Realism

No single theory reliably explains the wide range of international interactions, both conflictual and cooperative. But there is a theoretical framework that has traditionally held a central position in the study of IR. This approach, called realism, is favored by some IR scholars and vigorously contested by others, but almost all take it into account. It is a relatively conservative theoretical approach; liberal and revolutionary alternatives will be reviewed in Chapter 3.

Realism (or political realism) is a school of thought that explains international relations in terms of power (see “Defining Power,” pp. 47–48). The exercise of power by states toward each other is sometimes called realpolitik, or just power politics. Realists are often pessimistic concerning human nature. Realism has a long history, and it dominated the study of IR in the United States during the Cold War.

Realism as we know it developed in reaction to a liberal tradition that realists called idealism. Idealism emphasizes international law, morality, and international organization, rather than power alone, as key influences on international events. Idealists think that human nature is basically good. With good habits, education, and appropriate international structures, human nature can become the basis of peaceful and cooperative international relationships. Idealists see the international system as one based on a community of states with the potential to work together to overcome mutual problems (see Chapter 3).
For idealists, the principles of IR must flow from morality. Idealists were particularly active in the period between World War I and World War II, following the painful experience of World War I. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and other idealists placed their hopes for peace in the League of Nations as a formal structure for the community of nations. Those hopes were dashed when that structure proved helpless to stop German, Italian, and Japanese aggression in the 1930s. Since World War II, realists have blamed idealists for looking too much at how the world ought to be instead of how it really is. Sobered by the experiences of World War II, realists set out to understand the principles of power politics without succumbing to wishful thinking. Realism provided a theoretical foundation for the Cold War policy of containment.

Realists ground themselves in a long tradition. The Chinese strategist Sun Tzu, who lived 2,000 years ago, advised the rulers of states how to survive in an era when war had become a systematic instrument of power for the first time (the “warring states” period). Sun Tzu argued that moral reasoning was not very useful to the state rulers of the day, faced with armed and dangerous neighbors. Sun Tzu instead showed rulers how to use power to advance their interests and protect their survival.

At roughly the same time, in Greece, Thucydides wrote an account of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) focusing on relative power among the Greek city-states. He stated that “the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.” Much later, in Renaissance Italy (around 1500), Niccolò Machiavelli urged princes to concentrate on expedient actions to stay in power, including the manipulation of the public and military alliances. After World War II, scholar Hans Morgenthau argued that international politics is governed by objective, universal laws based on national interest defined as power (not psychological motives of decision makers). Realists see in these historical figures evidence that the importance of power politics is timeless and cross-cultural.

Realists tend to treat political power as separate from, and predominant over, morality, ideology, and other social and economic aspects of life. For realists, ideologies do not matter much, nor do religions or other cultural factors with which states may explain their actions. Realists see states with very different religions or ideologies or economic systems as quite similar in their actions with regard to national power.

Sometimes the realist framework is summarized in three propositions: (1) states are the most important actors (the state-centric assumption); (2) they act as rational

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individuals in pursuing national interests (the unitary rational-actor assumption); and
(3) they act in the context of an international system lacking central government (the
anarchy assumption). Table 2.1 summarizes some major differences between the
assumptions of realism and idealism. We will return to the realism-liberalism debate at
the start of Chapter 3.

Power
Power is a central concept in international relations—the central one for realists— but
one that is surprisingly difficult to define or measure.

Defining Power
Power is often defined as the ability to get another actor to do what it would not oth-
erwise have done (or not to do what it would have done). A variation on this idea is that ac-
tors are powerful to the extent that they affect others more than others affect them. These defini-
tions treat power as influence. If actors get their way a lot, they
must be powerful. One problem
with this definition is that we sel-
dom know what a second actor
would have done in the absence
of the first actor’s power. There is
a danger of circular logic: power
explains influence, and influence
measures power.

Power is not influence itself,
however, but the ability or poten-
tial to influence others. Many
IR scholars believe that such
potential is based on specific
(tangible and intangible) charac-
teristics or possessions of states—
such as their sizes, levels of
income, armed forces, and so forth. This is power as capability.
Capabilities are easier to measure
than influence and less circular
in logic.

POWER AS INFLUENCE
Power is the ability to influence the behavior of others. Military force and
economic sanctions are among the various means that states and non-
state actors use to try to influence each other. The bombing of Spanish
commuter trains in 2004 apparently swung an election a few days later
and led to Spain’s withdrawal from the U.S.-led multinational coalition in
Iraq. In this case, the terrorists, linked to al Qaeda, had the power to
influence outcomes.
Measuring capabilities to explain how one nation influences another is not simple, however. It requires summing up various kinds of potentials. States possess varying amounts of population, territory, military forces, and so forth. The best single indicator of a state’s power may be its total GDP, which combines overall size, technological level, and wealth. But even GDP is at best a rough indicator. An alternative method, compared to the method followed in this book, gives GDP estimates that are on average about 50 percent higher for countries in the global North and about 50 percent lower for the global South (see Chapter 1, footnote 1, p. 9). In particular, this alternative method reduces China’s GDP substantially from the figures reported in this book. So GDP is a useful estimator of material capabilities but not a precise one. These tangible capabilities (including military forces) are often referred to as material power.

Furthermore, power depends on nonmaterial elements. Capabilities give a state the potential to influence others only to the extent that political leaders can mobilize and deploy them effectively and strategically. This depends on national will, on diplomatic skill, on popular support for the government (its legitimacy), and so forth. Some scholars emphasize the power of ideas—the ability to maximize the influence of capabilities through a psychological process. This process includes the domestic mobilization of capabilities—often through religion, ideology, or (especially) nationalism. International influence is also gained by forming the rules of behavior, to change how others see their own national interests. If a state’s own values become widely shared among other states, it will easily influence others. For example, the United States has influenced many other states to accept the value of free markets and free trade. This has been called soft power.

Because power is a relational concept, a state can have power only relative to other states. Relative power is the ratio of the power that two states can bring to bear against each other. It matters little to realists whether a state’s capabilities are rising or declining in absolute terms, only whether they are falling behind or overtaking the capabilities of rival states. Most realists, moreover, emphasize material power.

Even realists recognize the limits to explanations based solely on power. At best, power provides a general understanding of typical or average outcomes. In actual IR there are many other elements at work, including an element of accident or luck.

Estimating Power

Any estimate of an actor’s overall power must combine diverse elements and will therefore be inexact. But such estimates are nonetheless useful. The logic of power suggests that in wars the more powerful state will generally prevail. Thus, estimates of the relative power of the two antagonists should help explain the outcome of each war. These estimates could take into account the nations’ relative military capabilities and the popular support for each one’s government, among other factors. But most important is the total size of each nation’s economy—the total GDP. With a healthy enough economy, a state can buy a large army, buy popular support (by providing consumer goods), and even buy allies.

For example, the United States that invaded Iraq in 2003 was the most powerful state in the history of the world, and Iraq had been weakened by two costly wars and a decade of sanctions. The power disparity was striking. In GDP, the United States held
an advantage of more than a hundred to one; in population, more than ten to one. The larger U.S. armed forces were much more capable technologically. In the 2003 Iraq War, the United States lacked some of the power elements it had possessed during the 1991 Gulf War—the moral legitimacy conferred by the UN Security Council, a broad coalition of allies (including the most powerful states regionally and globally), and partners willing to pay for most of the costs of the war. Despite these shortfalls, U.S. military power alone was able to carry out the objective of regime change in Iraq, within a month and with low U.S. casualties. When the war began, the U.S.-led coalition established its dominance within the first few hours and went on to systematically crush Iraq's military power and drive Saddam Hussein's regime from Baghdad.

So the GDP ratio—nearly one hundred to one—would seem to reflect accurately the power imbalance between the United States and Iraq. (In the short term, of course, other factors ranging from political strategies to military forces to weather play a role.)

And yet, two years later, the U.S. forces' grip on Iraq remained tenuous as an anti-American insurgency proved far stronger than expected. At the same time, the war in Iraq weakened support for American policies around the world. The difficulties encountered by the world's superpower in trying to establish stable political control in Iraq demonstrate that power—getting others to do what you want—includes many elements beyond just military might. GDP does not always predict who will win a war, as shown by the U.S. loss in the Vietnam War and the Soviet Union's loss in the Afghanistan War in the 1980s. Nonetheless, despite its lack of precision, GDP is probably the best single indicator of power.

