

# **Introduction to International Relations Theory**

**1**

**A Paradigmatic-  
Theoretical Approach to  
IR**



# What is IR? Why should we study it?

- International Relations (IR) is the “branch of political science concerned with relations between nations” and international institutions.
- IR Studies have three chief concerns:
  - Looking back at history
  - Formulating a model
  - Using that model to make predictions



# Central Concepts

## Paradigm

- The dominant way of understanding a subject
- A worldview

## Theory

- A set of hypotheses on the relationship between variables
- Used to describe, explain, and predict
- Falsifiability

Actors operate roughly via paradigms. We use theories to understand why they act a certain way and to predict what they will do in the future.

**2**

**Realism**



*The strong do what they can  
and the weak suffer what they  
must.*

Thucydides in *The History of the Peloponnesian  
War*, c. 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E.



# Definition & Basic Assumptions

- World politics is, and must be, a conflict between self-interested actors pursuing power.
- Underpinning Assumptions
  - The state of nature is Anarchy (Hobbes)
  - States are the main, unitary and rational actors
  - Great power politics
  - Relative gains only

# Sub-theories of Realism



## Classical Realism

- Humans inherently seek power, and the state reflects that
- “The war of all against all”
- National interest first
  - Power → Prosperity → Peace → Survival
- Outcomes > Intentions
- No room for international institutions

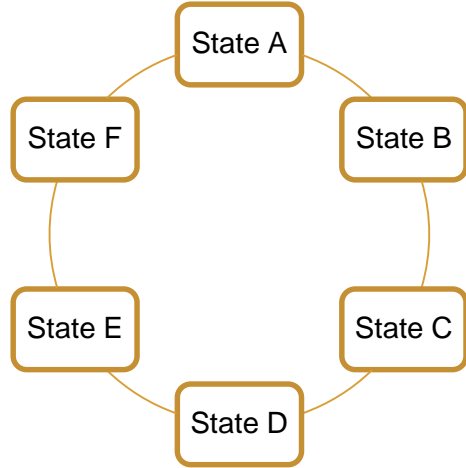
## Neo/Structural-Realism

- Structural constraints, not human nature
- States exist to provide security and/or power in an anarchic world
  - Security Dilemma
- Maximize power, constrain other actors
  - Balance of Power, Zero-Sum Game
- Defensive vs. Offensive

