

## Realist Foreign Policy: Can We Talk?

Jonathan Kirshner

Any discussion of “realist foreign policy” needs to reckon with a fundamental question: can there be such a thing? The short answer, I argue here, is no. Realists disagree on much; irretrievable limits to knowledge will always prevent convergence around a single shared model of understanding of how the world works; and even were such a singular model possible, that would not settle the question of to what ends foreign policy should be applied.<sup>1</sup> These are not small hurdles. Consider that neoclassical economists – an intellectually homogenous cohort with aspirations to analytical precision – do not share the same theories of exchange rate determination (a much tidier topic than grand strategy) and even if they ever did, the policy advice that followed from such a common model would still depend on which, from a variety of objectives, different analysts privileged. Purpose matters.

Having said that, it is possible to derive from realism a general foreign policy disposition that can inform behavior—though a significant weakness of realism, even here, is that it tends to be a better guide to what *not* to do, and often foreign policy requires action.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, and more important, casting realist pearls of wisdom into the murky swamp of policy advocacy is fraught with profound analytical dangers. Scholarship in International Relations is designed to describe, explain and understand behavior in world politics, whereas prescription – policy

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<sup>1</sup> Realism is invariably (and accurately) described not as a theory, but as a “family of theories.” Moreover, the extreme unlikelihood – and almost certain practical impossibility – that international relations scholars (and, even more consequentially, policymakers) will ever converge around the same, shared implicit or explicit model of world politics means that expectations and thus policy advice will differ across actors—even those sharing the same objectives and general paradigmatic disposition. See Jonathan Kirshner “The Economic Sins of IR Theory and the Classical Realist Alternative,” *World Politics* 67:1 (January 2015), pp. 155-83.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, our dueling international macroeconomists will often disagree on what policies *should* be pursued, but are likely to agree that certain choices would be disastrous.

advocacy – is not only a different enterprise, it gravely risks muddying the analytical waters. One prominent and influential self-professed realist, John Mearsheimer, describes his theory this way: “offensive realism is mainly a descriptive theory . . . but it is also a prescriptive theory. States *should* behave according to the dictates of offensive realism, because it outlines the best way to survive in a dangerous world.”<sup>3</sup> At first glance this somewhat puzzling, because the “descriptive theory” on offer claims to be deterministic—and so policy advice should be irrelevant if the theory is correct, as states will inevitably behave as they will behave. (Newton did not say, “The apple will fall from the tree, and I urge it to pursue this course.” Nor would he have chastised apples for failing to follow his advice.) More important, combining description and prescription is also subversive of good social science. If advocacy can change outcomes (and if it can’t, why advocate?), then urging actors to behave as one’s theory predicts is putting a finger on the scale—like predicting a barroom brawl and then provoking one. Once we start rooting for our theories, it is all over<sup>4</sup> and so, at a minimum, when talking about “Realist foreign policy” it is essential to be very alert to the basic differences between description and prescription.

Realists are also confronted with a distinct, existential challenge when it comes to flirting with policy advocacy—the all-too-common danger of confusing and conflating positive with normative analysis. It is a realist pride of place to distinguish itself from utopianism by seeing the world as it is, not as one might wish it would be. Realism is an avowedly hard-boiled approach, alert to the mortal hazards and amoral behaviors that fill the space of international

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<sup>3</sup> John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 11-12. For a basic critique of the underlying logic of Mearsheimer’s model, see Jonathan Kirshner, “The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China,” *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:1 (March 2012), pp. 52-74.

<sup>4</sup> As a realist, for example, I think Realism was caught utterly off guard both by the end of the Cold War and the way that it ended—and we should own that failure, rather than seek post-hoc rationalizations in defense of the analytical perspective.

anarchy. And given that states must pursue their own security in such a self-help system, often informed by contrasting historical narratives, realists are profoundly reluctant, from an analytical perspective, to call balls and strikes regarding which behaviors are “good or bad” any more than they would blame a lion for eating a zebra. Certainly, there are some easy exceptions – genocide would be an obvious example – but as a rule of thumb, in E. H. Carr’s words, “Consistent realism . . . involves acceptance of the whole historical process and precludes moral judgment on it.”<sup>5</sup>

But this is not an ethical get-out-of-jail-free-card, and failing to recognize that, especially for realists, risks muddling positive and normative claims (and thus skewing policy advice), by imagining that the normative does not apply. Because realists stress that actors in world politics will at times act without moral restraint, and because realists commonly argue that given the (very understandable) imperative of self-preservation, the dangers of anarchy will at times require states to take ruthless measures to protect themselves, some self-professed “realists” see foreign policy behavior as distinctly unbound by concerns for ethics and morality. However, this conclusion (world politics is an amoral space, therefore we must behave amorally) does not follow, even if we allow – as realists must – for the need to be alert to the potentially bottomless perils of anarchy.