**Elements of Power**

State power is a mix of many ingredients, such as natural resources, industrial capacity, moral legitimacy, military preparedness, and popular support of government. All these elements contribute to an actor's power. The mix varies from one actor to another, but overall power does relate to the rough quantities of the elements on which that power is based.

Power resources are elements that an actor can draw on over the long term. Total GDP is in this category, as are population, territory, geography, and natural resources. These attributes change only slowly. Less tangible long-term power resources include political culture, patriotism, education of the population, and strength of the scientific and technological base. The credibility of its commitments (reputation for keeping its word) is also a power resource that a state can nurture over time, as is the ability of one state's culture and values to consistently shape the thinking of other states (the power of ideas). Power resources shape an actor's potential power.

The importance of long-term power resources was illustrated after the Japanese surprise attack on the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor in 1941, which decimated U.S. naval capabilities in the Pacific. In the short term, Japan had superior military power and was able to occupy territories in Southeast Asia while driving U.S. forces from the region. In the longer term, the United States had greater power resources due to its underlying economic potential. Over the next few years it built up military capabilities that gradually matched and then overwhelmed those of Japan.
Power capabilities allow actors to exercise influence in the short term. Military forces are such a capability—perhaps the most important kind. The size, composition, and preparedness of two states’ military forces matter more in a short-term military confrontation than do their respective economies or natural resources. Another capability is the military-industrial capacity to quickly produce tanks, fighter planes, and other weapons. The quality of a state’s bureaucracy is another type of capability, allowing the state to gather information, regulate international trade, or participate in international conferences.

As with power resources, some power capabilities are intangible. The support and legitimacy that an actor commands in the short term from constituents and allies are capabilities that the actor can use to gain influence.

Given the limited resources that any actor commands, there are always trade-offs among possible capabilities. Building up military forces diverts resources that might be put into foreign aid, for instance. Or buying a population’s loyalty with consumer goods reduces resources available to the military. To the extent that one element of power can be converted into another, it is fungible. Generally, money is the most fungible capability because it can buy other capabilities.

Realists tend to see military force as the most important element of national power in the short term, and they see other elements such as economic strength or diplomatic skill or moral legitimacy as being important to the extent that they are fungible into military power. Well-paid soldiers fight better, as do soldiers imbued with moral fervor for their cause, or soldiers using higher-technology weapons. Skilled diplomats can avoid unfavorable military confrontations or provoke favorable ones. Moral foreign policies can help sway public opinion in foreign countries and cement alliances that increase military strength. Realists tend to treat these dimensions of power as important mainly because of their potential military impact. Indeed, realists share this emphasis on material (usually military) power with revolutionaries such as Chairman Mao Zedong of China, who said: “All power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”

Morality can contribute to power, by increasing the will to use power and by attracting allies. States have long clothed their actions, however aggressive, in rhetoric...
about their peaceful and defensive intentions. Of course, if a state overuses moralistic rhetoric to cloak self-interest too often, it loses credibility even with its own population.

The use of geography as an element of power is called **geopolitics**. It is often tied to the logistical requirements of military forces (see Chapter 4). In geopolitics, the three most important considerations are location, location, location. States increase their power to the extent they can use geography to enhance their military capabilities, such as by securing allies and bases close to a rival power, by controlling key natural resources, or by enjoying separation from potential adversaries by large bodies of water. In general, power declines as a function of distance from a home state.

A recurrent geopolitical theme for centrally located, largely landlocked states such as Germany is the threat of being surrounded. Militarily, centrally located states often face a two-front problem. Germany had to fight France to the west and Russia to the east simultaneously in World War I. For states less centrally located, such as Britain or the United States, different geopolitical problems appear. These states have been called “insular” because bodies of water protect them against land attacks. Their geopolitical problem in the event of war is to move soldiers and supplies over long distances to reach the scene of battle. This capability was demonstrated in the U.S. participation in World War I, World War II, the Cold War, and the Gulf War.

**Bargaining**

The exercise of power involves two or more parties, each trying to influence the other more than it is itself influenced. The mutual attempts to influence others constitute a bargaining process. Bargaining is important in various theoretical perspectives (not just realism), though different theories emphasize different motivations, tactics, and outcomes.

**Bargaining and Leverage**

Bargaining may be defined as tacit or direct communication in an attempt to reach agreement on an exchange of value—that is, of tangible or intangible items that one or both parties value. Bargaining need not be explicit. Sometimes the content is communicated through actions rather than an exchange of words.

A bargaining process has two or more participants and sometimes has mediators whose participation is nominally neutral. Participants have a direct stake in the outcome; mediators do not. There are one or more issues on which each participant hopes to reach agreement on terms favorable to itself, but the participants’ interests diverge on these issues, creating conflicts. These conflicts define a bargaining space—one or more dimensions, each of which represents a distance between the positions of two participants concerning their preferred outcomes. The bargaining process disposes of these conflicts by achieving agreement on the distribution of the various items of value that are at stake. The end result is a position arrived at in the bargaining space. Such agreements do not necessarily represent a fair exchange of value; many agreements are manifestly one-sided and unfair. But in a broad sense, bargains whether fair or unfair
contain an element of mutual gain. This is possible because the items of value being exchanged have different value to the different parties.

Participants bring different means of leverage to the bargaining process. Leverage derives from power capabilities that allow one actor to influence the other to reach agreements more favorable to the first actor’s interests. Leverage may operate on any of three dimensions of power: the promise of positive sanctions (rewards) if the other actor gives one what one wants; the threat of negative sanctions (damage to valued items) if not; or an appeal to the other’s feeling of love, friendship, sympathy, or respect for oneself.

Bringing bargaining leverage into play generally opens up a new dimension in the bargaining space, allowing outcomes along this new dimension to be traded off against those on the original dimension (the main issue at stake). Leverage thus helps to get deals done—albeit not always fair ones.

The use of violence can be a means of settling conflicts. The application of violent negative leverage can force an agreement that ends a conflict. (A gain, the agreement may not be fair.) Because such violence may also create new sources of conflict, agreements reached through violence may not last. Nonetheless, from a realist perspective violence is just another means of leverage.

The same principles of bargaining apply to both international security affairs and international political economy. In both cases power and leverage matter, and structures and institutions have been designed to aid the bargaining process. In international security such institutions as diplomatic missions and international organizations facilitate the bargaining process.

Bargaining that takes place formally—usually at a table with back-and-forth dialogue—is called negotiation. Because the issues in IR are important and the actors are usually sophisticated players in a game with long-established rules and traditions, most issues of contention reach a negotiating table sooner or later. Often bargaining takes place simultaneously at the negotiating table and in the world (often on the battlefield). The participants talk in the negotiation hall while manipulating instruments of leverage outside it.

Negotiating styles vary from one culture or individual to another. In international negotiations on major political and military issues, problems of cultural difference may become serious obstacles. A good negotiator will take time to understand the other party’s culture and bargaining style, as well as its interests and available means of leverage.

**Strategies**

Power strategies are plans actors use to develop and deploy power capabilities to achieve goals. A key aspect of strategy is choosing the kinds of capabilities to develop, given limited resources. The capabilities required to manage a situation may need to be developed years before that situation presents itself. Central to this dilemma is what kind of standing military forces to maintain in peacetime—enough to prevent a quick defeat if war breaks out, but not so much as to overburden one’s economy (see pp. 151–155). Strategies include whether (and in which situations) a state is willing to use its power capabilities. The will of a nation or leader is hard to estimate. Even if leaders make explicit their intention to fight over an issue, they might be bluffing.
The strategic actions of China in recent years exemplify the concept of strategy as the rational deployment of power capabilities. China's central foreign policy goal is to prevent the independence of Taiwan, which China considers an integral part of its territory (as does the UN and, in theory, the United States). Taiwan's government was set up to represent all of China in 1949, when the nationalists took refuge there after losing to the communists in China's civil war. Since 1949, Taiwan has operated more and more independently. China does not have the military power to invade Taiwan successfully, but it has declared repeatedly that it will go to war if Taiwan declares independence. So far, even though such a war might be irrational on China's part, the threat has deterred Taiwan from formally declaring independence. China might lose such a war, but would certainly inflict immense damage on Taiwan. In 1996, China held war games near Taiwan, firing missiles over the sea. The United States sent two aircraft carriers to signal China that its exercises must not go too far.

