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DAY 31

Approaches to International Relations

· 10 questions

Every question carries a **Flow Snapshot** — plus a handwritten model answer on the channel.

"No PYQ will be unfamiliar."

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 10 marks

Critically examine the functional and system approaches to the study international relations.

FLOW SNAPSHOT – how the answer moves

R1 both products of the behavioural turn → push IR past human nature → one to cooperation, one to structure **R2** two modern reactions against realism → institutions vs structure as the new lens

Intro routes

Mitrany, "form follows function" → technical tasks build institutions + peace → loyalty-transfer assumption fails (nation-state legitimacy) → **Haas** neo-functionalism + spillover → ECSC → political integration → limits: European-only, Westphalian state persists, Eurocentric → systems approach: structure shapes units → **Kaplan's** models (BoP / bipolar / universal / hierarchical / unit-veto) → critics: **Bull** (intellectual exercise), **Lieber** (testability)

Body flow

both remote from power, domestic politics, agency → systems too abstract and untestable; functionalism idealises cooperation and stays Eurocentric

Counter-view

R1 neither sufficient alone → functionalism reads cooperation, systems reads structure **R2** complement both by restoring power, history and agency

Conclusion routes

But the approaches emerged from the behavioural turn in International relations, as scholars tried to move beyond realism's focus on human nature. The functionalism moved towards cooperation and the system approach towards structure.

David Mitrany's functionalism held that "form follows function": states cooperate best on specific technical tasks done together. This builds institutions and peace. He assumed loyalty would shift from the state to functional bodies, but the nation-state's legitimacy made this unworkable.

Ernst Haas's neo-functionalism brought politics back through the spillover effect, for example European coal and steel community grew into political integration. But the approach rests on the European case, the Westphalian state persists and it remains Eurocentric.

The systems approach instead treats world politics as structure whose pattern shapes its units. Morton Kaplan modelled it through balance of power, bipolar, universal, hierarchical and unit-veto systems.

Hedley Bull dismissed it as an intellectual exercise & Robert Lieber doubted its testability.

Therefore, neither suffices alone. Both neglect power and agency & each needs perspectives that restore these to the study of world politics.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 10 marks

Bring out the major differences between the Classical Realism of Hans Morgenthau and the Neorealism of Kenneth Waltz.

FLOW SNAPSHOT – how the answer moves

R1 common realist ground (power, anarchy, self-help) → one root difference: the source of the power-struggle **R2** both realist → disagree on where power politics begins → that root drives every other difference

Intro routes

Morgenthau: cause in human nature (*Politics Among Nations*, objective laws from that nature) → **Waltz**: cause in system structure (*Theory of International Politics*, anarchy + distribution of capabilities; leaders/human nature downplayed, structure compels) → purpose of power: end (classical) vs means to survival (neorealism) → method: subjective/philosophical vs systematic/scientific, modelled on microeconomics → ethics: prudence present in **Morgenthau** vs largely absent in **Waltz**

Body flow

despite the differences, both stay within realism → shared self-help + balance of power → a reworking of the foundation, not a break

Counter-view

R1 evolution from a human-centric to a system-centric account of IR **R2** structural rigour gained, but **Morgenthau**'s attention to statecraft and ethics set aside

Conclusion routes

Both Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz work within realism where power, anarchy and self-help are common ground. They differentiate on where the struggle for power begins and that difference shapes every other one.

Morgenthau located the cause of conflict in human nature. According to him, in *Politics Among Nations*, international politics runs on objective laws derived from nature. Waltz relocated the cause to the structure of the international system. For him, in *Theory of International Politics*, anarchy and the distribution of capabilities decide behaviour; leaders and human nature are downplayed because structure compels them.

For classical realism power is an end but for neorealism it is a means to survival. Their methods differ too: Morgenthau's realism is subjective & philosophical, while Waltz makes it systematic and scientific, modelled on microeconomics. Prudence and ethics matter for Morgenthau but are absent in Waltz.

For all these differences, both remain within realism, sharing self-help and the balance of power.

