally, or against China in the Asia-Pacific region today. Instead, there was a multipolar world where groups of power conglomerated in the tug of war against each other. Writers like Waltz opine that this type of system is extremely dangerous and unstable.⁶⁰ The aforementioned Allies and Axis powers were therefore the main blocs of that period.⁶¹ It should be noted that these coalitions were not joined because of altruistic ideals. Their main aim was to protect their interests and also to contain the growth of the other bloc, which is how realism explains alliance formation. For the Allies, Japan, Italy and Germany therefore had to be warred against because their expansionist ideals were found to be threatening to the world's balance of power. While realism explains this phenomenon through a power-politics lens, liberalism would focus on the commonalities that the countries had between them, while constructivism would examine the ideas, interests and norms that caused states to view one group as allies and the other as adversaries.

57 See, for example, Tricia Ruiz, "Feminist Theory and International Relations: The Feminist Challenge to Realism and Liberalism", *Soundings Journal* 2 (2005).

58 See, for example, Diana Thorburn, "Feminism Meets International Relations", *SAIS Review* (1989-2003) 20, n.º 2 (2000), <https://tinyurl.com/mtvrc65r>.

59 See, for example, John Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism", *International Relations* 23 (2009).

60 See, for example, Waltz, *Structural Realism*, 51-2.

61 See, for example, Hughes and Royde-Smith, "World War II".

States Seek Security

The anarchic nature of the international system means that states will seek security in order to ensure their survival.⁶² Accumulation of wealth and military arsenal are two main ways in which nations can increase their global standing. The conquest and subsequent annexation of territories therefore explains the operations of the superpowers at that time.⁶³ The atomic bomb was the latest and most superior weapon developed in 1945. The United States invested in it because along with its own goals, it learnt that Germany was building one.⁶⁴ The Soviet Union was also rumored to have nuclear plans afoot.⁶⁵ A state's security lies to some extent in the superiority of its weapons if we are to follow the assumptions of realism. The atomic bomb then, was built not for Japan *per se*, but to demonstrate America's military might. Japan therefore was just the platform from which America could send a warning to the world. Were two bombs therefore necessary? Could one bomb accomplish the same outcome? Moreover, why did the bombs have to be discharged? Could the world's knowledge of it achieve the same outcome and the war ended by traditional means?⁶⁶ These are some perplexing questions that reveal the ethical and legal implications of using the bomb. While we may not be able to answer some of these questions in hindsight, we can see how realism would explain its usage based on the dynamics of the international system at that time, the competition between the states and the quest for security.

Some historians argue that prior to the dropping of the atomic bombs, Japan was already defeated.⁶⁷ They posit that Japan was already seeking an avenue for capitulation via the Soviet Union.⁶⁸ This thinking, however, also has to be balanced with the Japanese rejection of the Potsdam Declaration⁶⁹

62 Jackson and Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*, 62.

63 The Dutch, for example had Indonesia, the French, Indochina, the British, Malaysia, Burma, Ceylon and India and Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Manchuria. See Heller, *The Cold War*, 20.

64 Gautam Pradeep, "The Nuclear Bomb and How It Changed the World", *StudyLib*, accessed May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/yc5txxy4>.

65 Gaddis, *The United States*, 246.

66 See a debate on the matter in Lukas, 1945, 148; Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); Louis Morton, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 1990).

67 *Ibid.*

68 *Ibid.*

69 Asia for Educators, "The Potsdam Declaration (July 26, 1945)", *Asia for Educators*, accessed May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2sf9kde4>.

and the Soviet's later announcement of war with Japan.⁷⁰ To say that the war could have been won by conventional means is therefore an educated guess, which some academics may use events like the results of the Vietnam War⁷¹ may refute. What could have happened is therefore based on the information that we have today and so we can only evaluate what was done and possibly why it was done using the analytical tools at our disposal.