There is a real danger here—akin to one observable in economic theory. Students in introductory microeconomics classes learn that the discipline models agents as selfish egoists: that they care only for themselves and not for others. A (presumably unintended) consequence of this abstract modeling device is that undergraduates who take such courses “learn” to be more

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<sup>5</sup> E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1946 [1939]), p. 91.

selfish in their own behavior.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, lectures on realism that model state behavior as amoral can inadvertently teach students – and those who would proffer foreign policy advice derived from realist principles – that foreign policy *should* be conducted without concerns for its moral implications. As with descriptive and prescriptive, the conflation of positive with normative risks undermining the logic and coherence of would-be “realist foreign policy.”

### **Power and Purpose**

Even if realists are able to avoid the treacherous analytical landmines just described, the hope for a singular, distinct realist foreign policy remains remote. To offer specific policy advice, it is necessary to have theories that make generalizations about how other actors will behave in world politics, and, relatedly, theories about how other states will respond to the recommended foreign policy measures that are introduced. But realism does not do these things well. The foreign policies of states are functions of both power and purpose (the capabilities of states, and what they want). Recent political developments in the United States underscore this point. American power has not changed all that much (and assessments of that power vary widely<sup>7</sup>) but its purpose – who it chooses to call friend and foe, what commitments it is likely to fulfill, the ends for which it will use military force, which institutions it will support – has changed radically. This is problematic because realism is much better in attending to power in a general sense, than to purpose, about which, beyond the fundamental imperative of survival, it is

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Frank, Thomas Gilovich and Dennis Regan, “Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7:2 (spring 1993), pp. 159-171.

<sup>7</sup> Compare, for example Michael Beckley, “The Power of Nations: Measuring What Matters,” *International Security* 43:2 (fall 2018), pp. 7-44 and Jonathan Kirshner, *American Power after the Financial Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

largely agnostic. Structural realism renounces the concept of purpose, modeling states as like units, differentiated only by their relative capabilities; Classical realism embraces purpose—but assumes that such purpose is informed by varied and contingent historical contexts.

The desire to survive is Realism 101—but that does not get us very far in explaining the foreign policy choices of states (or as a foreign policy guide). This is especially problematic for realism, which has traditionally been overwhelmingly concerned with the behavior of great powers—often only slim handful of the greatest powers.<sup>8</sup> But the survival of great powers is very rarely at risk, and not typically the imperative that informs most foreign policy choices. Consider the contemporary United States. With its gargantuan military, enormous economy, enviable geography, and nuclear deterrent, if all the U.S. cared about was physical security and domestic autonomy, it would not even need a foreign policy. To design an American foreign policy that ventures beyond those first two items on the check list, it would be necessary to know what it wants—or have a theory of what else it should want. Similarly, China today is literally orders of magnitude more powerful and secure than it was two generations ago. If defending the homeland was its only national security imperative, it would need less foreign policy now, not more. The stuffing of great power foreign policy is almost invariably about much more than survival.

Plainly, realists expect, or at a minimum acknowledge, that states, and in particular great powers, will want more than survival and domestic autonomy; in addition, realists tend to assume there is a relationship between capabilities and ambition. Once again, however, as to policy, realism is underdetermining. Classical realists presume (and typically endorse) the pursuit of what Arnold Wolfers called “milieu goals”—which are essentially measures taken to

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<sup>8</sup> “A general theory of international politics is necessarily based on the great powers,” Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (New York: Addison Wesley, 1979), p. 73. Note that Mearsheimer’s book is explicitly about “great power” politics.

shape world politics in ways that make the international environment the sort of one in which national values and national interests can thrive.<sup>9</sup> This also gestures at the notion that one purpose of extending power and influence abroad is to prevent other actors, with less amenable or even oppositional motivations, from shaping that environment. Even for classical realists, however, the embrace of milieu goals leaves considerable space for a wide range of foreign policy dispositions and choices. As Hans Morgenthau observed, “the goals that might be pursued by nations in their foreign policies can run the whole gamut of objectives any nation has ever pursued or might possibly pursue.”<sup>10</sup>