The move is therefore an evolution from a human-centric to a system-centric account of international relations, not a break from realism.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 10 marks

What are the core assumptions of idealism as an approach to study international relations? Explain its continuing relevance in peace building.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

R1 interwar liberal thought = idealism → Enlightenment faith: humans rational, world reformable → war removable, peace reachable **R2** idealist optimism vs realist pessimism → good nature + shared interests → these very premises still drive peace-building

Intro routes

human nature good → war from bad institutions, not fixed drive → reform removes it → individuals primary, states pluralistic (group bargaining) → interests dynamic (self- + other-regarding) → mutual interests → cooperation without a hegemon → **Hoffmann**: self-restraint / moderation / compromise / peace → three pillars (institutions, interdependence, democracy) → **Coulombis & Wolfe**: "art of good government" → pillars carried into practice → **Kant** (republican constitutionalism + federation) → **Wilson** (collective security) → **Doyle** (democratic peace) → contemporary survival: UN, Paris Agreement, SDGs

Body flow

realists brand idealism utopian → its harmony-of-interests optimism doubted

Counter-view

R1 assumptions are no utopian relic → enduring rule-based cooperation vindicates the institutional wager **R2** idealism survives as the working logic of institution-based peace — sharpened by realism, not defeated by it

Conclusion routes

Idealism, the dominant liberal outlook of the interwar years (1919-1939), begins from a hopeful, enlightenment reading of human possibility.

According to them people are rational and can reshape their world, so peace is not beyond reach. Human nature is essentially good; war springs from bad institutions, not a fixed drive and reforming international relations can remove it. Individuals are the primary actors, though states remain by bargaining among groups.

State interests are dynamic i.e. both self-regarding & other-regarding and mutual interests let states cooperate without a hegemon. Hoffmann locates its essence in self-restraint, moderation, compromise and peace.

It rests on 3 pillars: institutions, interdependence and democracy. For Coulombis and Wolfe, "politics is the art of good government, not the art of the possible."

Immanuel Kant's republican constitutionalism and federation, Woodrow Wilson's collective security and Michael Doyle's democratic peace all descend from them. The contemporary example of this is UN, the Paris Agreement and the SDGs.

Realists dismiss this as utopian, but enduring rule-based cooperation shows the idealist wager on institutions holds.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 10 marks

"Marxist approach to the study of international relations has lost its relevance in the post-cold war era." Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

R1 Marxism as class/capital (IPE) lens → anti-imperialism + core-periphery → predicted collapse never came → decline thesis has force **R2** post-Cold War liberal triumph → socialism abandoned in practice → is class analysis still usable?

Intro routes

decline thesis: **Fukuyama's** end of history / socialist states → liberalism / **Keohane** and **Nye** complex interdependence, not class → **but** capitalism keeps generating predicted inequality → Seattle + WSF vs WEF + 2008 crisis → **Piketty** haves vs have-nots → **Wallerstein** world-systems still explains Southern underdevelopment

Body flow

realist charge: Marxist state is reductionist, ignores autonomous state strength → true only in part

Counter-view

R1 declined as governing system, not as critique → inequality persists → emancipatory purpose (change, not just interpret) keeps it relevant **R2** relevance shifts from blueprint to diagnostic tool → survives wherever global inequality endures

Conclusion routes

Marxism views international relations through class and capital rather than states. It rests on proletarian internationalism, anti-imperialism and a core-periphery view of world economy.

Its predicted collapse of capitalism-imperialism never arrived, and the post-Cold war decline thesis has real force. Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History?* announced the triumph of liberal democracy and former socialist states abandoned Marxism for liberalism. Keohane and Nye described a world of complex interdependence not reducible to class.

But the capitalist order kept producing the inequalities Marxism has predicted. Anti-globalisation protests like Seattle, the World Social Forum against the World Economic Forum & the 2008 financial crisis exposed deep disparities.

Thomas Piketty showed neo-liberalism producing a world split between haves and have-nots. Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems approach explains persistent underdevelopment in the Global South.

Realists argues that the Marxist state is a reductionist instrument of class, ignoring its autonomous strength. But Marxism has declined as a governing system, not as a critique.

