

IR Theory Reference Guide

CONFLICT BRIEF · PREMIUM STUDY MATERIAL · 2026

A comprehensive reference guide to international relations theory — covering the major schools of thought, key thinkers, foundational concepts, analytical frameworks, levels of analysis, major debates, and real-world applications. Designed for students in IR, political science, and related disciplines.

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Section 1: The Four Major IR Theories

International relations theory attempts to explain how and why states behave as they do, what drives conflict and cooperation, and how power is distributed and exercised in the international system. Four broad traditions dominate the field.

1.1 Realism

Core Premise: The international system is anarchic — there is no world government. States are the primary actors and their overriding goal is survival. Power is the central currency of international politics.

Key Assumptions:

- The international system is anarchic — no authority exists above the state
- States are rational, unitary actors that calculate costs and benefits
- States primarily seek survival and security, not moral or ideological goals
- Relative gains matter more than absolute gains — states care how much power they have compared to rivals
- Alliances are temporary and interest-based, not principled
- Military power is the ultimate arbiter of international disputes

Sub-types:

Classical Realism	Human nature is inherently power-seeking. States reflect this innate drive. (Morgenthau)
Structural / Neorealism	It is the structure of the anarchic system — not human nature — that forces states to compete. (Waltz)
Offensive Realism	States maximize power whenever possible because more power means more security. (Mearsheimer)
Defensive Realism	States seek sufficient security, not maximum power; aggression is often counterproductive. (Jervis, Walt)

Key Thinkers: Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Morgenthau, Waltz, Mearsheimer, Kennan

Strengths: Explains great power competition, arms races, war, alliance politics, and the persistence of conflict despite international institutions.

Key Critique: Underestimates cooperation, international institutions, and non-state actors. Struggles to explain peaceful periods and the democratic peace.

1.2 Liberalism

Core Premise: States can cooperate to achieve mutual benefits. International institutions, democracy, and economic interdependence reduce the likelihood of war and make sustained cooperation possible.

Key Assumptions:

- Human beings and states are capable of cooperation and progress
- Democracies are less likely to go to war with each other — the democratic peace

- Economic interdependence raises the costs of war and creates incentives for peace
- International institutions reduce transaction costs and help states resolve disputes
- Multiple actors matter — NGOs, international organizations, and markets shape outcomes
- Absolute gains matter — if all benefit, cooperation is rational even in anarchy

Sub-types:

Classical Liberalism	Free trade, democracy, and international law produce peace. (Kant, Wilson)
Neoliberal Institutionalism	Institutions reduce transaction costs, enable information sharing, and make cooperation possible. (Keohane, Nye)
Commercial Liberalism	Economic interdependence makes war too costly — trading states prefer prosperity to conflict. (Angell, Rosecrance)
Democratic Peace Theory	Liberal democracies do not fight each other — the most robust empirical finding in IR. (Doyle, Russett)

Key Thinkers: Kant, Wilson, Keohane, Nye, Doyle, Russett, Angell

Strengths: Explains post-WWII cooperation, the EU, international trade regimes, and the long peace among democracies.

Key Critique: Too optimistic about human nature and state intentions. Cannot fully explain wars between democracies or the limits of international institutions.

1.3 Constructivism

Core Premise: International relations are socially constructed. The identities, norms, and ideas that states hold shape their interests and behavior as much as material power does. "Anarchy is what states make of it."

Key Assumptions:

- Social reality is constructed through human interaction — it is not fixed or objective
- State interests are not given by the structure of the system — they are shaped by identity and norms
- "Anarchy is what states make of it" — Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian cultures of anarchy produce different behavior
- Norms, language, and discourse matter — how leaders frame issues shapes policy choices
- Change in IR is possible through shifts in ideas, norms, and identities
- Collective identity can emerge — states can develop shared "we-feeling" and act collectively

Sub-types:

Conventional Constructivism	Identities and norms shape interests; the social structure of the international system matters as much as its material structure. (Wendt)
Critical Constructivism	Goes further — deconstructs how mainstream IR naturalizes existing power structures. (Onuf, Campbell)
Feminist Constructivism	Gender identities are constructed and shape IR in ways mainstream theory ignores. (Tickner, Enloe)

Key Thinkers: Alexander Wendt, Nicholas Onuf, Peter Katzenstein, Martha Finnemore, John Ruggie

Strengths: Explains norm emergence (human rights, anti-landmine treaty), ideational change, and why states with similar power levels behave very differently.