Structural realism, as noted, has even less to say about purpose (and thus policy) for the great powers. Kenneth Waltz grounded his seminal theory explicitly on a microeconomic analogy: the international system presents uniform pressures and imperatives on states in the same way that the market imposes incentives and constraints on firms. The behavior of states and firms collectively create these forces, but those pressures are beyond the control of the constituent actors. Waltz is admirably cautious about drawing deterministic conclusions from all this—states and firms may choose to ignore systemic imperatives, he notes, but they will be selected out. Still, the suggestion is that wise foreign policy would not drift far from the constraints suggested by the imperatives presented by these powerful, exogenous forces. It is a deep seated problem for structural realism, however, that those forces are only properly seen as exogenous under conditions of “perfect competition” where participants are so many and so small that each actor is a “price taker” whose individual actions have no effect on the market as a whole. This does not well describe great power politics, which traffics exclusively in situations

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<sup>9</sup> Arnold Wolfers, “The Goals of Foreign Policy,” in Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962).

<sup>10</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Knopf, 1960), p. 9

of “imperfect competition” with the relevant analogies of monopoly (hegemony), duopoly (bipolarity), and oligopoly (multipolarity). Situations of imperfect competition in economics, unfortunately, are defined by a fundamental indeterminacy with regard to behavior. Oligopolists have considerable discretion as to how they will behave—even over the most fundamental choices regarding conflict and collusion (or what might be described as choosing to balance against or cooperate with others). Oligopoly theory finds that collusion is more profitable than competition, but also illustrates that either can occur, and the likelihood of one or the other is dependent on various, and varied, contingent and context dependent factors.<sup>11</sup> And the analogy is true in International Relations as well: great powers have considerable discretion over their choices—those choices are indeed influenced, but not determined, by exogenous systemic forces; in fact the foreign policy choices of great powers shape the nature of those systemic forces. As Raymond Aron observed, “the structure of the international system is always oligopolistic. In each period the principal actors have determined the system more than they have been determined by it.”<sup>12</sup>

In sum, articulating a singular, distinct “realist foreign policy” is inhibited by the fact that behavior of states – their responses to the opportunities and constraints presented by the international system – is shaped by the way that the foreign policy choices of great powers inform those opportunities and constraints, and filtered through historical experience and ideological lenses.<sup>13</sup> This means, frustratingly, that realists will not have iron laws on offer as

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<sup>11</sup> Robert L. Bishop, “Duopoly: Collusion or Warfare?” *American Economic Review* 50:5 (1960), pp. 933, 960; George Stigler, “A Theory of Oligopoly,” *Journal of Political Economy* 72:1 (1964), p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> Aron quoted in Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 29. See also Jonathan Kirshner “The Economic Sins of IR Theory.”

<sup>13</sup> As Gilpin has argued, states interpret events and craft responses in varied ways, based on particularistic factors: “foremost among the determinants of these perceptions is the historical experience of society . . . what lessons has the nation learned about war, aggression, appeasement, etc.?” Gilpin, *War and Change*, p. 51; see also Gilpin on

foreign policy advice. Harry Truman is reputed to have longed for a one-armed economist who would be incapable of saying “on the other hand”; similarly, the realist response to even the most primal foreign policy choice must be “it depends.” Consider the basic Jervisian question: should an apparent provocation be met with firmness or conciliation?<sup>14</sup> It depends. Hans Morgenthau was an opponent of the Munich accords, because he saw clearly the consequences of trying to accommodate Nazi Germany in the 1930s. But the problem was not with the policy of making concessions more generally—as Morgenthau made clear, and quite provocatively so, at the height of the Cold War. “Future historians will have to decide whether the Western world has suffered more from the surrender at Munich,” he admonished, “or from the intellectual confusion that equates a negotiated settlement with appeasement and thus discredits the sole rational alternative to war.”<sup>15</sup> Realist foreign policy advice will necessarily be contingent and qualified, and require well-informed, contextually grounded, situationally specific discretion, rather than urging general adherence to some imagined universally applicable rules.