The United States of America, operating largely like a realist state, had to take its position in the international system seriously. The bombing of Japan was therefore multidimensional. Since it was in the middle of a war with Japan, one could argue that the first intent was therefore to stop the war definitely by signaling to the Japanese that its own arsenal was no contest for American power. With the emphasis on military might at that time, the perception of one side having superior weapons would be a strong motivating factor in bringing the war to a definitive end. A second motive could have been to thwart any Soviet idea of acquiring any Japanese territory.⁷² Here, realists would argue that because of the suspicious nature of the international system, any accumulation of territory by one state can be used to gain a relative advantage over another state. This change can also turn an ally into an adversary as later happened. The United States, based on this calculation, therefore wanted to preserve the balance of power dynamics in the international system. A third related intention to use the atomic bomb may have been to curtail Soviet expansion in East Europe, which the United States and the British were concerned about.⁷³ The "Big Three" of the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union was an uneasy alliance with the US and Britain working with the Soviets to contain Japan, but simultaneously cautious of the Soviet's intentions.⁷⁴ The United States therefore wanted to act in a decisive way to end the war while limiting any further reach of power by the Soviets. A final intention could be to signal to the world that America was the leading

70 Morton, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, 351.

71 The Vietnam War was believed to one that the U.S. could have won easily. The Vietnamese however, refused to concede. This war soon became very unpopular in the U.S. Jennifer Rosenberg, "A Short Guide to the Vietnam War: What Everyone Should Know About the Vietnam Conflict", *ThoughtCo.*, September 6th, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/j9cp6d5e>.

72 See Martin Sherwin, "The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War: U.S. Atomic-Energy Policy and Diplomacy, 1941-45", *The American Historical Review* 78, n.º 4 (1973).

73 Gaddis, *The United States*, 246.

74 The National WWII Museum, "The Big Three", *The National WWII Museum*, accessed May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/y4x4t9ej>.

military power. The threat to countries that they could be bombed just like Japan would therefore greatly increase America's leverage at the negotiating table, until of course, other countries also got their own weapons. Whatever reason may find most salience, each points to an underlined realist assumption of seeking and maintaining power, as well as competition and suspicion in interstate relations.

The World After the Usage of the Atomic Bomb

A record 135,000 persons were believed to be killed in Hiroshima and 50,000 were annihilated in Nagasaki.⁷⁵ Japan surrendered on August 14, 1945.⁷⁶ There has been a surge of ambivalent arguments in the aftermath of the bombings. Whether the United States was wrong or right, however, is outside the scope of this paper. We have already established, however, that there are challenges in justifying what was done from a just war perspective. Suffice it to say that the world has not been the same since. The "Pandora Box in warfare" has been opened and the threat of mass destruction looms large in the international system. Other theoretical assumptions have also risen to prominence to counterbalance against realism by promoting a world of mutual interests, cooperation, peace and stability. American foreign policy though tinged by other paradigms, however, still can be largely explained by an oscillation between realism and liberalism as it pursues and protects its interests at home and abroad. This can be seen in instances such as its retreat from multilateralism as it withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement under President Trump, to rejoining under President Biden.⁷⁷ The insistence that NATO allies pay more to support the alliance⁷⁸ to their working together to secure prison swaps⁷⁹ would also point to these theories at work.

Realism articulates the view that war is inevitable. A thrust from liberalism saw the founding of the United Nations as a means of curtailing the outbreak

75 BBC, "Fact File: Hiroshima and Nagasaki", BBC, October 15th, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/5yej2n2r>.

76 Ibid.

77 Anthony Blinken, "The United States Officially Rejoins the Paris Agreement: Press Statement", US Department of State, February 19th, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4czr8rnn>.

78 Kanishka Singh, "Trump Again Conditions US Help to NATO Allies on their Paying 'Fair Share'", *Reuters*, March 19th, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/bdv9jfkv>.

79 Leila Fadel, "How the U. S. Helped Secure the Historic Prisoner Swap with Russia", *NPR*, August 2nd, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/yaf5xww4>.

of another major war. The many wars⁸⁰ that have been fought since its ratification by member countries, however, challenges the real power that it has. Since realism highlights the centrality of the state, and especially great power politics, one cannot overlook the fact that the United Nations Security Council is made up of the five victors of World War II. These include China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States.⁸¹ All of these states have veto power, which indicates that balance of power struggles are still prevalent. An example of this is the United States' war in Iraq in 2003, with the United States and United Kingdom going despite opposition from other members of the organization. Some scholars like Robert Pape argue that this may be an instance of 'soft balancing' since these weaker states do not have the military capacity to engage in 'hard balancing' against the United States.⁸² In 2024, the UN is gridlocked on how to resolve conflicts in Syria, Gaza, Ukraine, Lebanon, Sudan and South Sudan. The power struggles within and without the institution and the states choosing to do what they want to do anyway or hampering the institution's ability to respond collectively to these crises, all support realism's predictive power over those of liberalism. Advocates of liberalism, however, would argue that despite its limitations and need for modernization, the UN still plays an important role in responding to global economic, health, development and natural disasters, promoting peaceful relations among states and universal human rights.⁸³ This gives credence to liberalism.