Not risking war by declaring independence, Taiwan instead has used diplomacy to gain influence. It lobbies the U.S. Congress, asks for admission to the UN and other world organizations, and grants foreign aid to the 26 countries that recognize Taiwan's government (half of them are in Central America and the Caribbean). China has used its own diplomacy to counter these moves. It breaks diplomatic relations with countries that recognize Taiwan. When the Pacific microstate of Kiribati recognized Taiwan in late 2003, to gain Taiwanese aid, China broke off relations and removed a Chinese satellite-tracking station from Kiribati. Since the tracking station played a vital role in China's growing space program—which had recently launched its first astronaut—and in Chinese military reconnaissance, its dismantling underscored China's determination to give Taiwan priority even at a cost to other key national goals. In 2005, China prepared to retaliate against Vanuatu for recognizing Taiwan. But in 2004 China gave more than $100 million in aid to Dominica for breaking relations with Taiwan. Two of the five vetoes China has ever used in the UN Security Council were to block peacekeeping forces in countries that extended recognition to Taiwan. By contrast, when its Taiwan interests are secure, China cooperates on issues of world order. For example, although China opposed the 1991 Gulf War, it did not veto the UN resolution authorizing it. These Chinese strategies mobilize various capabilities, from missiles to diplomats to industrial conglomerates, in a coherent effort to influence the outcome of China's most important international issue. Strategy thus amplifies China's power.

Some individual actors too are better than others at using their capabilities strategically. For instance, in the 1970s U.S. President Jimmy Carter used the great-power capabilities available to him, but his own strategic and interpersonal skills seem to have been the key to success in the Camp David agreements (which achieved the U.S. foreign policy goal of an Egyptian-Israeli treaty).

In the context of bargaining, actors use various strategies to employ leverage in an effort to move the final agreement point closer to their own positions. One common bargaining strategy is to start with extreme demands and then gradually compromise them in an effort to end up close to one's true (but concealed) position. Another strategy is to "drive a hard bargain" by sticking closely to one's original position in the belief that the other participant will eventually accept it. U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the
1970s, however, used a policy of preemptive concessions to induce movement on the other side and get to a middle-ground agreement quickly in few steps.

Another common bargaining strategy is fractionation—splitting up a complex issue into a number of small components so that progress may be sought on solvable pieces. The Arab-Israeli negotiations that began in 1991 had many sets of talks concurrently working on various pieces of the problem. The opposite approach, which some bargain- ers prefer, is to lump together diverse issues—called linkage—so that compromises on one can be traded off against another in a grand deal. This was the case in the Yalta negotiations of 1945 among the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union. On the table simultaneously were such matters as the terms of occupation of Germany, the Soviet presence in Eastern Europe, the strategy for defeating Japan, and the creation of the United Nations.

**Reciprocity, Deterrence, and Arms Races**

To have the best effect, strategic bargaining over IR outcomes should take into account the other actor's own goals and strategies. Only then can one predict which forms of leverage may induce the other actor to take the actions one desires. But this can be a problem: often states do not know each others' true intentions but can only observe each others' actions and statements (which may be lies).

**Reciprocity**—a response in kind to another's actions—can be an effective strategy for achieving cooperation in a situation of conflicting interests. If one side expresses willingness to cooperate and promises to reciprocate the other's cooperative and conflictual actions, the other side has great incentive to work out a cooperative bargain. And because reciprocity is relatively easy to interpret, the vow of future reciprocity often need not be stated explicitly.

Reciprocity can also help achieve cooperation in the sense of refraining from an undesired action. This is the intent of the strategy of **deterrence**—the threat to punish another actor if it takes a certain negative action (especially attacking one's own state or one's allies). The slogan “peace through strength” reflects this approach. If deter- rence works, its effects are almost invisible; its success is measured in attacks that did not occur. Generally, advocates of deterrence believe that conflicts are more likely to escalate into war when one party to the conflict is weak. In this view, building up military capabilities usually convinces the stronger party that a resort to military leverage would not succeed, so conflicts are less likely to escalate into violence. A strategy of **compellence**, sometimes used after deterrence fails, refers to the use of force to make another actor take some action. Generally it is harder to get another state to change course (the purpose of compellence) than it is to get it to refrain from changing course (the purpose of deterrence).

One strategy used to try to compel compliance by another state is escalation—a series of negative sanctions of increasing severity applied in order to induce another actor to take some action. In theory, the less severe actions establish credibility—showing the first actor's willingness to exert its power on the issue—and the pattern of escalation establishes the high costs of future sanctions if the second actor does not cooperate. These
should induce the second actor to comply, assuming that it finds the potential costs of the escalating punishments to be greater than the costs of compliance.

U.S. actions against Saddam prior to the Gulf War illustrate the strategy of escalation. First came statements of condemnation, then UN resolutions, then the formation of an alliance with power clearly superior to Iraq’s. Next came the application of economic sanctions, then a military buildup with an implicit threat to use force, then explicit threats of force, and finally ultimatums threatening force after a specific deadline. In this case the strategy did not induce compliance; only military defeat induced Iraq to accept U.S. terms.

Escalation can be quite dangerous. During the Cold War, many IR scholars worried that a conventional war could lead to nuclear war if the superpowers tried to apply escalation strategies. In fact, side by side with the potential for eliciting cooperation, reciprocity in general contains a danger of runaway hostility. When two sides both reciprocate but never manage to put relations on a cooperative footing, the result can be a drawn-out, nasty, tit-for-tat exchange of punishments. This characterizes Israeli relations with Palestinian militants, for instance.

An arms race is a reciprocal process in which two (or more) states build up military capabilities in response to each other. Since each wants to act prudently against a threat (often a bit overblown in the leaders’ perceptions), the attempt to reciprocate leads to a runaway production of weapons by both sides. The mutual escalation of threats erodes confidence, reduces cooperation, and makes it more likely that a crisis (or accident) could cause one side to strike first and start a war rather than wait for the other side to strike. The arms race process was illustrated vividly in the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race, which created arsenals of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons on each side.

The unitary actor assumption holds that states make important decisions as though they were single individuals able to act in the national interest. In truth, factions and organizations with differing interests put conflicting pressures on state leaders. Iran’s government is badly split between reformers, led by President Khatami, and conservative ayatollahs who barred reformist candidates for parliament in 2004. This news kiosk in Tehran in 2002 sells a postcard of Khatami (below soccer players, top center) along with other political and sports figures.
Chapter 2  Power Politics

Rationality

Consistent with the bargaining framework just outlined, most realists (and many non-realists) assume that those who wield power behave as rational actors in their efforts to influence others.

First, the assumption of rationality implies that states and other international actors can identify their interests and put priorities on various interests. A state’s actions seek to advance its interests. The assumption is a simplification, because the interests of particular politicians, parties, economic sectors, or regions of a country often conflict. Yet realists assume that the exercise of power attempts to advance the national interest—the interests of the state itself.

But what are the interests of a state? Are they the interests of domestic groups (see Chapter 3)? The need to prevail in conflicts with other states (see Chapter 4)? The need to cooperate with the international community for mutual benefit (see Chapter 6)? There is no simple answer. Some realists simply define the national interest as maximizing power—a debatable assumption.

Second, rationality implies that actors are able to perform a cost-benefit analysis—calculating the costs incurred by a possible action and the benefits it is likely to bring. Applying power incurs costs and should produce commensurate gains. As in the problem of estimating power, one has to add up different dimensions in such a calculation. Even a rational actor can miscalculate costs and benefits, or calculate on the basis of faulty information (although this does not mean they are irrational). And, again, human behavior and luck can be unpredictable.

In addition to rationality, many realists make an additional assumption that the actor (usually states) exercising power is a single entity that can “think” about its actions coherently and make choices. This is called the unitary actor assumption, or sometimes the strong leader assumption, and it is used to describe the nature of states as international actors. Although useful, this simplification does not capture the complexity of how most states actually arrive at decisions (see Chapter 3).

These three assumptions about rationality and the actors in IR are simplifications that not all IR scholars accept. But realists consider these simplifications useful because they allow scholars to explain events in a general way.

Despite criticisms of these assumptions, realists argue that rational actor models capture not all but the most important aspects of IR. These simplified models provide the foundations for a large body of IR research that represents international bargaining relationships mathematically. By accepting the limitations of the assumptions, IR scholars can build very general and abstract models of international relationships.