Key Critique: Vague on causal mechanisms. Difficult to test empirically. Critics argue it underestimates material power and overestimates the role of ideas.

1.4 Marxist and Critical Theories

Core Premise: IR theory as traditionally practiced serves the interests of powerful states and capitalist elites. A truly critical IR must examine whose interests the international order serves and seek emancipatory transformation.

Key Assumptions:

- The capitalist world economy structures IR in ways that benefit core states at the expense of peripheral ones
- Class interests — not national interests — drive foreign policy for Marxists
- The international order is not neutral — it reflects and reproduces existing power hierarchies
- Critical theory asks: "for whom and for what purpose" does IR knowledge exist? (Cox)
- Emancipation — freeing marginalized groups from structures of domination — is a goal of critical IR

Sub-types:

World-Systems Theory	Core states exploit periphery through the capitalist world economy. (Wallerstein)
Dependency Theory	Underdevelopment of the Global South is a product of exploitation by the developed North. (Frank, Cardoso)
Neo-Gramscianism	Hegemony is maintained through ideological consensus, not just material power — making it appear natural. (Cox, Gramsci)
Post-Colonialism	IR must be understood through the lens of colonialism and its enduring legacies. (Fanon, Said, Bhabha)
Feminist IR	Gender is a fundamental organizing principle of IR, systematically excluded from mainstream theory. (Tickner, Enloe)

Key Thinkers: Marx, Lenin, Wallerstein, Cox, Gramsci, Tickner, Enloe, Fanon, Said

Strengths: Explains patterns of global inequality, the politics of international economic institutions, and why mainstream IR tends to favor powerful states.

Key Critique: Accused of having a predetermined political agenda. Struggles to explain cooperation between unequal states or cases of genuine norm change.

Section 2: Key IR Thinkers

Thucydides (c.460–400 BC)

Classical Realism

History of the Peloponnesian War established the first systematic account of power politics. The Melian Dialogue — "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" — is the foundational statement of power realism. Introduced the "Thucydides Trap": when a rising power challenges a ruling power, war is the most likely outcome. His analysis of the Peloponnesian War attributed its "truest cause" to the growth of Athenian power and the fear this inspired in Sparta — a structural argument that anticipates Waltz by 2,400 years.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

Liberal Internationalism

"Perpetual Peace" (1795) argued that three "definitive articles" would produce lasting peace: a republican constitution, a federation of free states, and cosmopolitan law guaranteeing hospitality to foreigners. The direct intellectual ancestor of the League of Nations, the UN, democratic peace theory, and the EU. Introduced the crucial distinction between republican (liberal) and despotic states as a variable in war and peace — the first formulation of what became democratic peace theory.

Hans J. Morgenthau (1904–1980)

Classical Realism

"Politics Among Nations" (1948) established realism as a systematic academic theory. His six principles of political realism: (1) politics is governed by objective laws rooted in human nature; (2) national interest defined in terms of power; (3) power's meaning is context-dependent; (4) moral universalism cannot guide statecraft; (5) no identity between national moral aspirations and universal moral laws; (6) the political sphere is autonomous. Critiqued liberal idealism as dangerous utopianism that ignored the tragedy of politics. Later opposed the Vietnam War as a misapplication of the very realism he had championed.

Kenneth Waltz (1924–2013)

Neorealism / Structural Realism

"Man, the State and War" (1959) introduced three "images" — individual, state, systemic — as the loci of causes of war. "Theory of International Politics" (1979) founded neorealism: the anarchic structure of the international system, not human nature, explains why states compete. States are functionally similar units differentiated only by relative capabilities. The balance of power emerges as a systemic tendency — not because statesmen choose it, but because the structure compels it. Also argued nuclear weapons stabilize great power relations through MAD — the most counterintuitive finding of structural realism.