Realism, Japan and its Reconstruction

Japan has rebounded significantly from its decimation by the atomic bombs. This growth was aided in some ways by the role that the United Sta-

80 Examples of these include the First Indochina War, Greek Civil War, Indo-Pakistani War, Arab-Israeli War, Korean War, Cuban Revolution, Suez Crisis and the Vietnam War. See Ultimate Bible Reference Library, "Wars Fought Since 1945 to 2010", *Ultimate Bible Reference Library*, accessed May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/4szpwv5m>.

81 UN Security Council, "Permanent and Non-Permanent Members", *United Nations Security Council*, accessed May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/yvmyu2bn>.

82 Robert Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States", *International Security* 30, n.º 1 (2005), <https://tinyurl.com/4r43xma5>.

83 See, for example, Paul Taylor and Devon Curtis, "The United Nations", in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, eds. John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

tes played in promoting democracy and a free economy.⁸⁴ Some attribute this gesture to the goodwill of the Americans. The support given to the Japanese is similar to the Marshall Plan for Europe and suggests an altruistic United States that helps to rebuild war torn nations. These actions also coincide with *jus post bello* or the postwar conditions that complete the just war theory. From this perspective, once the war ends, the enemy is to be viewed and treated differently. There should be respect for its territory and a commitment from the victor to help with rebuilding as a way of promoting ‘justice after war.’⁸⁵ These gestures of goodwill also help to mitigate the effects of some of the atrocities committed during war. If one should examine the happenings of that time, however, we see that some realist assumptions also guided these policies. The Soviet Union had interests in a part of Japan. If the United States did not help Japan then, it is believed that the Soviet Union would. This help, though on the face of it seems to support liberalism but could also be realist in nature because it was influenced by interstate rivalry.

The postwar assistance to Japan also highlights the primacy of the state in the international system. Interactions were still largely between the states and not with other actors. This also reveals the anarchic nature of the system. There was no global conciliator strong enough to impose punitive measures against the United States if it did not help Japan and the other countries in Eastern Europe. The United States, of its own volition, thought it necessary to implement this form of assistance. Why then was reconstruction instituted? The United States had to think about its position in the international system, and also about the outcomes that it wanted to achieve. A devastated Europe and Japan did not serve its best interests. It would be beneficial to have thriving economies in these regions as this would help these states and the U.S. in the long run. Moreover, dependence on the United States for assistance would subtly keep these states loyal to American values, reinforce capitalism and subdue communist ideology. The reconstruction efforts after World War II were therefore cleverly constructed realist mechanisms promoted as liberalism that helped to cement America’s position at the helm of the international system. Today, however, the US-Japanese relationship is one of the strongest in Asia, with the US using Japan to balance against China and Japan relying on

84 L. Stuart Hirai, “How the US and Japan Went from Enemies to Allies after WWII”, *History*, April 17th, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/396da9bm>.

85 Gary Bass, “Jus Post Bellum”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 32, n.º 4 (2004), <https://tinyurl.com/3ecpuc66>.

the United States for protection against China's expansion.⁸⁶ From realism's perspective, this relationship should not have materialized. The fact that it occurred and continues to exist suggests that realism is too cyclical and cannot adequately account for change in the international system.

Realism and the Soviet-American Arms Race

The United States had hoped that possession of the atomic bomb would have demonstrated its military supremacy. This was expected to influence the Soviet Union into making concessions on Europe.⁸⁷ Instead of bullying the Soviet Union into compliance, however, the atomic bomb prompted it to get some of its own.⁸⁸ Waltz articulates the view that realism generally, and anarchy specifically, socializes states to be functionally similar. Those who do not are punished.⁸⁹ The fact that the Soviet Union began to amass nuclear power is therefore a realist reaction to America's newfound might. Realism contends that there is mistrust in the international system because there is no guarantee that today's friend will not be tomorrow's enemy.⁹⁰ The fact that the United States and the Soviet Union turned from allies to adversaries supports this view.