Game Theory

Game theory is a branch of mathematics concerned with predicting bargaining outcomes. A game is a setting in which two or more players choose among alternative moves, either once or repeatedly. Each combination of moves (by all players) results in a set of payoffs (utility) to each player. The payoffs can be tangible items such as money or any intangible items of value. Game theory aims to deduce likely outcomes
Bargaining

(what moves players will make), given the players' preferences and the possible moves open to them.

Game theory was first used extensively in IR in the 1950s and 1960s by scholars trying to understand U.S.-Soviet nuclear war contingencies. Moves were decisions to use nuclear weapons in certain ways, and payoffs were outcomes of the war. The use of game theory (and related formal models) to study international interactions has increased in recent years, especially among realists, who accept the assumptions about rationality. To analyze a game mathematically, one assumes that each player chooses a move rationally, to maximize its payoff.

Different kinds of situations are represented by different classes of games, as defined by the number of players and the structure of the payoffs. One basic distinction is between zero-sum games, in which one player's gain is by definition equal to the other's loss, and non-zero-sum games, in which both players can gain (or lose). In a zero-sum game there is no point in communication or cooperation between the players because their interests are diametrically opposed. But in a non-zero-sum game, coordination of moves can maximize the total payoff to the players. Analysis of a game entails searching for a solution (or equilibrium) — a set of moves by all the players such that no player can increase its payoff by changing its move. It is the outcome at which rational players will arrive. Some simple games have one solution, but many games have multiple solutions.

The game called Prisoner's Dilemma (PD) is the one most commonly studied. The original story tells of two prisoners questioned separately by a prosecutor. The prosecutor knows they committed a bank robbery but has only enough evidence to convict them of illegal possession of a gun unless one of them confesses. The prosecutor tells each prisoner that if he confesses and his partner doesn’t confess, he will go free. If his partner confesses and he doesn’t, he will get a long prison term for bank robbery (while the partner goes free). If both confess, they will get a somewhat reduced term. If neither confesses, they will be convicted on the gun charge and serve a short sentence. The story assumes that neither prisoner will have a chance to retaliate later, that only the immediate outcomes matter, and that each prisoner cares only about himself.

This game has a single solution: both prisoners will confess. Each will reason as follows: “If my partner is going to confess, then I should confess too, because I will get a slightly shorter sentence that way. If my partner is not going to confess, then I should still confess because I will go free that way instead of serving a short sentence.” The other prisoner follows the same reasoning. The dilemma is that by following their individually rational choices both prisoners will end up serving a fairly long sentence when they could have both served a short one by cooperating (keeping their mouths shut).

In IR, the PD game has been used to gain insight into arms races. Consider the decisions of India and Pakistan to build sizable nuclear weapons arsenals. In 1998, when India detonated underground nuclear explosions to test weapons designs, Pakistan promptly followed suit. Now, both sides are building up arsenals. To analyze the game, one must assign values to each possible outcome — often called a preference ordering— for each player. This is not simple: if one misjudges the value a player puts on a particular outcome, one may draw wrong conclusions from the game. The following preferences are
plausible: the best outcome would be that oneself but not the other player had a nuclear arsenal (strong leverage); second best would be for neither to go nuclear (no leverage, but no expense); third best would be for both to develop nuclear arsenals (a major expense without gaining leverage); worst would be to forgo nuclear weapons oneself while the other player developed them (and be subject to blackmail).

The game can be summarized in a payoff matrix (see Table 2.2). The first number in each cell is India’s payoff, and the second number is Pakistan’s. To keep things simple, 4 indicates the highest payoff, and 1 the lowest. As is conventional, a decision to refrain from building nuclear weapons is called “cooperation,” and a decision to proceed with nuclear weapons is called “defection.” The dilemma here parallels that of the prisoners just discussed. Each state’s leader reasons: “If they go nuclear, we must; if they don’t, we’d be crazy not to.” The model seems to predict an inevitable Indian-Pakistani nuclear arms race, although both states would do better to avoid one. Indeed, both sides now have dozens of nuclear missiles, and they nearly went to war in 2002, with estimated war deaths of up to 12 million.

The model can be made more realistic by allowing the players to play the game repeatedly; as in most IR contexts, the same actors will bargain over an issue repeatedly. Game theorists have shown that in a repeated PD game, the possibility of reciprocity can make it rational to cooperate. Now the state leader reasons: “If we defect now, they will respond by defecting and both of us will lose; if we cooperate they might cooperate too; and if we are suckerized once we can defect in the future.”

Another commonly analyzed game in IR is known as Chicken, which represents two male teenagers speeding toward a head-on collision. The first to swerve is “chicken.” Each reasons: “If he doesn’t swerve, I must; but if he swerves, I won’t.” The player who first commits irrevocably not to swerve (for example, by throwing away the steering wheel) will win. Similarly, in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, some scholars argued that President John F. Kennedy “won” by seeming ready to risk nuclear war if Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev did not back down and remove Soviet missiles from Cuba. (There are, however, alternative explanations of the outcome of the crisis.)

Through analysis of these and other games, IR researchers try to predict what rational actors would do in various situations. Games can capture and simplify the fundamental dynamics of various bargaining situations. However, a game-theoretic analysis is
only as good as the assumptions that go into it. In particular, the results of the analysis depend on the preferences that players are assumed to have about outcomes. Of course, it is difficult to know what the exact preferences of players (such as state leaders) are, since this requires intimate knowledge of a player's goals and desires.

The International System

States interact within a set of well-defined and long-established "rules of the game" governing what is considered a state and how states treat each other. Together these rules shape the international system as we know it.

Anarchy and Sovereignty

Realists emphasize that the rules of the international system create anarchy—a term that implies not chaos or absence of structure and rules, but rather the lack of a central government that can enforce rules. In domestic society within states, governments can enforce contracts, deter citizens from breaking rules, and carry out laws. Both democracies and dictatorships provide central government enforcement of a system of rules. If a law is broken, there is a police force and courts to punish the lawbreaker. Realists contend there is no such central authority to enforce rules and ensure compliance with norms of conduct. Lack of such a central authority among states is what realists mean by anarchy. The power of one state is countered only by the power of other states. States must rely on self-help, which they supplement with allies and the (sometimes) constraining power of international norms. In this anarchic world, realists emphasize prudence as a great virtue in foreign policy. States should pay attention not to the intentions of other states but rather to their capabilities.

Despite its anarchy, the international system is far from chaotic. The great majority of state interactions closely adhere to norms of behavior—shared expectations about what behavior is considered proper. Norms change over time, slowly, but the most basic norms of the international system have changed little in recent centuries.
Sovereignty—traditionally the most important norm—means that a government has the right, at least in principle, to do whatever it wants in its own territory. States are separate, are autonomous, and answer to no higher authority. In principle, all states are equal in status, if not in power. Sovereignty also means that states are not supposed to interfere in the internal affairs of other states. Although states do try to influence each other (exert power) on matters of trade, alliances, war, and so on, they are not supposed to meddle in the internal politics and decision processes of other states. For example, it would be inappropriate for Russia or Britain to endorse a candidate for U.S. president. (This rule is often broken in practice.)

In practice, most states have a hard time warding off interference in their affairs. Such “internal” matters as human rights or self-determination are, increasingly, concerns for the international community. Also, the integration of global economic markets and telecommunications makes it easier than ever for ideas to penetrate state borders.

States are based on territory. Respect for the territorial integrity of all states, within recognized borders, is an important principle of IR. Many of today’s borders are the result of past wars or were imposed arbitrarily by third parties such as colonizers.

The territorial nature of the interstate system developed long ago when agrarian societies relied on agriculture to generate wealth. In today’s world, where trade and technology rather than land create wealth, the territorial state may be less important. Information-based economies are linked across borders instantly, and the idea that the state has a hard shell seems archaic. The accelerating revolution in information technologies may dramatically affect the territorial state system in the coming years.

Membership in the international system rests on general recognition (by other states) of a government’s sovereignty within its territory. This recognition is extended formally through diplomatic relations and by membership in the UN. It does not imply that a government has popular support but only that it controls the state’s territory and agrees to assume its obligations in the international system—to accept internationally recognized borders, to assume the international debts of the previous government, and to refrain from interfering in other states’ internal affairs.