Robert O. Keohane (1941–)

Neoliberal Institutionalism

"After Hegemony" (1984) argued that international institutions enable cooperation even without a hegemonic enforcer. Institutions reduce transaction costs, provide information, lengthen the "shadow of the future," and make defection visible and costly. With Nye, developed the concept of complex interdependence — challenging realism's state-centric, military-focused assumptions by showing that states are connected through multiple channels and military force is often inappropriate. One of the most cited IR scholars of all time; bridge between realism and liberalism.

Joseph S. Nye Jr. (1937–)

Liberalism / Power Theory

Coined "soft power" — the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, arising from the attractiveness of a state's culture, political values, and foreign policy. Distinguished from hard power (military and economic coercion) and combined in "smart power." "Bound to Lead" (1990) argued US hegemony would persist through soft power even as material capabilities declined relatively. "The Future of Power" (2011) analyzed how the information revolution and cyber domain change the nature of power. His power taxonomy remains the dominant framework in policy discussions of US global influence.

Alexander Wendt (1958–)

Constructivism

"Social Theory of International Politics" (1999) is the defining constructivist IR text. "Anarchy is what states make of it" — his most famous phrase — means the meaning and effects of anarchy depend on the identities and relationships of states within it. Introduced three "cultures of anarchy": Hobbesian (enemies — destroy), Lockean (rivals — live and let live), Kantian (friends — collective security). Argued state identities and interests are not fixed by material structure but are socially constructed through interaction. Accepted more structural constraints than critical constructivists while insisting ideas matter as much as material power.

John Mearsheimer (1947–)

Offensive Realism

"The Tragedy of Great Power Politics" (2001) argued great powers are structurally compelled to maximize relative power — not from greed but from the inescapable logic of anarchy. States can never be certain of others' intentions, so more power is always preferable. Predicted China's rise would inevitably lead to conflict with the US — a prediction that has gained wide attention. "The Israel Lobby" (2007, with Walt) controversially argued pro-Israel domestic interest groups distort US foreign policy. Strongly opposed NATO expansion, predicting in writing in 2014 that it would ultimately trigger conflict with Russia.

Hedley Bull (1932–1985)

English School

"The Anarchical Society" (1977) is the defining English School text. Argued that despite international anarchy, states form an "international society" — they recognize common interests and values and bind themselves to common rules and institutions. Distinguished: international system (mere interaction of states), international society (shared norms and rules), world society (shared values across humanity including non-state actors). Identified five primary institutions of international society: the balance of power, international law, the diplomatic system, the great powers, and war. The English School synthesizes elements of realism and liberalism, emphasizing order rather than power or cooperation as the central category.

Barry Buzan (1946–)

English School / Copenhagen School

"People, States and Fear" (1983) broadened security beyond military threats to include political, economic, societal, and environmental sectors — the "sectors of security." "Security: A New Framework for Analysis" (1998, with Waever and de Wilde) developed securitization theory: security is a speech act — when a political actor successfully designates something as an existential threat requiring emergency measures, the issue is "securitized" and moves outside normal politics. Any issue can be securitized or desecuritized. The framework explains how migration, climate change, and public health have all been securitized by different governments at different times.

Martha Finnemore (1959–)

Constructivism

"National Interests in International Society" (1996) showed that international organizations actively teach states what their interests should be — interests are not fixed by material conditions but are shaped by international norms and institutions. "The Purpose of Intervention" (2003) showed how norms about legitimate military intervention have changed fundamentally over time. With Kathryn Sikkink, developed the "norm life cycle": norms emerge through norm entrepreneurs, cascade as states adopt them through socialization and legitimation, and become internalized as taken-for-granted behavior. Demonstrated that what counts as a legitimate reason for war has changed dramatically since the 19th century.

Robert Cox (1926–2018)

Neo-Gramscianism / Critical Theory

"Social Forces, States and World Orders" (1981) introduced the most famous distinction in critical IR: "Theory is always for someone and for some purpose." Problem-solving theory takes the existing world order for granted and asks how to make it work better. Critical theory asks how the existing order came to be, whose interests it serves, and whether it can be changed. Applied Gramsci's concept of hegemony to IR: US hegemony is maintained not just through material power but through ideological consensus that makes the current order appear natural and legitimate. His "historical structures" framework — material capabilities, institutions, and ideas — remains the most systematic critical IR methodology.