### **What Realist Principles have to Offer**

With these essential caveats in mind, a review of the core tenets of realism reveals that, although they are not suggestive of uniformly identifiable foreign policies, they do gesture at a

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“national sentiment” and “political values” in his “The Politics of Transnational Economic Relations”, *International Organization* 25:3 (summer 1971), pp. 401, 403.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1076), chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> Hans Morgenthau, “International Affairs: The Resurrection of Neutrality in Europe”, *American Political Science Review* 33:3 (June 1939), pp. 483-4; Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York: Knopf, 1951), pp. 137, 138.

recognizable foreign policy disposition. That is all that can be hoped for. As Robert Gilpin cautioned, realism is not a “theory”—it is a point of departure, a philosophy, a constellation of theories that derive from a set of commonly shared assumptions.<sup>16</sup> As such, a variety of contrasting, even competing theories can be derived from this tradition, and can be evaluated for their deductive logic and empirical consistency. (One can argue, building from realist assumptions, that bipolarity is more likely to lead to war than multipolarity, or vice versa; that a preponderance of power is stabilizing, or destabilizing; that the decision to introduce force in a particular situation is wise, or reckless.) But although realists will often disagree with one another on aspects of both theory and policy, they do derive their academic theories and practical policy recommendations by drawing on the same set of building blocks.

Realist analysis of world politics begins with an emphasis on the consequences of anarchy. Observing anarchy is not distinct to realism—placing it as the fundamental point of departure for understanding international relations is. Realists need not insist that war is imminent, or even likely, but they believe that states must condition their behavior to acknowledge war as a real possibility. And it is not simply the prospect of “war” that states must understand as a possibility—in anarchy, there are no assurances that the behavior of others will be restrained. Conquest, savagery, subjugation, and even annihilation are possibilities, and have been, and remain, features of human relations since time immemorial. Once again, it is not that realists assume that behaviors *will* be unconstrained, it is that they *may* be unconstrained, and there are simply no guarantees that the worst might not occur. We may not be on the edge of the abyss, but the ground can crumble beneath our feet with surprising suddenness. Civilization,

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Gilpin, “The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism”, in Robert O. Keohane (ed.) *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 304; Robert Gilpin, “No One Loves a Political Realist,” *Security Studies* 5:3 (1996), p. 6.

however apparently robust, is fragile. As John Maynard Keynes wrote of his content, confident cohort in the heady years of peace and prosperity before the then-unimaginable catastrophe that was the Great War, “we were not aware that civilisation was a thin and precarious crust.” Rather, like graceful water-spiders, they navigated blissfully on the surface, guided by a “thin rationalism skipping on the crust of the lava.”<sup>17</sup> Realists never lose sight of the volcano, even those that are apparently dormant, and as result, are closely attentive to the capabilities of others, and to the balance of power, and to changes to both of those, as these are formative in defining potential security threats.

Another foundation of realist analysis is to locate the unit of analysis as the group, not the individual, and to place an emphasis on political will as an important factor in motivating behavior. This contrasts realism with liberalism, which typically focuses on the individual pursuing personal material gain as its point of departure. Realism models humans as identifying with groups, and making foundational (if malleable over time) distinctions between those inside and outside the group. (This is why realists tend to place great emphasis on the group interest, or the “national interest,” and on goals not invariably reducible to economic gain.)

The presence of such groups, each placing a higher priority on their own needs and interests than those of others, pursuing a range of objectives in the context of anarchy, leads realists to expect international politics to be characterized by inevitable conflicts of interest. Disputes between states are not simply the result of misunderstandings or failures to achieve mutually beneficial cooperation (although those pathologies can certainly occur), but are largely and simply manifestations of those clashing interests. The security dilemma is real, and its

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<sup>17</sup> John Maynard Keynes, “My Early Beliefs,” *Two Memoirs* (1949) (reprinted in Elizabeth Johnson and Donald Moggridge (eds.) *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes* (London: Macmillan, 1971-1989) (CW) Volume X, pp. 447, 450.

intensity consequential in explaining the likelihood of when mutual insecurities will result in war, but international conflict is inevitable even between states (like most great powers, most of the time) who are not fearful that their survival is at stake. World politics is characterized by active, varied political contestation between actors with opposing interests.

An additional consequence of this, and another core attribute of Realism, is that politics never ends. The clash of interests is endless, and resolving one clash (say, through a decisive war that leads to a clear victor and vanquished), will soon enough be followed by a new set of contestations. (A classic example of this is the short trip from the end of World War II, the epochal struggle against fascism that surely settled matters definitively as far as German and Japanese ambition was concerned, to the dawn of the Cold War, but the phenomenon is a general one.) There is no end zone in world politics—one political dispute will be followed by another, and implacable foes in one round will at times find they share interests in a latter, and vice versa (recall that Athens and Sparta were allies in the Persian war). From this perspective, disputes in world politics are less problems to be solved than relations to be managed.