States have developed norms of diplomacy to facilitate their interactions. An embassy is considered to be territory of the home state, not the country where it is located (see pp. 274–276). The U.S. embassy in China, for instance, harbored a wanted Chinese dissident for two years after the Tiananmen Square crackdown of 1989, and Chinese troops did not simply come in and take him away. To do so would have been a violation of U.S. territorial integrity. Yet the norms of diplomacy can be violated. In 1979, Iranian students took over the U.S. embassy in Tehran, holding many of its inhabitants hostage for 444 days.

Realists acknowledge that the rules of IR often create a security dilemma—a situation in which states’ actions taken to assure their own security (such as deploying more military forces) tend to threaten the security of other states. The responses of those other states (such as deploying more of their own military forces) in turn threaten the first state. The dilemma parallels the Prisoner’s Dilemma game discussed earlier. The security dilemma is a negative consequence of anarchy in the international system. Realists tend to see the dilemma as unsolvable, whereas liberals think it can be solved through the development of norms and institutions (see Chapters 3 and 6).
As we shall see in later chapters, changes in technology and in norms are undermining the traditional principles of territorial integrity and state autonomy in IR. Some IR scholars find states to be practically obsolete as the main actors in world politics, as some integrate into larger entities and others fragment into smaller units. Other scholars find the international system quite enduring in its structure and state units. One of its most enduring features is the balance of power.

**Balance of Power**

In the anarchy of the international system, the most reliable brake on the power of one state is the power of other states. The term *balance of power* refers to the general concept of one or more states’ power being used to balance that of another state or group of states. The term is used in several ways and is imprecisely defined. Balance of power can refer to any ratio of power capabilities between states or alliances or it can mean only a relatively equal ratio. Alternatively, balance of power can refer to the process by which counterbalancing coalitions have repeatedly formed in history to prevent one state from conquering an entire region. The theory of balance of power argues that such counterbalancing occurs regularly and maintains the stability of the international system. The system is stable in that its rules and principles stay the same: state sovereignty does not collapse into a universal empire. This stability does not, however, imply peace; it is rather a stability maintained by means of recurring wars that adjust power relations.

Alliances (to be discussed shortly) play a key role in the balance of power. Building up one’s own capabilities against a rival is a form of power balancing, but forming an alliance against a threatening state is often quicker, cheaper, and more effective.

Sometimes a particular state deliberately becomes a balancer (in its region or the world), shifting its support to oppose whatever state or alliance is strongest at the moment. Britain played this role on the European continent for centuries, and China played it in the Cold War.

In the post–Cold War era of U.S. dominance, balance-of-power theory would predict closer relations among Russia, China, and even France—great powers that are not close U.S. military allies. These predictions appear to be on the mark. Russian-Chinese relations have improved dramatically in such areas as arms trade and demilitarization of the border. Russia and China signed a treaty of friendship in 2001. France contested U.S. positions vigorously in global trade negotiations and discussions of NATO’s command structure, and sometimes sided with Russia and China in the UN Security Council, notably in the debate before the 2003 Iraq War. French leaders have complained repeatedly of U.S. “hyperpower.” Europe and Japan opposed U.S. positions on a range of proposed treaties in 2001, on such subjects as missile defense, biological weapons, small arms trade, and global warming. In 2003, as America used military force in Iraq, world public opinion revealed widespread anti-American sentiment. In Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, and Nigeria—containing half of all the world’s Muslims—more than 70 percent worried that the United States could become a threat to their own country, a worry shared by 71 percent of Russians. In Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, and Jordan, less than a quarter of
the population supported the U.S. war on terrorism. A survey of 38,000 people in 44 nations showed a dramatic drop in support for the United States from 2002 to 2003.

**Great Powers and Middle Powers**

Power, of course, varies greatly from one state to another. The most powerful states in the system exert most of the influence on international events and therefore get the most attention from IR scholars. By almost any measure of power, a handful of states possess the majority of the world's power resources. At most a few dozen states have any real influence beyond their immediate locality. These are called the great powers and middle powers in the international system.

Although there is no firm dividing line, great powers are generally considered the half dozen or so most powerful states. Until the past century the great power club was exclusively European. Sometimes great powers' status is formally recognized in an international structure such as the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe or the UN Security Council. In general, great powers may be distinguished by the criterion that they can be defeated militarily only by another great power. Great powers also tend to share a global outlook based on national interests far from their home territories.

The great powers generally have the world's strongest military forces and the strongest economies to pay for military forces and other power capabilities. These large economies in turn rest on some combination of large populations, plentiful natural resources, advanced technology, and educated labor forces. Because power is based on these underlying resources, membership in the great-power system changes slowly. Only rarely does a great power—even one defeated in a massive war—lose its status as a great power, because its size and long-term economic potential change slowly. Thus Germany and Japan, decimated in World War II, are powerful today.

What states are great powers today? Seven states appear to meet the criteria: the United States, China, Russia, Japan, Germany, France, and Britain. In total GDP, a measure of potential power, the United States ranks highest by far at $11 trillion per year (2004 data). Because of its historical role of world leadership (especially in and after World War II), and its predominant military might, the United States is considered the world's only superpower.

China, with a total GDP of nearly $7 trillion, is or soon will be the world's second largest economy. China's GDP is especially hard to estimate, and another method would put it below $2 trillion. In any case, China's sheer size and its rapid economic growth make it a powerful state. China has a large but not very modern military, and its orientation is regional rather than global. But, with a credible nuclear arsenal and a seat on the UN Security Council, China qualifies as a great power. It is expected to play a central role in world politics in the twenty-first century. Japan ranks third (perhaps second), with a GDP of nearly $4 trillion. Along with Germany (over $2 trillion GDP), Japan is an economic great power, but both countries' military roles in international security affairs have been curtailed since World War II (although recently both have begun using military forces beyond their own territories). Russia, even after the breakup of the Soviet Union, has a GDP above $1 trillion—again a hard one to estimate—and very large
(though rundown) military forces including a massive nuclear arsenal. France and Britain finish out the list at around $1.6 trillion GDP each.

The great powers thus include the five permanent members of the UN Security Council: the United States, Russia, France, Britain, and China. The same five states are also the members of the “club” possessing large nuclear weapons arsenals (there are also several recent smaller-scale nuclear states). In world political and economic affairs, Germany and Japan are also great powers (they would like Security Council seats, too; see p. 247). These seven great powers account for about half of the world’s total GDP—and hence, presumably, about half of the total power in the world. This concentration of power is especially strong in practice because the remaining half of the world’s power is split up among nearly 200 other states (see Figure 2.1).

Middle powers rank somewhat below the great powers in terms of their influence on world affairs. Some are large but not highly industrialized; others have specialized capabilities but are small. Some aspire to regional dominance, and many have considerable influence in their regions.

A list of middle powers (not everyone would agree on it) might include states such as Canada, Italy, India, Brazil, Mexico, South Korea, Australia, Iran, and Turkey. Middle powers have not received as much attention in IR as have great powers. These states do, however, often come into play in the specific regional conflicts that dominate

![Figure 2.1: Great-Power Shares of World GDP, 2003 (purchasing-power method)](image-url)
the day-to-day flow of international news. Smaller, weaker states are often at the center of specific conflicts and crises, but their actions have only minor influence on world politics.

**Power Distribution**

With each state's power balanced by other states, the most important characteristic of an international system in the view of many realists is the distribution of power among states in an international system. Power distribution as a concept can apply to all the states in the world or to just one region, but most often it refers to the great-power system (with most of the world's total power capabilities).

Neorealists (so called because they have adopted and refined realism) try to explain patterns of international events in terms of the system structure—the international distribution of power—rather than the internal makeup of individual states. Neorealism is thus also called structural realism. Neorealists often use game theory and related models in such analyses. Compared to traditional realism, neorealism is more scientific in the sense of proposing general laws to explain events, but neorealism has lost some of the richness of traditional realism, which took account of such complex elements as geography, willpower, and diplomacy.

Sometimes an international power distribution (world or regional) is described in terms of polarity (a term adopted from physics), which refers to the number of independent power centers in the system. This concept encompasses both the underlying power of various participants and their alliance groupings.