Section 3: Core Concepts Defined

Anarchy

The absence of a central world government above states. The defining structural condition of the international system for realists and neorealists — states must rely on self-help because no authority will protect them. Note: anarchy does not mean chaos — it means the absence of hierarchical authority. Constructivists argue anarchy's effects depend entirely on how states interpret and respond to it: Hobbesian cultures of anarchy produce war; Kantian cultures produce collective security.

Balance of Power

The tendency for states to counteract any power that threatens to dominate the system by forming alliances or building their own capabilities. Neorealists see this as an automatic systemic tendency — it happens without anyone intending it. Classical realists see it as a conscious policy tool. Walt's Balance of Threat Theory refines the concept: states balance against threats (considering intentions and geography), not just raw power. The balance of power organized European diplomacy from the Peace of Westphalia (1648) through to 1945.

Security Dilemma

A structural condition in which one state's attempt to increase its security causes other states to feel less secure, triggering a cycle of military buildup that leaves everyone worse off — even if no state intended to threaten anyone. First named by John Herz (1950). The dilemma is sharpest when offensive and defensive military capabilities are indistinguishable. Nuclear weapons partially resolve the security dilemma through Mutually Assured Destruction — any first strike is suicidal, making defensive intentions credible. The security dilemma remains central to US-China relations today.

Hegemony

Dominance of the international system by a single state with the power and willingness to provide global public goods: a stable reserve currency, open trade, and security. Hegemonic Stability Theory (Kindleberger, Gilpin) argues the international order is most stable when a single hegemon enforces its rules. Gramsci extends hegemony to mean ideological dominance — the ability to make one's worldview appear natural and universal, so that dominated groups consent to their own domination. Cox applies this to US hegemony: US dominance is maintained through a combination of material power, multilateral institutions, and an ideology (liberal internationalism) that other states have internalized.

Soft Power

Coined by Joseph Nye — the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce. A state exercises soft power when others want what it wants, making coercion unnecessary. Sources: culture (when it is appealing to others), political values (when it lives up to them), and foreign policy (when it is seen as legitimate). Contrasted with hard power (military and economic coercion) and combined in "smart power." China's Confucius Institutes, the BBC World Service, Hollywood, and US universities are all soft power instruments. The key insight: power is not just about making others do what you want by force — it is also about shaping what they want.

Democratic Peace Theory

The empirical claim, first theorized by Kant, that liberal democracies do not go to war with each other. Often described as "the closest thing to an empirical law in international relations" (Jack Levy). Explanations include: shared norms of peaceful conflict resolution among democracies; institutional constraints on leaders making war (elections, press freedom, checks and balances); and economic interdependence among democracies. Key caveat: democracies do fight non-democracies, sometimes very aggressively. The theory does not predict that democracies are peaceful — only that they are peaceful toward each other.

Relative vs. Absolute Gains

A fundamental realist-liberal disagreement. Realists: states care primarily about relative gains — how much power they accumulate compared to rivals, not in absolute terms. A state will reject a mutually beneficial deal if its rival benefits more, because the rival's gain could be used against it tomorrow. Liberals: absolute gains matter more — if all parties benefit from cooperation, it is rational to cooperate regardless of the distribution of gains. This debate has enormous implications: if realists are right, international cooperation is severely limited; if liberals are right, extensive cooperation is possible.

Securitization

From the Copenhagen School (Buzan, Waever, de Wilde, 1998): securitization is a speech act. When a political actor successfully frames an issue as an existential threat requiring emergency measures beyond normal politics, that issue has been "securitized." The key insight: security is not an objective quality of threats — it is a political designation. Any issue can be securitized (migration, climate change, pandemic, cultural identity) or desecuritized (returned to normal politics). Understanding who has the power to securitize issues — and who benefits — is central to critical security studies.

Complex Interdependence

Keohane and Nye's (1977) challenge to realism: modern states interact through multiple channels — not just governments but also firms, NGOs, and individuals. Military force is not always the dominant policy instrument and is often inappropriate between allies. Security does not automatically dominate the foreign policy agenda — economic, environmental, and social issues are often more important. Complex interdependence produces very different political processes than realism predicts: international institutions and transnational actors play central roles, and military power is relatively less useful.