Therefore, as long as inequality persists, Marxism's emancipatory demand to change the world and not merely interpret it keeps it relevant.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2022 · 10 marks

Discuss the commonalities between the Marxist and Realist approach to the study of International Politics.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

R1 ideological opposites → yet both read world politics as material + conflict, not ideals/morality **R2** open on the shared lens → materialist, structural, conflict-driven reading → morality set aside

Intro routes

materialism (realism: power & survival — **Morgenthau**, **Waltz** ↔ Marxism: historical materialism, world-system as capital) → conflict-prone arena (continuous power competition ↔ opposed class interests) → hegemony & world order (**Carr**: "have" vs "have not" powers) → scepticism of universal norms (moral talk masks dominant interests) → structural convergence (**Waltz** concedes **Lenin** on imperialism; **Wallerstein**'s core-periphery || realism's systemic constraints)

Body flow

central actor splits them → states in anarchy (realism) vs classes & market forces in an exploitative capitalist world-economy (Marxism)

Counter-view

R1 different actors, shared method → convergence runs deeper than the rivalry **R2** materialism + structure + conflict unite them → they part only on who acts and what the system is

Conclusion routes

Marxism and Realism sit at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, but both explain world politics through material structures and conflict rather than ideals or moral purpose.

Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz argue that realism grounds state action in power and survival. Marxism uses historical materialism, treating the world-system as structured by capital.

Both therefore see a conflict-prone arena. Realism stresses continuous power competition. Whereas Marxism sees as inherently conflictual world-system of opposed class interests. Both analyse hegemony. E. H. Carr cast international politics as a struggle between "have" and "have not" powers. Both distrust universal norms, reading moral talk as a cover for dominant interests.

Waltz acknowledged the reach of Lenin's account of imperialism, and Immanuel Wallerstein's core-periphery map parallels realism's systemic constraints.

Both differs on state i.e. states in an anarchical system for realists, classes and market forces in an exploitative capitalist world-economy for Marxists. But as materialist, structural, conflict-centred approaches, they share far more than their opposition suggests.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 15 marks

In what ways does the functionalist approach in international relations help in maintaining peace and order in global politics?

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

R1 high politics keeps failing to secure peace → **Mitrany's** "peace by pieces" → order built from below, not imposed **R2** peace as the outcome of cooperation on shared needs → function precedes politics

Intro routes

"form follows function" → cooperate first on technical tasks (trade / health / environment), done better together → trust built, conflict-potential reduced, expert-led start on least-contested ground → cooperation generates institutions → IOs + specialised agencies (WHO / ICAO / WMO) as forums for dialogue, negotiation, dispute resolution → norm-setting, aggressive nationalism curbed, non-state actors (NGOs / MNCs), wider global identity → **Haas**: neo-functionalism + spillover → interdependence deepens → political integration → EU (Coal & Steel), India-Pakistan Composite Dialogue → dense economic ties deter conflict → continuous dialogue sustains peace despite strained relations

Body flow

understates power and security → neo-functionalism's regional focus narrows global reach

Counter-view

R1 insight holds: shared needs met together → order from habit, not fear **R2** peace grown through function, not imposed by design

Conclusion routes

Functionalism developed by David Mitrany focused on how can peace be built when high politics keeps failing to secure it? For him the solution was "peace by pieces".

Order grows from below, through cooperation on shared needs and not from political settlements imposed from above. The core mechanism is "form follows function". States cooperate first on specific technical tasks such as trade, public health and environmental protection. This low-barrier cooperation builds trust and reduces the potential for conflict.

Such cooperation then generates its own institutions. Functionalism promotes international organisations and specialised agencies like the WHO, ICAO and WMO, which become standing forums for dialogue negotiation & dispute resolution. They set norms, curb aggressive nationalism and draw in non-state actors such as NGOs & MNCs.

Ernst Haas extended this through neo-functionalism & the spillover effect : success in one area pulls cooperation into others. It deepens interdependence until it reaches political integration. The EU's growth from the Coal and Steel community shows the pattern.

The India-Pakistan composite bilateral dialogue applied the same logic. States with dense economic ties are less willing to risk conflict that would disrupt them and continuous dialogue sustains peace even where relations are strained.

Critics argue that this understates power and security, and that neo-functionalism's regional focus narrowed its global reach.