In a multipolar system there are typically five or six centers of power, which are not grouped into alliances. Each state participates independently and on relatively equal terms with the others. They may form a coalition of the whole for mutual security through coordination of efforts. At the other extreme, a unipolar system has a single center of power around which all others revolve. This is called hegemony, and will be discussed shortly. A bipolar system has two predominant states or two great rival alliance blocs. The fairly rare tripolar system has three great centers of power. There is a tendency for a two-against-one alliance to form. Some scholars imagine a future tripolar world with rival power centers in North America, Europe, and East Asia.

These various polarities can be conceptualized as a pyramid or hierarchy of power in an international system. At the top is the most powerful state, with other great powers and middle powers arrayed below. Such a pyramid is similar to the dominance (or status) hierarchies that many animals use to regulate access to valuable resources such as food—the “pecking order.” The steepness of the pyramid represents the concentration of power in the international system.

Some IR scholars have argued that peace is best preserved by a relatively equal power distribution (multipolarity) because then no country has an opportunity to win easily. The empirical evidence for this theory, however, is not strong. The opposite proposition has more support: peace is best preserved by hegemony, and next best by bipolarity.

Such is the thrust of power transition theory. This theory holds that the largest wars result from challenges to the top position in the status hierarchy, when a rising power is surpassing (or threatening to surpass) the most powerful state. At such times, power is relatively
equally distributed, and these are the most dangerous times for major wars. Status quo powers that are doing well under the old rules will try to maintain them, whereas challengers that feel locked out by the old rules may try to change them. Status disequilibrium refers to a difference between a rising power’s status (formal position in the hierarchy) and its actual power. In such a situation, the rising power may suffer from relative deprivation— the feeling that it is not doing as well as others or as well as it deserves, even though its position may be improving in absolute terms. The classic example is Germany’s rise in the nineteenth century, which gave it great-power capabilities even though it was left out of colonial territories and other signs of status.

If the challenger does not start a war to displace the top power, the latter may provoke a “preventive” war to stop the rise of the challenger before it becomes too great a threat. Germany’s intensive arms race with Britain (the top power) led to increasing hostility and the outbreak of World War I. After the war there was again a disparity between Germany’s actual power (still considerable) and its harsh treatment under the terms of the Versailles Treaty. That disparity may have contributed to World War II.

**Hegemony**

Hegemony is the holding by one state of a preponderance of power in the international system, so that it can single-handedly dominate the rules and arrangements by which international political and economic relations are conducted. Such a state is called a hegemone. Sometimes the term is used to refer to the complex of ideas that rulers use to gain consent for their legitimacy and keep subjects in line, reducing the need to use force to accomplish the same goal. By extension, such a meaning in IR refers to the hegemony of ideas such as democracy and capitalism, and to the global predominance of U.S. culture (see pp. 305–306).
Most studies of hegemony point to two examples: Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States after World War II. Britain's predominance followed the defeat of its archrival France in the Napoleonic Wars. Both world trade and naval capabilities were firmly in British hands, as "Britannia ruled the waves." U.S. predominance followed the destruction caused by World War II. In the late 1940s, the U.S. GDP was more than half the world's total; U.S. vessels carried the majority of the world's shipping; the U.S. military could single-handedly defeat any other state or combination of states; and only the United States had nuclear weapons. U.S. industry led the world in technology and productivity, and U.S. citizens enjoyed the world's highest standard of living.

As the extreme power disparities after major wars slowly diminish (states rebuild over years and decades), hegemonic decline may occur, particularly when hegemons have overextended themselves with costly military commitments.

The theory of hegemonic stability (see pp. 80–82) holds that hegemony provides some order similar to a central government in the international system: reducing anarchy, deterring aggression, promoting free trade, and providing a hard currency that can be used as a world standard. Hegemons can help to resolve or at least keep in check conflicts among middle powers or small states.

From the perspective of less powerful states, of course, such hegemony may seem unjust or illegitimate. For instance, China chafed under U.S.-imposed economic sanctions for 20 years after 1949, feeling itself encircled by U.S. military bases and hostile alliances led by the United States. To this day, Chinese leaders use the term hegemony as an insult, and the theory of hegemonic stability does not impress them.

Even in the United States itself there is considerable ambivalence about U.S. hegemony. U.S. foreign policy has historically alternated between internationalist and isolationist moods. In World War I, the country waited three years to weigh in and refused to join the League of Nations afterward. U.S. isolationism peaked in the 1930s; public opinion polls late in that decade showed 95 percent of the U.S. public opposed to participation in a future great European war, and about 70 percent opposed to joining with other nations to stop aggression.

Internationalists, such as Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, favored U.S. leadership and activism in world affairs. These views seemed vindicated by the failure of isolationism to prevent World War II (or to keep the United States out of it). U.S. leaders after the war became alarmed by the threat of Soviet (and then Chinese) communism and drummed up U.S. public opinion to favor a strong internationalism during the Cold War. The United States became an activist, global superpower. In the post-Cold War era, a new isolationist camp emerged in reaction to the displacements caused by globalization and free trade. However, the terrorist attacks of September 2001 discredited the idea of U.S. disengagement from world affairs, and renewed public support for U.S. interventionism in distant conflicts that no longer seemed so distant.

A second area of U.S. ambivalence is unilateralism versus multilateralism in U.S. internationalism. Multilateral approaches—working through international institutions—augment U.S. power and reduce costs, but they limit U.S. freedom of action. In 2001, the new Bush Administration declined to participate in such international efforts as a treaty on global warming (see pp. 360–362), a conference on racism, and an International Criminal Court (see p. 277). These unilateralist U.S. policies have been resisted by Europe and Canada. The international community's united front against
Alliances pushed these disputes to the back burner, but they soon reemerged with the U.S. push for war against Iraq in 2003.

A third aspect of ambivalent U.S. hegemony is that of morality versus realism. Should the United States be a moral guiding light for the world—pursuing goals such as democracy and human rights—or should it concentrate on its own national interests, such as natural resources and geostrategic position?

Alliances

An alliance is a coalition of states that coordinate their actions to accomplish some end. Most alliances are formalized in written treaties, concern a common threat and related issues of international security, and endure across a range of issues and a period of time. If actors’ purposes in banding together were shorter-term, less formal, or more issue-specific, the association might be called a coalition rather than an alliance. Informal but enduring strategic alignments in a region are discussed shortly. But these terms are somewhat ambiguous. Two countries may have a formal alliance and yet be bitter enemies, as are Greece and Turkey. Or, two countries may create the practical equivalent of an alliance without a formal treaty.

Purposes of Alliances

Alliances generally have the purpose of augmenting their members’ power relative to other states. By pooling their power capabilities, two or more states can exert greater leverage in their bargaining with other states. For smaller states, alliances can be their most important power element, and for great powers the structure of alliances shapes the configuration of power in the system. Of all the elements of power, none can change as quickly and decisively as alliances. Most alliances form in response to a perceived threat. When a state’s power grows and threatens to overmatch that of its rivals, the latter often form an alliance to limit that power.

Marriage of Convenience

Alliances generally result from a convergence of practical interests, not sentimental or ideological reasons. Here, a U.S. general gets rival Afghan warlords to patch up relations, 2002.
Except in the rare circumstance of hegemony, every state is weaker than some combination of other states. If states overstep norms of international conduct they may face a powerful alliance of opposing states (i.e., a balance of power). This happened to Iraq when it invaded Kuwait in 1990, as it had to Hitler's Germany in the 1940s and to Napoleon's France in the 1800s.

Realists emphasize the fluidity of alliances. They are not marriages of love, but marriages of convenience. Alliances are based on national interests, and can shift as national interests change. This fluidity helps the balance-of-power process to operate effectively.

It is not simple or costless to break an alliance: one's reputation may suffer and future alliances may be harder to establish. There is an important norm that says that written treaties should be honored. So states often do adhere to alliance terms even when it is not in their short-term interest to do so.

Nonetheless, recall that because of the nature of international anarchy, the possibility of turning against a friend is always present. Realists would agree with French president Charles de Gaulle (under whom France withdrew militarily from NATO and developed its own nuclear weapons in the 1960s) that "France has no permanent friends, only permanent interests."1

Examples are many. Anticommunist Richard Nixon could cooperate with communist Mao Zedong in 1972. Joseph Stalin could sign a nonaggression pact with a fascist, Adolph Hitler, and then cooperate with the capitalist West against Hitler. The United States could back the Islamic militants in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, then attack them in 2001. Every time history brings another such reversal in international alignments, many people are surprised. Realists are not so surprised.