One reason for this is that the power, and consequentially the purpose and ambition of actors in the international system is constantly in flux, and so new challenges, previously latent or unanticipated, are constantly bubbling to the surface. It is the case that as an abstract modeling assumption, some modern structural realists (including Waltz and Mearsheimer), assume actors in world politics are no more than security seekers.<sup>18</sup> More traditionally and more generally, however, realists have assumed that states' ambitions grow in step with their capabilities. This has a long and distinguished pedigree in realist thought. Thucydides emphasized greed as a

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<sup>18</sup> For a critique of this approach see Randall Schweller, "Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?" *Security Studies* 5:3 (1996), pp. 90-121.

primal motivating force in world politics, and the seeming if unseemly insatiability of that drive has been emphasized by many others, including Machiavelli (“it does not appear to men that they possess securely what a man has unless he acquires something else new”), Carr (“the exercise of power always appears to beget the appetite for more power”) and Nicholas Spykman: “the number of cases in which a strong dynamic state has stopped expanding or has set modest limits to its power aims has been very few indeed”).<sup>19</sup>

Finally, realism is characterized by its analytical modesty—a profound awareness of what students of world politics do not know, and cannot know. Realists emphasize uncertainty and contingency in recognizing the wide and unpredictable range of the possible. In economics, the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-08 rekindled debates about the distinction between risk and uncertainty (in the former, the underlying probability distribution is knowable, in the latter it is not). The failure of macroeconomic models based on assumptions of “rational expectations” has led to renewed interest in articulations of uncertainty associated with Keynes and two prominent anti-Keynesians, Frank Knight and Friedrich von Hayek, and ought to give pause to theories of international relations rooted in such hyper-rationalist (and very shaky) foundations.<sup>20</sup>

Realism has always embraced uncertainty. Again, this can be traced all the way back to Thucydides, who, despite crafting his narrative to foreshadow events that he wished to

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<sup>19</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov), p. 4; Carr, *Twenty Years' Crisis*, p. 112; Nicholas Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1942), p. 20. See also, Miles Kahler, “External Ambition and Economic Performance,” *World Politics* 40:4 (July 1988), p. 451, and Hans Morgenthau, “The Evil of Politics and the Politics of Evil,” *Ethics* 56:1 (October 1945), pp. 1, 13, 16-17.

<sup>20</sup> John Maynard Keynes, “The General Theory of Employment” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 51:2 (1937) (*CW*: XIV, p. 122); Friedrich von Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” *American Economic Review* 35:4 (1945), 519-30; see also Hayek, “The Pretence of Knowledge,” (Nobel Memorial Lecture, 11 December 1974), pp. 267-271-2; Frank Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971/1921), pp. 241, 311. For applications of this distinction to International Relations, see Stephen Nelson and Peter Katzenstein, “Uncertainty, Risk, and the Financial Crisis of 2008,” *International Organization* 68:2 (2014), pp. 361-92, and Kirshner, “The Economic Sins of Modern IR Theory.”

emphasize, nevertheless repeatedly illustrates how, but for unpredictable developments, important events in his *History* could have turned out differently. To choose war, in particular, is to plunge headlong into radical uncertainty—one of many reasons why such a decision must be made with great care. As Clausewitz put it, “No other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance.”<sup>21</sup> This disposition is related to the realist embrace of the fundamental difference between the natural and the social sciences, as seen in the title of the foundational work of modern realism, Morgenthau’s *Scientific Man vs Power Politics*. Once again Keynes, speaking of economics, makes this point incisively. Social science deals with “motives, expectations [and] psychological uncertainties.” These do not exist in the natural sciences, requiring a fundamentally different approach to studying one as compared with the other. “One has to be constantly on guard against treating the material as constant and homogenous,” he admonished. “It is as though the fall of the apple to the ground, depended on the apple’s motives.” This absence of inviolable laws is ironically an iron law of realism: “The first lesson the student of international politics must learn and never forget,” Hans Morgenthau insisted, “is that the complexities of international affairs make simple solutions and trustworthy prophecies impossible.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Thucydides recounts numerous occasions where votes on momentous issues are very close—and at times decisions reached are reversed, suggesting that very different outcomes were possible. He also provides vivid descriptions of battles determined by unpredictable events and even blind chance. As Tolstoy lectured in *War and Peace*, “Every battle . . . fails to come off as those who planned it expected it to. That is inevitable.” Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, with essays by Paret, Howard, and Brodie, Commentary by Brodie) (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1976). P. 85.