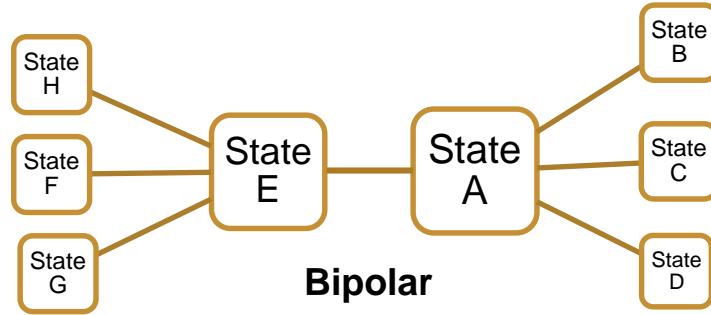




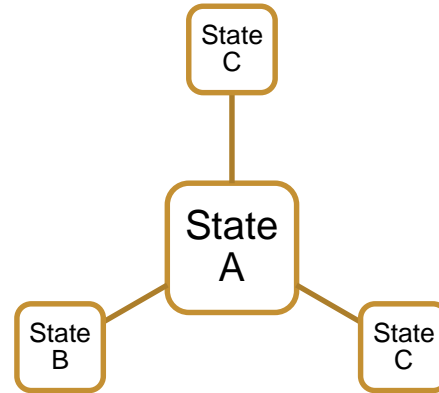
# Polarities



**Multipolar (Unstable!)**



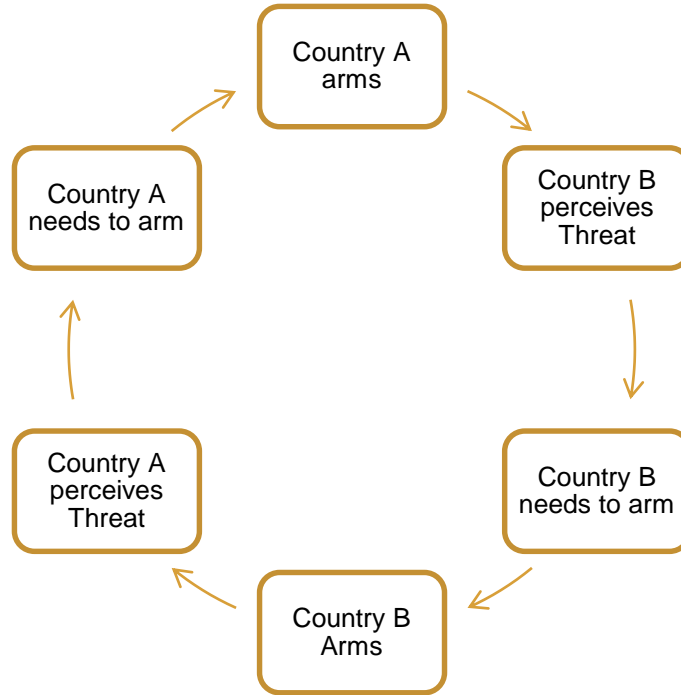
**Bipolar**



**Unipolar**



# The Security Dilemma





# Criticisms of Realism

- Fails to describe Cooperation
  - Post-World War II
- Assumptions difficult to test (non-falsifiable)
- Lacks precision with central concepts
  - What is power? Security?
- Disregards ethics
- Self-fulfilling Prophecy
- Military expenditures over all else



# How do we measure power?

Rank	Country	GDP (purchasing power parity)
1	European Union	\$ 14,450,000,000,000
2	United States	\$ 13,860,000,000,000
3	China	\$ 7,043,000,000,000
4	Japan	\$ 4,417,000,000,000
5	India	\$ 2,965,000,000,000
6	Russia	\$ 2,076,000,000,000
7	Brazil	\$ 1,838,000,000,000
8	Mexico	\$ 1,353,000,000,000
9	Canada	\$ 1,274,000,000,000
10	South Korea	\$ 1,206,000,000,000

Rank	Country	Oil exports (bbl/day)
1	Saudi Arabia	8,900,000
2	European Union	6,971,000
3	Russia	5,080,000
4	Norway	3,018,000
5	United Arab Emirates	2,540,000
6	Iran	2,520,000
7	Canada	2,274,000
8	Mexico	2,266,000
9	Venezuela	2,203,000
10	Kuwait	2,200,000

Rank	Country	Strategic warheads
1	United States	5,521
2	Russia	5,682
3	European Union	533
4	China	~130
5	Israel	100–200
6	Pakistan	~60
7	India	~50

**And what about arms sales?**

**3**

**Liberalism**



*No independent state, large or small, shall come under the dominion of another state.*

Immanuel Kant in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, c. 1795



# Definition & Basic Assumptions

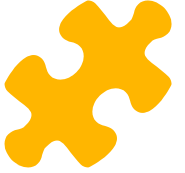
- World politics should not be organized around power politics, and instead focus on mutual benefits and international cooperation
- Underpinning Assumptions
  - States naturally want to cooperate
  - Focus on absolute gains, not a zero-sum game
  - International institutions
  - The “national interest” is determined by internal preferences of the people



# Democratic Peace Theory

- Monadic
  - Democracies are inherently more peaceful
- Dyadic
  - Democracies tend to avoid war with one another because:
    - Common norms + institutions
    - Increased trade
    - Membership in international institutions





# The Status of Democracy

## Defining Democracy

- Thin v. Thick
- Measuring Democracy?
  - Dichotomous vs. Continuous
- Democracy-Dictatorship Index
  - Binary Measure
- Freedom of the World Index
  - Continuous
- Varieties of Democracy
  - Electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian

## Current Trends

- Democratization increasing since post-World War II
- Third Wave
  - Post-1989
- Fourth Wave?
  - Backsliding into authoritarianism?
  - Democracy in Retreat (Freedom in the World Report 2019 by Freedom House)



# Neoliberal Institutionalism

- Emphasizes the role of intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) in peacefully resolving interstate problems
- Reaction to neorealism
  - Accepts many of its assumptions
- Optimistic about cooperation
  - IGOs keep states honest with each other





# Limits and Criticisms of Liberalism

- How much influence do IGOs exert? How stable are they?
  - Great power politics?
- What are the prospects for cooperation?
  - Low v. High Politics
- Realists argue that liberalism turns foreign policy into a moral crusade

4

**Constructivism**



*Power politics are institutions,  
not essential features of  
anarchy. Anarchy is what  
states make of it.*

Alexander Wendt in *Anarchy is what states  
make of it: the social construction of power  
politics* (1992)