The fluidity of alliances deepens the security dilemma. If there were only two states, it would be possible to match capabilities so that both have adequate defense but cannot attack. But if a third state is free to ally with either side, then each state has to build adequate defenses against the potential alliance of its enemy with the third state. The threat is greater and the security dilemma is harder to escape.

A **alliance cohesion** is the ease with which the members hold together an alliance. Cohesion tends to be high when national interests converge and when cooperation within the alliance becomes institutionalized and habitual. When states with divergent interests form an alliance against a common enemy, the alliance may come apart if the threat subsides. It did, for instance, with the World War II U.S.-Soviet alliance. Even when alliance cohesion is high, as in NATO during the Cold War, conflicts may arise over **burden sharing** (who bears the costs of the alliance).

Great powers often form alliances with smaller states, sometimes called client states. In the Cold War, each superpower extended a security umbrella over its allies. The issue of credibility in such an alliance is whether (and under what circumstances) the great power will assist its clients in a war. Extended deterrence refers to a strong state's use of threats to deter attacks on weaker clients—such as the U.S. threat to attack the Soviet

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1 Time, July 12, 1963.
Union if it invaded Western Europe. Great powers face a real danger of being dragged into wars with each other over relatively unimportant regional issues if their respective clients go to war. If the great powers do not come to their clients’ protection, they may lose credibility with other clients, but if they do, they may end up fighting a costly war. The Soviet Union worried that its commitments to China in the 1950s, to Cuba in the 1960s, and to Syria and Egypt in the 1970s (among others) could result in a disastrous war with the United States.

**NATO and the U.S.-Japanese Security Treaty**

At present, two important formal alliances dominate the international security scene. By far the more powerful is the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)**, which encompasses Western Europe and North America. Using GDP as a measure of power, the 26 NATO members possess nearly half the world total (roughly twice the power of the United States alone). Members are the United States, Canada, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. At NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium, military staffs from the member countries coordinate plans and periodically direct exercises in the field. The NATO “allied supreme commander” has always been a U.S. general. In NATO, each state contributes its own military units—with its own national culture, language, and equipment specifications.

NATO was founded in 1949 to oppose and deter Soviet power in Europe. Its counterpart in Eastern Europe during the Cold War, the Soviet-led **Warsaw Pact**, was founded in 1955 and disbanded in 1991. During the Cold War, the United States maintained more than 300,000 troops in Europe, with advanced planes, tanks, and other equipment. After the Cold War ended, these forces were cut to about 100,000. But NATO stayed together because its members believed that NATO provided useful stability even though its mission was unclear. The first actual use of force by NATO was in Bosnia in 1994, in support of the UN mission there. The European Union has formed its own rapid deployment force, outside NATO. The decision grew in part from European military weaknesses demonstrated in the 1999 Kosovo War, in which the United States contributed the most power by far. Although this Eurocorps generally works with NATO, it also gives Europe more independence from the United States. In 2003, the European Union sent military forces as peacekeepers to Democratic Congo—the first multinational European military operation to occur outside NATO. In 2004, NATO and U.S. forces withdrew from Bosnia after nine years, turning over peacekeeping there to the European Union (as they had in Macedonia). But NATO forces, including U.S. soldiers, remain next door in Kosovo.

The biggest issue for NATO is its recent eastward expansion, beyond the East-West Cold War dividing line. In 1999, former Soviet-bloc countries Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary joined the alliance. Joining in 2004 were Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria. Making the new members’ militaries compatible with NATO is a major undertaking, requiring increased military spending by existing and new NATO members. NATO expansion was justified by liberals as a way to solidify...
new democracies while keeping Europe peaceful, and by conservatives as protection against possible future Russian aggression. NATO forces have participated in the war in Afghanistan, but the 2003 Iraq War bypassed NATO and divided NATO members. France and Germany strongly opposed the war, and Turkey refused to let U.S. ground forces cross into Iraq. Russian leaders oppose NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe as aggressive and anti-Russian. They view NATO expansion as reasserting dividing lines on the map of Europe, but pushed closer to Russia's borders. These fears strengthen nationalist and anti-Western political forces in Russia. To mitigate the problems, NATO created a category of symbolic membership—the Partnership for Peace—which almost all Eastern European and former Soviet states including Russia joined.

The second most important alliance is the U.S.-Japanese Security Treaty, a bilateral alliance. Under this alliance the United States maintains nearly 60,000 troops in Japan (with weapons, equipment, and logistical support). Japan pays the United States several billion dollars annually to offset about half the cost of maintaining these troops. The alliance was created in 1951 against the potential Soviet threat to Japan.

Because of its roots in the U.S. military occupation of Japan after World War II, the alliance is very asymmetrical. The United States is committed to defend Japan if it is attacked, but Japan is not similarly obligated to defend the United States. The United States maintains troops in Japan, but not vice versa. The United States belongs to several other alliances, but Japan's only major alliance is with the United States. The United States share of the total military power in this alliance is also far greater than its share in NATO.

Japan's constitution renounces the right to make war and maintain military forces, although interpretation has loosened this prohibition over time. Japan maintains military forces, called the Self-Defense Forces, which is a powerful army by world standards but much smaller than Japan's economic strength could support. Japanese public opinion restrains militarism and precludes the development of nuclear weapons (after Japanese cities were destroyed by nuclear weapons in World War II).

Japan is as dependent as ever on natural resources from foreign countries, but Japanese leaders generally believe that economic and diplomatic (rather than military) capabilities can best assure a smooth flow of resources to Japan and export markets for Japanese goods. The security alliance with the United States—Japan's largest trading partner—provides a stable security framework conducive to business.

For its part, the United States has used the alliance with Japan as a base to project U.S. power in Asia, especially during the wars in Korea (1950–1953) and Vietnam (1965–1975) when Japan was a key staging area for U.S. war efforts. The continued U.S. military presence in Japan (as in Europe) symbolizes the U.S. commitment to remain engaged in Asian security affairs. However, these U.S. forces have been drawn down somewhat in the past decade in response to high costs, reduced threats, and some opposition by local residents (especially on Okinawa island). As the U.S. begins to focus more on the Middle East, more cuts in troops could follow in the coming years.

Parallel with the U.S.-Japan treaty, the United States maintains military alliances with several other states, including South Korea and Australia. Close U.S. collaboration with militaries in other states such as Pakistan make them de facto U.S. allies.
The Former Soviet Republics

The 12 members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) comprise the former Soviet republics except the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). Russia is the leading member and Ukraine the second largest. After its first decade, the CIS remains a loose coordinating institution for states to solve practical problems in economic and (sometimes) military spheres.

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, a chaotic situation emerged. Power for several years had been shifting from the center in Moscow to the 15 constituent Soviet republics. The Warsaw Pact had collapsed. The Soviet army itself began to break...
up, and several republics began forming their own military forces using Soviet forces, bases, and equipment located on their territories. At the same time, other former Soviet forces located outside Russia remained in a chain of command centered in Moscow, effectively under Russian control. For years until 1997, Russia and Ukraine debated ownership of the Black Sea fleet, whose port was in Ukraine but whose history was distinctly Russian. (Russia and Ukraine are the two largest and most important members of the CIS; see this chapter's "Policy Perspectives" feature, p. 73.) One reason for forming the CIS was simply to speed the death of the old Soviet Union and ease the transition to full independence for its republics. The extensive property of the Soviet Union (including state-owned industry and military forces) went to the individual republics, especially to Russia, which became the USSR’s successor state. The disposition of the Soviet Union’s property and armed forces was negotiated by CIS members.

Although some military coordination takes place through the CIS, plans for a joint military force instead of 12 independent armies did not succeed. Among the largest CIS members, Kazakhstan and Belarus are the most closely aligned with Russia, while Ukraine is the most independent.

It is to the CIS’s credit that in the post-Soviet chaos no major war erupted between major CIS member states. Substantial warfare did occur between some of the smaller members (notably Armenia and Azerbaijan), and there was civil violence within several other CIS states (Russia, Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan); CIS forces were drawn into a few small clashes. But the large members were not drawn into wars. The outcome could have been much worse.