<sup>22</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), see for example pp. 121, 139, 150, on the “the illusion of a social science imitating a model of the natural sciences”; Keynes, letter to Roy Harrod, July 16 1938 (*CW*: XIV, pp. 299, 300); Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, pp. 20, 21.

## A Realist Foreign Policy Disposition

In sum, there is no such thing as a singular, distinct “realist foreign policy.” However, the building blocks of realism are strongly suggestive of a particular foreign policy disposition. Attentiveness to the inexorable dangers implied by anarchy (latent or present), a need to respect the realities of power (the capabilities of others, the inevitable limits of one’s own), an anticipation that world politics is characterized by conflicts of interest (with the resolution of one soon followed by another), all in the context of irretrievable uncertainty, leads, logically, to an imperative of prudence. (Ironically, and recalling the difficult tension between description and prescription, one reason that realists urge states to behave prudently is because they expect some potentially dangerous states to behave rashly.) If there is one theme common to all realist thinkers<sup>23</sup> it would be this admonition to proceed with caution, weigh alternatives, identify and prioritize interests, and anticipate, as best as possible, the plausible range of the tumbling consequences of proposed foreign policy measures.

This dyed-in-the-wool instinct for prudence is grounded further in two additional tenets that are closely associated with (but not distinct to) realism: the essential relationship between force and politics, and a profound wariness of hubris and the arrogance of power. The former is most closely associated with Clausewitz, and his admonition that the assessment of the “success” or “failure” of a military operation can only be judged by the extent to which it has advanced or achieved the *political* goals for which that force was introduced (and weighed against the cost of

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<sup>23</sup> Machiavelli is a notable and vexing outlier here, at times urging leaders to take the initiative and seize sudden opportunities as they appear. This is especially prevalent in *The Prince*; Machiavelli in *Discourses on Livy* is closer to the traditional realist fold with regard to the merits of prudence. In *Discourses* Machiavelli admonishes that the rash behaviors of an unconstrained Prince can lead to foreign policy blunders.

undertaking the effort).<sup>24</sup> More colloquially, this can be described as the “day after tomorrow question.” Meaning, you have used force, and perhaps even achieved your military objectives, but what happens next? The use of force will not only result in (unpredictable) countermeasures, but it will also unleash a cascade of political consequences. Some of these may be good and even welcome—but in a world where political and political conflict never ends, they must be thoughtfully anticipated in advance. As for hubris, anxiety about the arrogance of power is perhaps the singular strand that weaves its way through realist thought throughout history. For Edmund Burke, “Among precautions against ambition, it may not be amiss to take precautions against our *own*. I must fairly say, I dread our *own* power and our *own* ambition.” This was a preoccupation of George F. Kennan, who urged that “the gentle civilizer of national self-interest,” restrain the crusading tendency in American foreign policy.<sup>25</sup>

And of course there is the Rosetta Stone of realist prudence, Thucydides’ *The Peloponnesian War*. For all the casual invocation of the notion of a “Thucydides Trap,” the greatest lesson that Thucydides wished to impart with his great work was the mortal danger of hubris. Any careful reading of Thucydides makes abundantly clear that it was indeed hubris, not a mechanistic trap generated by power dynamics, which brought Athens to ruin.<sup>26</sup> To Thucydides’ palpable lament, the ambitious city-state repeatedly and tragically “grasped at

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<sup>24</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 69, 80. (“The political object—the original motive for the war—will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires,” p. 81) Similarly, for Morgenthau, “Realism, then, considers prudence – the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions – to be the supreme virtue in politics.” *Politics Among Nations*, p. 11

<sup>25</sup> Edmund Burke, “Remarks on the Policy of the Allies” (1793), in David P. Fidler and Jennifer M. Welsch (eds), *Empire and Community: Edmund Burke’s Writings and Speeches on International Relations* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), p. 291; George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy 1900-1950* (New York: Mentor Books, 1951), p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> See Jonathan Kirshner, “Handle Him with Care: The Importance of Getting Thucydides Right,” *Security Studies* 28:1 (January – March 2019), pp. 1-24.