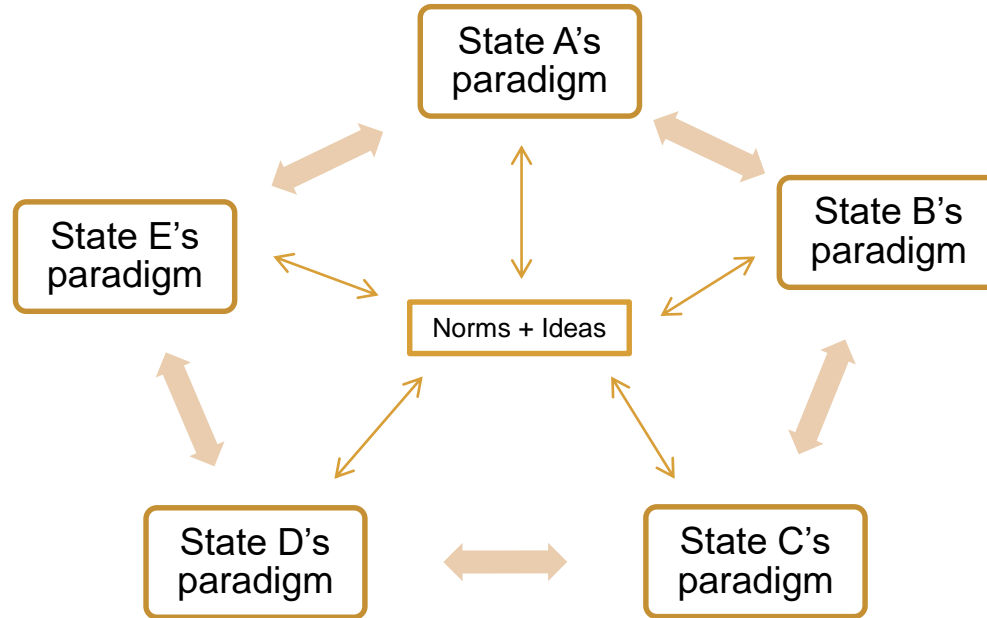


## Definition & Basic Assumptions

- The world, and what we know of it, is socially constructed, and the study of IR should focus on the impact of ideas on state behaviors.
- The ideas that guide states are constructed, not given
  - If everyone woke up tomorrow and believed the US didn't exist, would the US continue to exist?
- Juxtaposed to “rational” theories
  - Liberalism/Realism
  - No “first principles”



# Norms and Intersubjectivity





# What do Constructivists ask?

- How do international norms spread around?
  - Intersubjective, long-term processes
- What is power?
  - The ability for actors to convince other people of their ideas
- How does change happen?
  - A whole mess of things!





# Limits and Criticisms of Constructivism

- Difficult to have structured explanations of how ideas change over time
- Might over-privilege the role of structures over agents
  - How do constructivists deal with rogue + unpredictable leaders?
- Longer-term, bigger-picture might ignore details

**5**

# **Unorthodox Theories**



*Orthodox IR sanitizes  
globally-destructive collective  
inter-state behavior.*

Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed in *The International  
Relations of Crisis...* (2012)

# Critical Approaches to IR Theory



## Marxist

- Heavily focused on economic/material concerns
- (Economic) Base → Superstructure
- How does capitalism drive IR?
  - How do we explain imperialism?

## Feminist

- How do gendered ideas, structures, policies, and actors affect IR?
  - Masculinity + War Link
- IR ignores women + their experiences

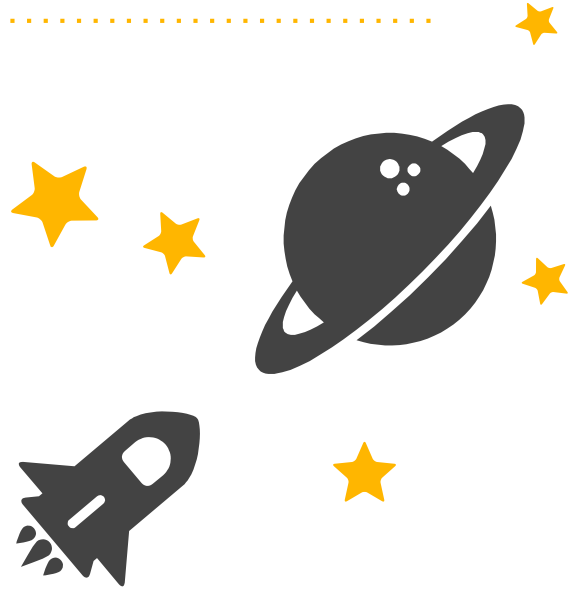
## Critical Security Studies

- Rejects the pursuit of security
  - What does the pursuit of security lead us to?
- What are the implications of insecurity?

**Conclusions?**

# So, who's right?

Well, no one is.

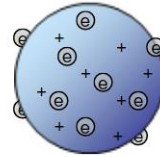




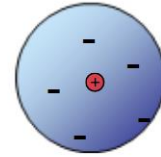
# An Analogy: What is an Atom?



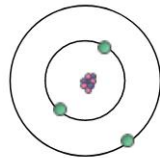
Dalton's model  
(1803)



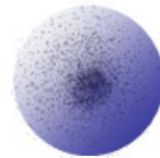
Thomson's plum-pudding  
model (1897)



Rutherford's model  
(1909)



Bohr's model  
(1913)



Charge-cloud model  
(present)