The end of World War II up to 1991 saw the transition of a multipolar international system to a bipolar one. This means that instead of a world where we had several great powers, we now had two major blocs of influence. Notably, this period was marked by a stiff hush of peace.⁹¹ Realists explain this peace by pointing to the mutually assured destruction (MAD) capability, or the ability to wreak havoc on the other that each state had. Both states felt it necessary to preserve their security and so they accumulated nuclear weapons. Interestingly, Japan was bombed, but the Soviet Union was not. From a realist standpoint, a country will weigh the costs and benefits of its actions becau-

86 Akio Takahara, "A Japanese Perspective on China's Rise and the East Asian Order", in *China's Ascent: Power, Security and the Future of International Politics*, eds. Robert Ross and Zhu Feng (New York: Cornell University Press, 2008).

87 Gaddis, *The United States*, 267.

88 Ibid.

89 See Waltz, "Structural Realism".

90 Ibid.

91 See for example, Gordon Barrass, *The Great Cold War: A Journey Through the Hall of Mirrors* (Stanford, US: Stanford University Press, 2009), 91-100.

se states are rational actors.⁹² It was therefore foolhardy to attack the Soviet Union because it could inflict equal damage on the U.S. Japan, on the other hand, did not have the capability at that time to return harm to the United States in the magnitude that it had been hit.

The Japanese bombing showed how damaging nuclear weapons can be. This provoked a reluctance on the part of both the U.S. and the Soviet Union to use them. Possession of them, however, kept the other side guessing as to whether they would actually be used. It is this uncertain, but looming threat that kept war at bay. The bombing of Japan therefore changed the power structure of the international system, incited an arms race, but also brought with it an inhibition to ever use those weapons again. For realists, it is the relative equal balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union that brought about this type of restraint and not because they were motivated by norms of peace. The shift from this bipolarity in the later years, as well as the rise in influence of non-state actors would change the dynamics of the international system and also challenge the preeminence that realism has as an international relations theory that explains, describes and predicts world events.

Realism and the Growth of Nuclear States

It cost the United States of America about USD 2 billion to build the first atomic bombs.⁹³ An increase in technological and scientific advancements, however, has made knowledge and materials for nuclear warfare readily accessible to many countries. A gun in the hands of a police officer is expected to protect citizens. A gun in the hands of a sniper, though, will wreak havoc. The world is becoming very nervous about some of the states that are believed to have nuclear weapons or the capability to do so. These include India, Pakistan, Israel, Iran and North Korea.⁹⁴ In some parts of the world, there are more jitters about Pakistan, Iran and North Korea than the other two. While some states like Israel have maintained ‘nuclear opacity’ where

92 See, for example, Brian Schmidt and Colin Wight, “Rationalism and the ‘Rational Actor Assumption’ in Realist International Relations Theory”, *Journal of International Political Theory* 19, n.º 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/17550882221144643>.

93 Morton, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, 335.

94 See, for example, Arms Control Association, “Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance”, Arms Control Association, January 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2vyxcs58>.

they will neither confirm or deny if they have these weapons,⁹⁵ from an American perspective, closer relationships with Israel and India make it easier for them to be dissuaded from using these weapons if they ever confirm possession and willingness to use them. It is less certain how diplomatic channels or coercion could work with North Korea and Pakistan which have less friendly relationships with the United States and appear more eager to change the status quo. Constructivism as a theory helps with this by showing how state perception and the culture of anarchy between states determine whether weapons are seen as threatening or not. Realism is largely concerned with great power politics, but some like Mearsheimer arguing that small states do not matter because their actions are constrained by the structure of the international system. Nuclear capability, however, has meant that the world has to pay attention to these 'rogue states' that are believed to have these weapons.