However, it is valid that where states meet common needs together, order grows from habit rather than fear.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 15 marks

What do you mean by offensive and defensive realism?

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

R1 both neorealist strands → shared anarchy / self-help / survival → split on how much power = security **R2** realism's puzzle "how much power is enough?" → two answers inside structural realism → security-sufficient vs power-maximum

Intro routes

shared neorealist premises → **Defensive (Waltz)**: security maximisers → equilibrium not hegemony → excess power provokes balancing + conquest costly (nationalism) → prudence = adequate power → **Waltz** quote → **Offensive (Mearsheimer)**: power maximisers → safest when strongest (intentions unverifiable) → balancing unreliable (buck-passing) → potential hegemons become actual → regional not global hegemony (oceans) → China's rise not peaceful

Body flow

same premises, opposite prescriptions → restraint / equilibrium (defensive) vs pursuit of dominance (offensive) → US post-Cold War overextension read as the cost of too much power vs great-power rivalry (South China Sea, Eastern Europe) read as unavoidable

Counter-view

R1 disagreement is not over premises but over prudence — how much power is enough **R2** the two strands together map realism's range of state behaviour, restraint to dominance

Conclusion routes

Offensive & defensive realism are two strands within structural realism or neorealism. Both accept that the international system is anarchic, states depend on self-help and survival is the first goal.

They divide over a single question i.e. how much power a state needs to be secure. Defensive realism, associated with Kenneth Waltz in Theory of International Politics, treats states as security maximisers.

Prudence therefore counsels adequate, not maximum power. As Waltz put it, "In anarchy, security is the highest end. Only if survival is assured can states seek such other goals as tranquillity, profit and power."

Offensive realism, developed by John Mearsheimer in The tragedy of great power politics, treats states as power maximisers. Because intentions can never be verified, a state is safest when it is strongest, & so it keeps expanding its share of power.

Balancing is unreliable, since states buck-pass and potential hegemons inevitably try to become actual ones.

Global dominance is impossible because oceans prevent it. So the realistic aim is regional hegemony and on this reasoning China's rise will not be peaceful.

Both rest on anarchy and self-help but prescribe opposite policies. Defensive realism views US's overextension in its post-Cold war as the price of seeking too much. Whereas offensive realism views great-power rivalry, over the South-China Sea or in Eastern Europe, as unavoidable.

Therefore, the disagreement is not about premises but about how much power prudence allows.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 10 marks

Explain the central tenets of the World-Systems Theory.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

R1 global inequality is structural, not a gap between isolated nations → one capitalist world-economy since the sixteenth century **R2** Wallerstein's single social system → global division of labour → unequal distribution of wealth and power

Intro routes

single world-system → core / periphery / semi-periphery (buffer, political > economic) → unequal exchange, surplus periphery → core, capital accumulation → core's wealth ↔ periphery's underdevelopment → Frank's development of underdevelopment → historical capitalism: positions shift, hierarchy persists → states as variables → imperialism + temporary hegemony

Body flow

charges of determinism and Eurocentrism

Counter-view

R1 concede determinism / Eurocentrism → still a sharp lens on Africa and Latin America **R2** hierarchy persists under global capitalism → theory keeps explaining the periphery's continued poverty

Conclusion routes

World - Systems Theory presents the world economy as a single social system, structured by a global division of labour and an unequal distribution of wealth & power. Immanuel Wallerstein traces this inequality to the expansion of capitalism since the 16th Century.

The approach divides the states into three: The core (capital-intensive, high-technology, strong institutions) dominates the periphery (labour-intensive, resource-exporting, weak states), while the semi-periphery acts as a buffer, playing a larger political than economic role.

Its engine is unequal exchange where surplus flows from periphery to core, sustaining capital accumulation on a global scale. The core's wealth is inseparable from the periphery's underdevelopment.

Andre Gunder Frank's development of underdevelopment also talks about this unequal exchange where integration into capitalism itself produces poverty.

Under this historical capitalism, positions may shift over time, but the core-periphery hierarchy persists. States are only variables within it and the system is shaped by imperialism and by a hegemony that is always temporary.