Norm Life Cycle

From Finnemore and Sikkink (1998): international norms evolve through three stages. (1) Norm emergence: norm entrepreneurs advocate for new standards of behavior, often through international organizations. (2) Norm cascade: once a critical mass of states adopt a norm, others follow through socialization, imitation, and legitimation pressure. (3) Internalization: norms become taken-for-granted and no longer require active promotion. Examples: the anti-slavery norm, women's suffrage, prohibition on chemical weapons, anti-apartheid, the Responsibility to Protect. Understanding norm cascades explains why new norms can spread rapidly once they reach a tipping point.

Intersubjective Knowledge

A key constructivist concept: some forms of knowledge and meaning exist not in individual minds (subjective) or in material reality (objective), but in shared social understandings (intersubjective). The meaning of nuclear weapons is intersubjective — it depends not on the physical weapon but on the relationship between the states that possess them. US nuclear weapons and North Korean nuclear weapons are the same material objects but have completely different meanings in international politics because of the intersubjective understandings that surround them.

Polarity

The distribution of power in the international system. Unipolarity: one dominant state — the US after the Cold War. Bipolarity: two superpowers — the US-Soviet Cold War. Multipolarity: three or more major powers — 19th century Europe. Waltz argued bipolarity was the most stable form because each superpower managed its own bloc and miscalculation was less likely. Others argue multipolarity encourages flexibility and reduces catastrophic risks. The current international system is debated between late unipolarity and emerging multipolarity as China's power grows.

Bandwagoning vs. Balancing

Two possible state responses to a rising threat. Balancing: joining the weaker side to prevent the stronger from dominating — the expected behavior per balance of power theory. Bandwagoning: aligning with the stronger or more threatening power to share in the gains or avoid being crushed. Walt's Balance of Threat theory argues states balance against threats (considering a potential adversary's aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capability, and aggressive intentions) not just against raw power. The key question in contemporary IR: will states in the Indo-Pacific balance against China or bandwagon with it?

Levels of Analysis

The framework, developed by Waltz (1959) and Singer (1961), that organizes explanations of IR outcomes by their unit of analysis. (1) Individual level: leaders' psychology, perceptions, and decisions. (2) State/domestic level: regime type, domestic politics, interest groups, public opinion. (3) International system level: the structure of anarchy and the distribution of power. Each level generates different explanations and different policy prescriptions. The analyst's choice of level shapes what they can and cannot see. See Section 4 for full treatment.

Section 4: Levels of Analysis

The levels of analysis framework organizes explanations of IR outcomes by the unit of analysis. Where you look shapes what you find — and what you miss.

Level	Unit of Analysis	Key Questions	Example: WWI Cause	Associated Theories
Individual (1st Image)	Leaders, decision-makers	Why do leaders decide as they do?	WWI was caused by psychological factors	Classical and political psychology
State / Domestic (2nd Image)	Domestic politics, regime type	How does domestic politics shape foreign policy?	Domestic chaos and instability	Realism, liberalism, constructivism
International System (3rd Image)	The anarchic structure, distribution of power	How does the system structure influence state behavior?	Imperialism and global competition	Neorealism, neopolar theory, etc.

Waltz's Critique:

First and second image theories cannot by themselves explain war because they cannot explain why wars occur even when pacifist leaders run peaceful states, or why similar domestic systems produce very different foreign policies. Only the third image — the structure of the system — provides a complete explanation. However, third image theory alone cannot explain when particular wars happen or which specific states go to war. All three levels are required for a full account.

Graham Allison's Three Models — Cuban Missile Crisis (1962):

Model	Assumption	Explanation of Crisis
Rational Actor Model	States are unitary rational actors maximizing utility	The US chose blockade as the option that maximized deterrence while minimizing escalation
Organizational Process Model	Outputs are products of large bureaucracies following routines	The US followed existing Navy procedures — quarantine
Governmental Politics Model	Outcomes are the result of bargaining between individuals	The final decision reflected tensions between military hawks (wanting air strikes)

Section 5: Major Debates in IR Theory

The First Great Debate: Idealism vs. Realism (1930s–1940s)

E.H. Carr's "The Twenty Years' Crisis" (1939) attacked interwar liberal idealism — the belief that institutions, public opinion, and international law could prevent war — as utopian wishful thinking that ignored power. The failure of the League of Nations and the rise of fascism appeared to confirm the realist critique. This debate established realism as the dominant paradigm in IR and framed the field as a science of power politics. The idealists' project was not entirely wrong — it survived in different form as liberal institutionalism after WWII.