something further,” notably in the seventh year of the war, when Sparta, having suffered a disastrous setback at Pylos, offered peace terms that Athens soon “began to repent rejecting”—though it was a mistake they would soon repeat. These blunders anticipate what would be the most grievous mistake of the war, the Athenians’ wildly ambitious and ultimately disastrous scheme to conquer Sicily. Nicias, articulating the posture of a prudent realist that Thucydides clearly endorsed, opposed the scheme: “You leave many enemies behind you here to go there far away and bring back more with you,” he warned. In addition to the fact that Sparta remained a principal, potential mortal adversary, in any event the Sicilians “even if conquered, are too far off and too numerous to be ruled without difficulty,” and the proposed expedition was nothing but a reckless, “mad dream of conquest.”<sup>27</sup>

For foreign policy, however, prudence, the national interest, and the primacy of politics only get you so far. Realists opposed the Vietnam War on all of these grounds, questioning the interests at stake, and the wisdom and prospects of trying to impose a military solution on an intractable political problem.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, an uncommonly overwhelming consensus among

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<sup>27</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 4.21.2, 4.27.2 (Pylos), 4.41.4 (“kept grasping for more”), 6.10.1-5, 6.11.1, 6.13.1 (Sicily), quotations are from Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Touchstone, 1998). On the importance of Pylos and grasping for more see Jacqueline de Romilly, *Thucydides and Athenian Imperialism* (Philip Thody, trans) (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963/1947), pp. 172-6, 322, 327; Hunter R. Rawlings, *The Structure of Thucydides’ History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 229-30. Regarding Sicily, The reader “quickly realizes that Thucydides himself favors the views of Nicias.” Hans-Peter Stahl, “Speeches and the Course of Events in Books Six and Seven of Thucydides,” in Jeffrey S. Rusten, ed., *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Thucydides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 346 (quote), 352; see also John H. Finley, Jr., *Three Essays on Thucydides* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 147. As Hunter Rawlings explains, “Thucydides clearly regards the Athenian adventure in Sicily as the greatest event of his war, and its conclusion as the greatest event in Greek history,” Hunter R. Rawlings, “Writing History Implicitly Through Refined Structuring,” in Ryan K. Balot, Sara Forsdyke, and Edith Foster, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 206.

<sup>28</sup> See for example, Hans Morgenthau, *Vietnam and the United States* (1965), George F. Kennan, U.S. Senate Testimony, February 10, 1966, pp. 331-38, Kenneth Waltz, “The Politics of Peace,” *International Studies Quarterly* 11:3 (1967), pp. 199-211.

realists was reflected in their early, forceful opposition to the Iraq War, as it was obvious that a relatively easy military victory would not translate into the achievement of broader objectives—in fact, quite the opposite.<sup>29</sup> And correspondingly, it is hard to imagine realists signing up for a U.S. military strike on Iran, for example, following familiar, Clausewitzian “the day after tomorrow” reasoning. But Vietnam, Iraq, Iran (and Sicily) are pretty low-hanging fruit—the sage advice of “avoid obviously foolish military adventurers” only gets you so far. One again, realism is much better at suggesting what *not* to do than when and how to take positive action.

The virtue of prudence, for example, is different from the practice of a foreign policy, and does not necessarily imply passivity or timidity. Indeed, however, one danger implicit in realist instincts is the prospect of important opportunities lost to an overabundance of caution. The American forging of the international order after World War II (which met with the disapproval of Kennan at almost every turn) was active and ambitious. Weighing its costs and benefits, it was arguably the most successful grand strategy in the history of grand strategy. Realists, ever alert to reconciling ends with means, will surely routinely err on the side of avoiding overextension, but “under-extension” risks inviting dangerous foes to fill power vacuums left behind. As always, the wisest and most prudent course of action is dependent on context and contingent factors, and the national interest will not invariably be best served by caution.

Consider Sicily. Many realists in contemporary foreign policy debates who favor a foreign policy of “restraint” invoke that catastrophe in defense of the proposition that there is an affinity between realism, one that can be traced all the way back to Thucydides, and current advocacy for a more restrained U.S. grand strategy. And it is quite correct to observe that

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<sup>29</sup> See for example the statement placed as an advertisement in *The New York Times*, “War with Iraq Is Not in America’s National Interest,” September 26, 2002.

Pericles, as described by Thucydides, would have never embarked on the Sicilian adventure had he lived to speak out against it. But Pericles (and implicitly, Thucydides), was a strong proponent of the initial war with Sparta—a war that Athens arguably provoked, and which was sparked by crises that Athens could have easily taken measures to mollify, but chose not to. The debate for war in Athens was a close call, and Thucydides reports that Pericles’ arguments (which his narrative privileges) was decisive in carrying the day.<sup>30</sup> Certainly all good realists would have opposed the Sicilian expedition—but it is more likely that they would have been divided over the very distinct debate over whether go to war with Sparta seventeen years earlier.