Nuclear weapons are seen as a mechanism for deterring war and also to demonstrate state capability. The desire and race to enrich military arsenals across the world became even more pronounced after the Japanese bombing. Concern about the responsible use of these armaments led to the effectuation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1970.⁹⁶ 191 states are party to this treaty.⁹⁷ Five nations are classified as "nuclear states." These include the United States, Russia, United Kingdom, France and China.⁹⁸ Of note here is the fact that these "nuclear states" are the same victors of World War II and permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. While there are provisions in the treaty for the non-transfer of nuclear weapons and commitments towards cessation of the nuclear arms race and disarmament⁹⁹, other states have highlighted the hypocrisy of the treaty in that the major players can make the rules that other countries have to follow, while the rules sometimes do not seem to apply to them. This, at its core is realism because as Thucydides argued, "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what

95 Avner Cohen, *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

96 UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)*, July 1st, 1968, <https://tinyurl.com/3h4mku3u>.

97 Ibid.

98 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Year Book 2013: Armaments, Disarmaments and International Security. Summary* (Solna, SE: SIPRI, 2013), 12, <https://tinyurl.com/ya376c3v>.

99 UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*.

they must.”¹⁰⁰ Those states that flout the rules of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty are therefore also being realist as they seek power to demonstrate that they are not weak, and also to give themselves a seat at the negotiating table where they are taken seriously.

The anarchic nature of the international system has witnessed a growth spurt in not just nuclear weapons, but also in other forms of weapons of mass destruction, which includes biological and chemical warfare. The usage of bacteria, toxins, viruses, sarin, mustard gas and readily available chemicals such as chlorine is challenging how we conceive of and police ‘weapons’ in the international system.¹⁰¹ Realism, with its heavy focus on military might does not adequately address the importance of non-state actors, as well as the use of unconventional tools in warfare. Other theories better explain these phenomena, giving rise to the point that realism is ripe for renewal to sufficiently address the dynamics and trends of the world in which we now live. The bottom line is, since August 1945, the world has metamorphosed into a scramble for power as states and other actors seek both conventional and unconventional means to keep other actors at bay. How, if, why, or when these weapons will ever be used depends on the actors, including states, and their evaluation of their relative position in the international system.

Realism and the Need for Renewal in a Globalized World

Realism has made strong contributions to International Relations as a field of study. Its pessimistic view of the world and insistence on balance of power politics have given it some amount of superiority, preference, influence and theoretical longevity in the discipline. Realism therefore forms a part of the analytical toolkit of most International Relations theorizing.¹⁰² In many ways, however, realism, or at least some parts of it, fails to adequately describe

100 Thucydides, “The Peloponnesian War, The Melian Dialogue (Book 5, Chapter 17)”, *Wellesley College*, accessed May 14th, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/yjjwxnu6>.

101 See, for example, Sheena Chestnut Greitens, “Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction”, in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, eds. John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

102 Burchill et al., *Theories of International Relations*, 54; Jill Steans and Lloyd Pettiford, *International Relations: Perspectives and Themes* (London: Pearson, 2001).

and explain the world that we live in. Tickner, for instance, addresses the bias that International Relations has towards realism. For her, realism imposes a very one-sided view of the world in that it focuses only on the political issues that affect large states, and not on the dynamics of the smaller countries like those that make up the Third World.¹⁰³ Issues such as persistent poverty, the war in Syria and refugee crises in different parts of the world such as Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe all underscore the importance of developing countries in world affairs. Realism as a theory therefore needs to do more to address the relevance of small states in the global geopolitical environment.

Coupled with this criticism of realism is also the perspective from scholars like Ken Booth and Amitav Acharya that realism places too much emphasis on national security and not on human security concerns. Realism therefore fails in sufficiently explaining how non-military, yet vital concerns such as hunger, underdevelopment, ill-health, and a lack of respect for human rights can threaten the security of a state.¹⁰⁴ International Society scholars such as Martin Wight also challenge realism for not including more diverse voices and perspectives into its discussion. Our understanding of the world is therefore very narrowly construed by realism and does not account for the plethora of experiences across the world which can enrich our understanding of global affairs.¹⁰⁵ The heavy focus on national security from a military perspective as well as viewing the world as a system and not society with diverse experiences and voices therefore limit realism's explanatory power of world affairs.

Feminist and environmentalist scholars such as Cynthia Enloe¹⁰⁶ and John Vogler¹⁰⁷ also highlight the limited focus of realism by examining gender and climate change concerns in international politics. From their work

103 Arlene Tickner, "Seeing International Relations Differently: Notes From The Third World", *Millennium*, 32, n.º 2 (2003).

104 See, for example, Ken Booth, "Security and Emancipation", *Review of International Studies* 17, n.º 4 (1991), <https://tinyurl.com/ywvcf9ze>; Amitav Acharya, "Human Security", in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, eds. John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

105 Martin Wight, Gabriele Wright and Brian Porter, *International Theory: The Three Traditions* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1991).