The Second Great Debate: Traditionalism vs. Behavioralism (1950s–1960s)

Should IR be studied through historical, interpretive methods (traditionalism — Bull, Morgenthau) or through quantitative, scientific methods (behavioralism — Singer, Deutsch)? The debate was partly methodological and partly about whether IR could be a natural science. Behavioralism produced large-N empirical studies (the Correlates of War project) that transformed IR into a data-driven discipline. Traditionalists argued that reducing politics to measurable variables missed what mattered most. The debate produced a productive tension: IR now combines both approaches.

The Third Great Debate: Neorealism vs. Neoliberalism (1980s)

The "neo-neo debate" between structural realism (Waltz) and neoliberal institutionalism (Keohane) dominated the decade. Both sides accepted positivism and rationalism — they disagreed about whether anarchy made sustained cooperation impossible (realists) or difficult but achievable through institutions (liberals). The key empirical dispute was over whether relative gains concerns (realists) or absolute gains (liberals) drove state decisions about cooperation. The debate was more productive than confrontational — both sides shared assumptions that were challenged together by the constructivist turn.

The Fourth Great Debate: Positivism vs. Post-Positivism (1980s–present)

The most fundamental methodological divide in IR. Positivists (realists, liberals) believe IR can be studied as a science — there are observable, testable hypotheses about state behavior and social reality has a structure independent of the observer. Post-positivists (constructivists, critical theorists, post-structuralists, feminists) challenge the possibility of value-neutral social science, question the separation of subject and object, and argue that IR theory itself shapes the reality it claims to describe. This debate is unresolved and divides the field between mainstream and critical approaches.

The Agent-Structure Problem

One of the deepest ontological debates in social science. Do individuals (agents) shape social structures, or do structures shape individuals? For IR: do states create the international system (agent primacy — classical realism), or does the system's structure compel states to behave in particular ways (structural primacy — neorealism)? Constructivists, drawing on Giddens' structuration theory, argue for mutual constitution: agents and structures shape each other iteratively and cannot be analyzed in isolation. This is not merely philosophical — it determines whether change in the international system is possible and how it happens.

The Rise of China and the Thucydides Trap

Contemporary IR theory is most intensely engaged with whether China's rise will produce great power conflict. Mearsheimer (offensive realism): China will inevitably seek regional hegemony in Asia, as the US sought hegemony in the Western Hemisphere; the US will resist; conflict is the most likely outcome. Keohane and liberals: China's deep integration in the global economy and institutions creates strong incentives for peaceful management. Constructivists: the outcome depends on how China constructs its identity as a great power and how the US and the international community respond. Graham Allison documented that 12 of 16 historical cases of power transitions produced war.

Section 6: Theory Applied to Real Cases

The same historical event can be explained very differently depending on which theoretical lens is applied. The ability to apply multiple theoretical perspectives — and to understand what each illuminates and obscures — is the core skill of IR analysis.

The Cold War (1947–1991)

Central question: How do we explain forty years of superpower rivalry without direct war, and why did it end peacefully?

