

# Conflict and Cooperation in International Relations

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ALEXANDER CLACKSON, FEB 1 2011

The world we live in always seems to contain wars and conflicts. Just by looking back over 100 years, history is filled with major wars like the two World Wars, the constant scare of escalation of threat during the Cold War and more recently The Afghan and Iraq War. Despite the fact that people always talk about the need for peace, the world is instead filled with fear and constant security threats. Since the First World War many theorists and political scientists have tried to come up with a solution on how to create a peaceful international environment but with no real achievement. This leads to a natural conclusion that there are certain obstacles that prevent cooperation between states. This essay will analyse the main difficulties to cooperation. In order to do that, it is necessary to look at some present theories that suggest they have the answer to why cooperation is so hard to accomplish. This article will first look at the realist theory and explain what points it suggested to spell out threats to security and peace. Secondly this essay will illustrate what liberals think about cooperation and why they believe it is difficult yet possible to accomplish. The debate between realist and liberalist theories has been going on for many years now, almost since the end of the First World War. Each theory will offer its own view. The topic of obstacles to cooperation is sharply contested and debatable therefore the best that can be done is to find the closest and most probable answer to the question. This is what the conclusion of this essay will address and also discuss whether the obstacles to cooperation have changed throughout the years. Before this essay explains different theories it is essential to illustrate what cooperation actually means and what it entails. Scholars have summarised cooperation as “when actors adjust their behaviour to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination.”[1] Cooperation basically should lead to rewards for all states, not necessarily equal rewards, but everyone should benefit. Competition or conflict on the other hand is “goal-seeking behaviour that strives to reduce the gains available to others or to impede their want-satisfaction.” Cooperation can be between two states or a multiple number of states. The same applies to conflict.[2]

Realists believe they can provide the best explanation on why cooperation is so complicated to achieve. Realism is the most dominant theory and has been so since the end of the Second World War. Even though in the last few years it has been criticised heavily for not being able to explain certain issues in international relations like the peaceful end to the Cold War, it still provides a thorough theory. Realism divides into three parts: classical realism, neo-realism and neo-classical realism. The classical realists are more concerned with human nature. They believe that people in general are selfish and aggressive. The main actors of the international system, the states, are guided by this and essentially war is inevitable. There is a lot of evidence to support that, like the Nazi Germany led by Hitler or Iraq led by Saddam Hussein. Neo-realists are more concerned with the distribution of power and the international system. The international system lacks a sovereign authority that can make and enforce binding agreements. Without such authority, the states are given an opportunity to do what they like which makes it difficult for states to trust each other and cooperate.[3] This point is further maximised with the realist assumption that the state's main goal is power maximisation and security. So with no world authority to keep an eye on those power seeking states, it is no surprise that realists see international relations as a constant battle and a struggle for survival. Even if some states are not trying to increase their power and are happy with the way things are, they cannot trust other states to think the same because if the other state suddenly decided not to cooperate, the survival of the first state is under major threat. Because all states are aware of this, they all try to protect themselves by seeking control, increasing their military capabilities and making allies with other states. This in turn leads to a different realist concept- the security dilemma. Collins in his writing “The Security Dilemma” described the concept very well:

*“The Security Dilemma is the notion that in a context of uncertainty and bounded rationality perceived external*

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*threats (real or imagined) generate feelings of insecurity in those states that believe themselves to be the targets of such threats, thereby leading those states to adopt measures to increase their power and capability to counteract those threats (alliance creation, arms build-ups, and so on)*[4].

So if one state sees another state suddenly increase its military power it will assume that it is about to attack even if that might not be the case. The state that thinks it is under threat will have to increase its military power too which in turn will alarm the original state and this spiral could continue for a long time.[5] It is a never ending situation which is in fact why realists believe cooperation is not only difficult to achieve, but mostly impossible. Security dilemma happens because of fear between states. Many of these states experience a lack of contact between each other which eventually leads to a lack of trust. A current example of the security dilemma is between India and Pakistan. In order to achieve cooperation, security dilemma between two countries must not only stop getting worse but spiral back in the direction where those states trust each other. Even if states do agree on some laws and arms agreements, there is nothing to stop one of them breaking the agreement or cheating.[6] The example of how Hitler broke the Nazi-Soviet pact and invaded Russia is clear evidence that not all states can be trusted. There are however some disagreements about that point amongst realists. While offensive realism claims that states must always act aggressively to survive because the international system encourages conflict and the inevitability of war, the defensive realists are less negative.[7] They believe that cooperation or conflict depends on the situation. For example if two states are similar minded and share the same views, they are more likely to cooperate. The reason for that could be a better understanding between the countries like for example Germany and France share the same views and thus trust each other more. Therefore the international system does not necessarily generate conflict and war and security is often plentiful. So in summary what are the main obstacles to cooperation according to realists? The answer is aggressive, selfish humans living in states who are only concerned with power and security because of the self-help anarchical international system. Realists leave us with a bleak world, full of vulnerable states scared for their survival and reluctant to trust or cooperate with any other states. However before the points put forward by realists can be completely accepted, some criticisms and disadvantages of realist theory must be pointed out. First of all realism ignores the importance of different concepts of identity and culture in different states. For example countries with the same religion and culture are more likely to cooperate with each other. Realism is criticised heavily for exaggerating the importance of states and not taking into account other actors like institutions and NGOs. Also the international system has no doubt changed over the years, there are no major wars, the Cold War finished without any aggression which realists failed to predict and states in general have lost interest in territorial advantage. Robert Jarvis even believes that realist theory will not be able to explain conflict or cooperation in the coming years.[8] In fact the biggest critics of realists are the liberals or the institutionalists as they are also called.