106 Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Oakland, US: University of California Press, 2014), <https://tinyurl.com/msff7jce>.

107 See John Vogler, "Environmental Issues", in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, eds. John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

we can see that equal access to education, the gendered dimensions of war, climate change and resilience to natural disasters are also important issues in the international system. Theories that focus on these issues are not lesser theories and should not be dismissed for the ideals that they promote. Moreover, realism, by mainly focusing on state-to-state relations, finds it difficult to account for the rise of non-state actors such as terrorist groups. Incidents like the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States therefore shocked the world and its view of American impregnability. This and other acts of terror refute realist thinking on how military might can be a deterrent as some actors are not afraid to challenge the status quo. This challenge to realism is also enhanced by the relative ease with which people and money can move across borders, thereby affecting the capacity of states to regulate these flows. States also now have to contend with the global spread of infectious diseases such as Ebola, Mpox and COVID-19. This calls for global cooperation and reliance on institutions such as the World Health Organization to help manage these crises. These instances highlight the fact that other theories are needed to help us understand the world that we live in.

Susan Strange also reflects on the limitations of realism from an international political economic standpoint. In her estimation, it is untenable to conceive of the state as the only unit of analysis or the main actor from a political economy standpoint.¹⁰⁸ While Strange does not argue that the state is disappearing, she posits that it has become just one source of authority in an increasingly globalized world. Consequently, while the state still retains the right to use armed force, to tax and to borrow, and to determine what is lawful and criminal, it is being displaced by market and technological forces, thereby affecting the scope and reach of its governance.¹⁰⁹ Trends in the global political economy such as the rise of multinational corporations, transnational finance, ecommerce, illicit trade and global financial crises limit the extent to which the state can be the only or even the main player in the system. In sum, realism remains one paradigm that helps us to view the world, but it is not the only worldview that matters, especially in an increasingly globalized world.

108 Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge, US: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

109 *Ibid.*

Conclusion

In the final analysis, realism has made its impact on International Relations in that it has helped to formalize it as a field of study. Its main contribution is that it presents a very pessimistic view of the world which it sees as anarchic and governed by evil, selfish actors who make these innate tendencies a part of the states that they govern. Since states are the central actors in this system, foreign policy is driven by national interest. Realism has been strongly criticized for not giving enough credit to the theoretical value of other paradigms. Its focus is too narrow and as a result, it does not offer a comprehensive view of the world. Using the example of World War II generally and of the decision to bomb Japan specifically, this paper has therefore shown that while realism offers a cogent explanation, it is not the only possible explanation that we can use.

When we examine the world through a realist lens, we see that the state has centrality in global affairs. This does not mean, however, that it is the only actor. The absence of a supranational authority above states gives rise to high levels of mistrust. With no one to turn to for help, states must secure their survival by developing economically and militarily. Japan's quest for world dominance caused it to push its tentacles across Asia. Its attack on the United States, however, caused retaliation that dented Japan's goals in a way that has shocked the world. The use of the atomic bomb was cutting edge in an era of war. This weapon was expected to block Soviet expansionist aspirations in Japan and prompt concessions over Europe. The Soviet Union, however, refused to be bullied. What emerged, instead, was an amassing of nuclear weapons that brought about an uneasy peace that changed the structure of the international system from multipolarity to bipolarity.

The introduction of the atomic bomb has changed the way that countries protect themselves, and also how they go to war. Realism contends that war is inevitable. What this paper has shown, however, is that realism under examines the role of the individual in world affairs. Realism also fails to account for the fact that since 1945, there has not been another world war on the scale that we saw then, neither has any country ever used those weapons again in warfare. This does not mean that we have not experienced turmoil and conflict in different parts of the world. If we should follow the tenets of realism, however, there should be more conflicts. Realism then, is but one view in the wide spectrum of paradigms that can be used to explain this part

of history. Undoubtedly, however, since the decision to use the atomic bomb, the world has changed dramatically, never to return to the old order of things. Realism must therefore renew itself and give space to other theories if we are to fully account for the complexities, challenges and trends of the world that we now live in. Examining liberalism, constructivism and feminism as equally important theories, as well as other emerging perspectives may be the starting place in which to do so.

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