The theory is criticised with determinism and Eurocentrism but still offers an understanding of the lasting poverty of Africa and Latin America.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 10 marks

Explain the various facets of the idealist approach to the study of international relations. Comment on its contemporary relevance.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

R1 idealism = interwar liberal dominance → politics around morality, cooperation, peace, not power **R2** set against realist power politics → rejects zero-sum world → morality and cooperation can reorder relations

Intro routes

human nature good → war from bad institutions, reform can end it (**Coulombis & Wolfe**: good government, not the art of the possible) → **Kant**, *Perpetual Peace*: republican constitutionalism + commercial interdependence + federal contract → **Wilson** (father of modern idealism): collective security over balance of power, self-determination, League of Nations → **Doyle**: democratic peace, spread of democracy promotes peace

Body flow

realist rejoinder → great-power conflict (Ukraine) + institutions weak against power → limits of the idealist faith

Counter-view

R1 relevance affirmed → survives in UN collective security, human rights, climate, pandemic → rules-based order lives on **R2** relevance qualified → guiding force in global governance, not a full account of the world

Conclusion routes

Idealism argues that international politics can and should be organised around morality, cooperation and peace, not power. It was the dominant liberal thought of the interwar years and rejects the realist view of a zero-sum world.

Its first facet is a view of human nature as essentially good: bad behaviour flows from bad institutions and reforming relations can eliminate war. For Coulombis and Wolfe, "politics is the art of good government, not the art of possible."

Immanuel Kant, in *Perpetual Peace*, roots this in republican constitutionalism, commercial interdependence and a federal contract between states.

Woodrow Wilson, the father of modern idealism, turns it into practice i.e. collective security over the balance of power, self-determination and the League of Nations. Michael Doyle adds democratic peace i.e. the spread of democracy promotes peace.

Its contemporary relevance survives in the UN's collective security, human-rights frameworks, climate cooperation, and the pandemic response. It favours a rules based order.

However, recent great-power conflict, as in Ukraine, tests it, exposing institutions as weak against power. Idealism remains a guiding force in global governance, if no longer a full account of the world.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 10 marks

Neo-liberalism lightened neo-realism's dark view of international politics. Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

R1 shared premise: anarchy + rational states → opposite verdicts on cooperation → claim holds: same start, minus the pessimism **R2** neo-realism asks "how to survive" → neo-liberalism asks "how to cooperate" → same anarchy, softer reading

Intro routes

Waltz: structure = anarchy + distribution of capabilities → survival central → cooperation blocked by insecurity (intentions unverifiable) + relative gains → **Mearsheimer**: institutions reflect power, war a constant risk → neo-liberalism accepts anarchy, denies it is determinative → absolute gains → economic interdependence (**Keohane & Nye**) → institutions: share information, cut transaction costs, enable reciprocity → mitigate cheating → states pool resources, cede some sovereignty

Body flow

Grieco: states still weigh relative gains ("who will gain more?") → the lightening is only partial

Counter-view

R1 gap narrows into a Neo-Neo Synthesis → dark view softened, not dispelled **R2** institutions soften but do not abolish the security dilemma → neo-liberalism lightens the darkness rather than removing it

Conclusion routes

Both neo-realism and neo-liberalism start from the same premise i.e. an anarchic system of rational states but draw opposite conclusions about cooperation. The claim holds because neo-liberalism keeps neo-realism's starting point while rejecting its pessimism.

For Kenneth Waltz, structure is anarchy plus the distribution of capabilities and survival becomes the central concern.

Cooperation is blocked by insecurity since intentions cannot be verified, and by relative gains, where a state weighs not its own gain but whether others gain more. John Mearsheimer argues that institutions reflect power and war remains a constant risk.

Neo-liberalism shifts attention to absolute gains and to the economic interdependence described by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye.

According to them the institutions share information, cut transaction costs and enable reciprocity. By mitigating cheating, institutions let states pool resources and even surrender some sovereignty to manage shared problems.

Joseph Grieco argues that states keep asking who will gain more and relative gains never fully disappear. The gap has narrowed into a Neo-Neo Synthesis, but institutions soften rather than abolish the security dilemma.

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