### **Realist Foreign Policy: Shared Instincts, Varied Pathways**

Realists share many assumptions and even instincts when describing the world and how actors are likely to behave in world politics; in addition to the more concrete analytical building blocks described above, one could add a certain pessimism about the human prospect and deep skepticism regarding the inevitability of political progress. In evaluating today’s dispiriting times, a realist would be unlikely to take comfort in the hope that humans are wiser or better than those who stumbled into the abyss of the 1930s.

Still, and stubbornly, the point remains that the common lineage that realists share does not translate into a clear foreign policy roadmap. With regard to contemporary American foreign policy, a summary tour of its commitments and interests suggests one policy that should

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<sup>30</sup> In the public debate before the war, Pericles spoke out forcefully against the notion of compromise or negotiation, and argued instead “It must be thoroughly understood that war is a necessity” (1.144.3); according to Thucydides, the majority voted for war only after they were “persuaded of the wisdom of [Pericles’] advice” (1.114.5). On Pericles’ war advocacy see for example Fisher and Kinch Hoekstra, “Thucydides and the Politics of Necessity,” and Mary P. Nichols, “Leaders and Leadership in Thucydides’ History,” both in Balot, Forsdyke, and Foster (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides* pp. 373, 461.

arguably find consensus among realists—the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Persian Gulf region. The notion that it was a vital U.S. interest that no single hostile power dominate the Gulf’s oilfields was a plausible one in the 1970s, given the international political setting, the global economic significance of Gulf oil, and the moment as understood in its historical context. And perhaps such a commitment could arguably have plausibly lingered for some time, and a case could be made that it was an interest of the U.S. and the OECD more generally that Iraq not absorb Kuwait in 1991. But all of those factors that then led to a geopolitical imperative in the Gulf are now dramatically different: the local balance of power seems robust, the broader international political context more complex, and the natural gas and oil shale revolutions have fundamentally transformed world energy markets.<sup>31</sup>

It is hard to find another policy proposal, however, that is so obviously, singularly, and unambiguously “realist.” A problem with trying to derive general rules from basic principles is that, in particular, “prudence” does not necessarily translate into “restraint.” In the case of the U.S. security guarantees in the Middle East, in assessing costs and benefits prudence does indeed suggest that a thoughtful reassessment of U.S. grand strategy would remove the Gulf from the list of its vital interests. But scaling back commitments – often wise, sometimes necessary – is not always the prudent thing to do. It is a shaking up of the box, an invitation to others to assert power and gain influence, comes with it the elimination of any regionally stabilizing effects that were attendant with American presence, participation, and commitment, and, inevitably and more generally, is a leap into uncertainty, from the familiar to the unknown. Pulling out of the Gulf seems well worth those risks. In contrast, withdrawing from NATO (or abandoning most

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<sup>31</sup> Moreover, a very strong case can be made that public policy ought to be urgently focused not on ensuring the flow of fossil fuels but weaning economies away from their consumption.

other U.S. long-standing alliances elsewhere in the world) would certainly be an act of restraint, but it would not be an act of prudence—it would be imprudent, for those reasons.<sup>32</sup>

Realists can and should have foreign policy preferences and offer recommendations rooted in their philosophical tradition. But it is subversive of good scholarship to blur the distinction between the positive and the normative, and to slip into the business of selling theories rather than dispassionately applying and evaluating them. In a world of uncertainty and contingency, and properly humbled by analytical modesty, beyond proffering valuable (and all too often disregarded) counsel against folly and hubristic adventures, a realist disposition will very rarely translate into hard and fast policy advice. “A statesman differs from a professor in a university; the latter has only the general view of society; the former, the statesman, has a number of circumstances to combine with those general ideas,” Edmund Burke once explained. “Circumstances are infinite, are infinitely combined, are variable and transient; he who does not take them into consideration is not erroneous, but mad.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> If anything, from an American perspective. NATO is the opposite of the Gulf—it offers large benefits for modest costs. (Regarding the “cost” of NATO, The U.S. could remain in the alliance while slashing its military spending; it could also (more likely) abandon NATO but not reduce its military spending.)

<sup>33</sup> Edmund Burke, “Speech on the Petition of the Unitarian Society” May 11, 1792, in Jessie Norman (ed.), Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France and Other Writing* (New York: Knopf, 2015), p. 794.