Realism	Classic balance of power competition between two states in a bipolar system. Nuclear weapons created stability through Mutually Assured Destruction. The bipolar system was remarkably stable because miscalculation by either superpower carried catastrophic consequences. Realism struggles to explain why the Cold War ended peacefully when the Soviet Union's power declined — balance of power logic would predict continued competition, not peaceful dissolution.
Liberalism	Prolonged by the absence of institutions capable of managing superpower competition at the outset. However, arms control agreements (SALT, START), diplomatic channels, and economic engagement helped manage the conflict over time. The Helsinki Accords (1975) created a human rights framework that empowered civil society in the Soviet bloc. Trade, scientific exchange, and cultural ties created constituencies for engagement on both sides.
Constructivism	The Cold War was above all a conflict of identities — capitalist liberal democracy vs. communist revolution — not merely a material power struggle. It ended when Gorbachev changed how the USSR understood its own identity and interests through glasnost and perestroika. His "new thinking" in foreign policy — rejecting zero-sum competition and accepting a "common European home" — was an ideational shift that preceded the material collapse of Soviet power.
Critical Theory	The Cold War served the material interests of military-industrial complexes in both superpowers, who benefited from permanent war economy spending. Both ruling elites used the ideological conflict to suppress domestic dissent and justify imperial interventions in the Global South. The Cold War's framing as a struggle between freedom and tyranny obscured US support for authoritarian regimes across Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia.

The 2003 Iraq War

Central question: Why did the US invade Iraq without UN authorization, and why did it prove so costly?

Realism (Mearsheimer / Walt)	A strategic blunder — the US overextended its power, destabilized a region it did not need to, and strengthened Iran (Iraq's main regional rival). The real driver was not WMD (which realists always doubted) but neoconservative ideology and, per Mearsheimer and Walt's controversial argument, the influence of the Israel lobby. The absence of WMD vindicated realist skepticism about the stated rationale and demonstrated the dangers of ideologically-driven foreign policy.
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Liberalism	The US bypassed the UN Security Council because the existing multilateral framework failed to respond to genuine post-9/11 security concerns. However, the absence of legitimate international authorization severely undermined the occupation's effectiveness and damaged US soft power globally. Liberal institutionalists see the Iraq War's aftermath as a vindication of their argument: unilateral military action, however powerful, cannot achieve political stabilization without legitimacy and multilateral cooperation.
Constructivism	Driven by the Bush administration's post-9/11 identity shift — the US redefined itself as a revolutionary power that would preemptively reshape threatening regimes. The "War on Terror" framing securitized Iraq in ways that short-circuited normal evidence-based threat assessment, allowing weak intelligence to justify invasion. The failure in Iraq subsequently re-shaped US identity — producing the "Iraq syndrome" of public reluctance to commit ground forces, visible in Syria policy under Obama.
Neo-Gramscian Critical Theory	The war served the interests of US oil companies, arms contractors, and neoconservative ideologues who sought to use military power to restructure the Middle East in ways that would entrench US hegemony and secure energy resources. The "weapons of mass destruction" rationale was a legitimating narrative that made the real reasons — strategic, commercial, ideological — appear as principled responses to genuine threats.

The Rise of China

Central question: Will China's growing power lead to conflict with the United States?

Offensive Realism (Mearsheimer)	China will inevitably seek regional hegemony in Asia — dominating the region as the US dominates the Western Hemisphere. The US, as the current global hegemon, will resist. Conflict is the most likely outcome not because of Chinese or American malice, but because the anarchic structure of the international system provides no guarantee of security, making power maximization the rational strategy. The Thucydides Trap has historically produced war in 12 of 16 cases of power transition.
Liberal Institutionalism	China's deep integration in the global economy — as the world's largest trading nation — and in international institutions (WTO, UN, IMF, G20) creates strong incentives to avoid the disruption that great power conflict would bring. Economic interdependence, international norms against territorial conquest, and shared interests in climate and pandemic governance can prevent Thucydides' Trap from closing. The goal of US policy should be to increase the cost of Chinese revisionism while preserving channels for cooperation.
Constructivism	The outcome is not structurally determined — it depends on how China constructs its identity as a great power and how other states respond. If China defines itself as a revolutionary revisionist power seeking to overturn the existing order, conflict is likely. If China internalizes the identity of a "responsible stakeholder" with a vested interest in the stability of the system it has benefited from, peaceful accommodation is possible. The key variable is not material power but mutual recognition and norm construction.

English School

China is not simply a power-maximizing state but a member of international society with interests in the stability of the rules-based order from which it has dramatically benefited. Managing China's rise requires reinforcing the norms and institutions of international society — particularly on sovereignty, trade, and arms control — while accommodating China's legitimate interests as a major power. The precedent of the Concert of Europe (1815-1914) suggests great power accommodation is possible through shared norms.