One of the first problems facing CIS military forces was what position to take in inter-republic warfare, such as that between Armenia and Azerbaijan, secessionist wars as in Georgia, or civil wars to control republics’ governments as in Tajikistan. In the mid-1990s, the CIS operated a 24,000-person peacekeeping force in Tajikistan, generally supporting the government in a civil war there. A 1,500-person force in Moldova and a 500-person force in Georgia, both acting as buffer forces to monitor cease-fires, operated under joint commands of Russia and the governments and rebel forces in each of those countries.

Another pressing military problem for the CIS was the disposition of the tens of thousands of nuclear weapons of the former Soviet Union. As the Soviet successor state, Russia assumed control of the weapons and within a year moved all the tactical nuclear weapons out of the other republics and into Russian territory. This was a very touchy operation because of the danger of theft or accident. The United States provided technical assistance. Still, there were reports that nuclear materials (or perhaps even warheads) had been stolen and sold on the international market by corrupt CIS officers or officials (see pp. 170–173 on proliferation). The strategic nuclear weapons—those on long-range missiles—were located in four republics: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. In the end all the former Soviet republics except Russia agreed to become nonnuclear states.

Overall, the CIS is a marriage of convenience. For now the members find it a necessary marriage—especially because of the tight economic integration of the member states—if not always a happy one. A divorce could occur quickly.
PROBLEM How do you confront a fluid security environment in which the balance of power could shift quickly?

BACKGROUND Imagine that you are the president of Russia. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, your relations with your most powerful and important neighbor, Ukraine, have been tense, but with periods of cooperation. You share a nearly 1,000-mile border, and Ukraine maintains an army of 300,000 troops. Ukraine owns a very modern military, including a nearly 3,000-plane air force.

Your country and Ukraine were able to reach an agreement to divide the Soviet Navy’s Black Sea Fleet, left in Ukrainian ports when the Soviet Union collapsed. Ukraine agreed to return nuclear weapons placed in its territory, and you have signed an agreement to establish a free trade area. Still, tensions have recently arisen concerning the drawing of borders and the implementation of the free trade agreement. Moreover, Ukraine claims you have not abided by the agreement on the Black Sea Fleet.

For several years, several of your neighbors, including Ukraine, have cooperated with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). To date, no CIS members have joined NATO, but many are members of NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. Your own country, Russia, does not anticipate NATO membership but has cooperated with NATO through the PfP program. In addition, you receive large amounts of aid from NATO member states, including $1 billion a year from the United States.

NATO expansion is not popular within Russia. Voices from within your parliament (the Duma) are demanding you take efforts to ensure Russian security. Nearly 20 percent of the Duma is now controlled by Communist or nationalist parties that oppose NATO expansion. Public opinion polls consistently show 60 percent of the public believes that NATO expansion threatens Russia.

Ukraine depends heavily on you for fuel and relies on your market to export more than 17 percent of its economic output. The fuel issue is a double-edged sword, however, since you rely on Ukrainian shipping ports to export 40 tons of oil annually.

SCENARIO Imagine that Ukraine announces it will accept an invitation to join NATO. You could quietly allow this to happen without making any objections. Such a course would keep Western donor states happy, but places you in a strategically vulnerable position. Moreover, NATO may ask you to remove your portion of the Black Sea Fleet from Ukraine once military integration begins. At this time, however, you have no reason to expect military conflict between your country and Ukraine (or any other NATO member).

You could also cease cooperation with NATO while pressuring Ukraine to leave. This signal of hostility could place your aid from NATO states in jeopardy, but would be quite popular domestically. This option would also place strain on your trade relationships with Ukraine.

CHOOSE YOUR POLICY Do you object to Ukraine’s admission to NATO? Do you cease cooperation with NATO? What relative weight do factors such as international aid play in your decision? How do you address security concerns arising from an alliance that may or may not be hostile to you in the future?
Regional Alignments

Beyond the three alliances just discussed and the regional IGOs mentioned earlier, most international alignments and coalitions are not formalized in alliances. Among the great powers, a close working relationship has developed, with China the most independent.

In the global South, many states joined a nonaligned movement during the Cold War, standing apart from the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. This movement, led by India and Yugoslavia, was undermined by the membership of states such as Cuba that were clearly clients of one superpower. In 1992, the nonaligned movement agreed to stay in business, though its future is unclear. In Africa, France maintains ties with its former colonies, though it reduced those ties in the 1990s. Starting in 1999, the 53-member Organization of African Unity, an IGO with few powers, reformed as the African Union (AU), a stronger organization with a continentwide parliament, central bank, and court. The AU’s first real test came with allegations of genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan in 2004. In response, the AU deployed 3,000 troops, but their effectiveness remained uncertain in early 2005.

In Asia, China has long been loosely aligned with Pakistan in opposition to India (which was aligned with the Soviet Union). The United States tended to favor the Pakistani side as well (especially when Pakistan supported anti-Soviet rebels in Afghanistan in the 1980s). But both U.S.-Indian and U.S.-Chinese relations have improved since the Cold War ended. The United States has 35,000 troops stationed in South Korea under terms of a formal bilateral alliance dating to the Korean War (North Korea is vaguely aligned with China).

In the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict created a general anti-Israel alignment of the Arab countries for decades, but that alignment broke down as Egypt in 1978 and then the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Jordan in 1993–1994 made peace with Israel. As the Israeli-Palestinian peace process moves forward and backward year by year, Arab countries continue to express varying degrees of solidarity with each other and degrees of opposition to Israel. Iraq and Iran were Israel’s most intractable enemies. Meanwhile, Israel and Turkey formed a close military relationship. Also, despite its small size, Israel has been the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid since the 1980s (about $3 billion per year).

The United States has close relations with Egypt (since 1978), and cooperates closely with Turkey (a NATO member), Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (cemented by the 1991 Gulf War), and with Morocco. But U.S.-Iranian relations remained frosty (despite some recent warming) 25 years after the 1979 revolution. The United States had very hostile relations with Iraq before the 2003 war, and faced stronger antipathy in the region thereafter. U.S. relations with Libya were also hostile for decades until a 2003 agreement normalized Libya’s place in the international system in return for Libya’s reformed behavior.

This chapter has focused on the concerns of realists—the interests of states, distribution of power among states, bargaining between states, and alliances of states. The chapter has treated states as unitary actors, much as one would analyze the interactions of individual people. The actions of state leaders have been treated as more or less
rational in terms of pursuing definable interests through coherent bargaining strategies. But realism is not the only way to frame the major issues of international security. Chapter 3 reexamines these themes critically, from more liberal and more revolutionary theoretical perspectives, and considers the foreign policy decision-making process.

**THINKING CRITICALLY**

1. **Using Table 1.3 on pp. 16–17 (with GDP as a measure of power) and the maps at the front of the book, pick a state and speculate about what coalition of nearby states might form with sufficient power to oppose the state if it became aggressive.**

2. **Choose a recent international event and list the power capabilities that participants used as leverage in the episode. Which capabilities were effective, and which were not? Why?**

3. **The modern international system came into being at a time when agrarian societies relied primarily on farmland to create wealth. Now that most wealth is no longer created through farming, is the territorial nature of states obsolete? How might the diminishing economic value of territory change the ways in which states interact?**

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

- Realism explains international relations in terms of power. Power can be conceptualized as influence or as capabilities that can create influence.
- The most important single indicator of a state's power is its GDP.
- Short-term power capabilities depend on long-term resources, both tangible and intangible. Realists consider military force the most important power capability.
- International affairs can be seen as a series of bargaining interactions in which states use power capabilities as leverage to influence the outcomes.
- Reciprocity can be an effective strategy for reaching cooperation in ongoing relationships but carries a danger of turning into runaway hostility or arms races.
- Rational-actor approaches treat states as though they were individuals acting to maximize their own interests. These simplifications are debatable but allow realists to develop concise and general models and explanations.
- Game theory draws insights from simplified models of bargaining situations.
- International anarchy—the absence of world government—means that each state is a sovereign and autonomous actor pursuing its own national interests.
- Seven great powers account for half of the world's GDP as well as the great majority of military forces and other power capabilities.
- Power transition theory says that wars often result from shifts in relative power distribution in the international system.
Hegemony—the predominance of one state in the international system—can help provide stability and peace in international relations, but with some drawbacks.

States form alliances to increase their effective power. Alliances can shift rapidly, with major effects on power relations. The world’s main alliances, including NATO and the U.S.-Japanese alliance, face uncertain roles in a changing world order.