Section 7: Quick Comparison Tables & Study Tips

7.1 Theory Comparison Matrix

Dimension	Realism	Liberalism	Constructivism	Critical Theory
Primary Actor	States	States + IGOs + NGOs	States + norms	Classes / hegemon
View of Anarchy	Permanent, destabilizing	Manageable via institutions	Socially constructed	Serves dominant interests
State Interests	Fixed — survival, power	Multiple, changeable	Socially constructed	Shaped by class/ideology
Cooperation	Rare, unstable	Possible, beneficial	Norm-dependent	Masks inequality
Change	Unlikely — system self-perpetuates	Gradual via institutions	Possible via norm shifts	Revolutionary transformation
Military Force	Key instrument of statecraft	Last resort	Meaning is social	Serves ruling class interests
Key Concept	Balance of Power	Complex Interdependence	Social Construction	Hegemony
Ontology	Materialist	Rationalist-materialist	Idealist / social	Historical materialist
Epistemology	Positivist	Positivist	Interpretivist	Critical / normative
Key Weakness	Ignores cooperation & norms	Too optimistic about change	Vague causal mechanisms	Predetermined political agenda

7.2 Key Thinker Reference Table

Thinker	Theory	Key Text	Year	Core Argument
Thucydides	Classical Realism	History of the Peloponnesian War	c.400 BC	The strong do what they can; the weak suffer what they must.
Machiavelli	Classical Realism	The Prince	1532	Rulers must separate morality from politics; power determines outcomes.
Kant	Liberalism	Perpetual Peace	1795	Republics, free trade, and international law produce lasting peace.
Morgenthau	Classical Realism	Politics Among Nations	1948	States pursue power as the primary goal; morality cannot guide statecraft.
Waltz	Neorealism	Theory of International Politics	1979	Anarchy forces states to compete; system structure determines behavior.
Keohane & Nye	Neoliberal Inst.	Power and Interdependence	1977	Complex interdependence makes military force less useful; institutions matter.
Keohane	Neoliberal Inst.	After Hegemony	1984	Institutions enable cooperation even without a hegemonic enforcer.
Wendt	Constructivism	Social Theory of International Politics	1999	"Anarchy is what states make of it" — identity shapes interests.
Bull	English School	The Anarchical Society	1977	States form an international society with shared norms despite anarchy.
Mearsheimer	Offensive Realism	Tragedy of Great Power Politics	2001	Great powers are structurally compelled to maximize power — tragedy is inevitable.
Cox	Neo-Gramscianism	Social Forces, States and World Order	1981	Theory always serves someone; the current order entrenches hegemonic power.
Buzan et al.	Securitization	Security: A New Framework	1998	Security is a speech act that moves issues outside normal politics.
Finnemore	Constructivism	National Interests in Int'l Society	1996	International organizations teach states what their interests should be.
Nye	Liberalism	Bound to Lead	1990	Soft power — attraction rather than coercion — is a key source of US influence.

Wallerstein	World-Systems Theory/The Modern World-System	1974	Core states exploit periphery through the capitalist world economy.
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7.3 Study Tips for IR Theory Examinations

- Know each theory's core assumptions, not just its conclusions — examiners test whether you understand why each theory produces its predictions, not just what the predictions are.
- Practice "applying the lens" — given any international event, be able to explain it from at least three theoretical perspectives. This is the most common exam question format.
- Know the key critiques of each theory as well as its strengths. The best IR essays acknowledge limitations and explain why scholars nevertheless find the theory useful.
- Learn which scholars are associated with which theory — Waltz is neorealism, not classical realism; Wendt is constructivism, not liberalism. Attribution errors cost marks.
- Understand the great debates — they show how the field has evolved and why we have the theories we do. The neo-neo debate explains why realists and liberals sound similar today.
- For essay questions, use this structure: (1) define the theory; (2) apply it to the case; (3) note what it explains well; (4) note what it misses; (5) compare with an alternative theory.
- The levels of analysis framework is one of the most useful organizing tools for any IR analysis — always ask: is this an individual, state, or systemic explanation?
- Remember that no single theory explains everything. Sophisticated IR analysis draws on multiple frameworks and is honest about their limits. Avoid theoretical dogmatism.