Liberalism was born just after the end of the First World War. Europe was so shocked by what happened that the politicians wanted to come up with a way to prevent any wars happening in the future. So Woodrow Wilson, the United States president at the time drew up 14 points to create peace throughout the international system and to create way to manage the international anarchy.[9] Liberal theory suffered a major blow when the Second World War broke out just a few years after the 14 points were created and most scholars and political scientists have been sceptical about the almost pacifistic views of the liberal theorists until the end of the Cold War.[10] The reason why liberal view became more popular after the Cold War is because states started to adopt international laws, arms control, the roles of international organisations became much greater and the desire for democracy in a lot of states started taking place. Before analysing what obstacles the liberals believe stop cooperation, it is imperative to explain the main debate points between realists and liberalists. Unlike classical realists, liberals believe human nature is good and capable of holding back the aggression. Their main assumption is that war is not inevitable and there is much more potential to cooperation if the anarchical conditions are reduced. Overall global change is possible.[11] The main obstacle to cooperation for liberalists is simple: not enough international institutions. According to idealists if the world were to create international organizations which promote peaceful change, disarmament and international laws, cooperation would be much easier to achieve. If necessary these international organizations can use enforcement on states. States which are bound by rules and norms created by the institutions will have no choice but to cooperate. In a globalised environment in which the international system is now tied in, new actors like transnational corporations and non-governmental organizations will facilitate interdependence and integration between states which in turn will lead to peaceful international environment.[12] Another obstacle to cooperation according to liberals is a massive democratic deficit at the global level. Liberalists believe that democratic states act

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peacefully towards one another and most conflicts and threats in the world come from the non-liberal states. To find an explanation for this is not easy, but the evidence is there: Western European states have not been in war with each other since the end of the Second World War. It is possible that after the horrors of that World War, democratic states never want to experience it again. Another explanation could be that liberal states simply realise that cooperating with other countries is beneficial for them. It is particularly valuable economically especially in a globalised world and a free trade system. Organisations like the WTO promote free markets and states take advantage of that to increase their economic profitability. For liberalist theorists the evidence is also there on how organisations like the EU and NATO promote peace and cooperation. While the EU has its disadvantages, the organisation has done a lot for Europe. It has created a common ground between European states, created democracy in 27 countries including former Soviet Union states which were under authoritarian regime and it gives more sovereignty to member states who can decide the policy.[13] A crucial incorrect point made by realists according to institutionalisms is that states clearly want to cooperate and that is why they join organisations that promote peace. So in order for cooperation to work the international system needs to be filled with democratic states with open markets and institutions like the EU to facilitate security. It is necessary to point out that liberalists agree with realist theory on anarchy, balance of power and self-help international system. The difference is that liberals suggest institutions and democratic states will be able to deal with such obstacles and cooperation will come naturally. Institutionalism has its flaws too however. First of all the major problem with institutions is that the states will only accept these institutions when it is in their favour and in their national interest. For example the United Kingdom is not accepting the Euro as its currency as it is not in their interest to do so. This suggests that the organisations are not as powerful as states, which leads to realists to come to a conclusion that such organisations cannot facilitate cooperation if a particular state does not want to do so. Secondly converting countries into democratic, liberal states is not easy, if not impossible. Just by looking at the example of Iraq where United States tried to get rid of an authoritarian leader and promote peace in the country, the plan badly back-fired and created nothing but chaos and disorder in Iraq. Eventually all states may progress towards a democratic political system.[14]

After looking at the debate between the two main theories of international relations, this essay has illustrated a number of main obstacles to cooperation provided by their assumptions. To summarise, realists believe that natural human aggression which is absorbed by individual states existing in an anarchical international system can encourage them to seek power and distrust other states which will make cooperation very difficult to achieve. States are also more concerned with relative gains rather than absolute gains. Liberalists acknowledge the above points made by realists but believe that the main obstacles are the lack of international institutions which provide international law, encourage disarmament and integrate states closer. Lack of democratic and liberal states is also an impediment to cooperation between states.

Can these obstacles be avoided? Yes according to liberalists who encourage us to believe that cooperation has evolved and states are more than likely to trust each other. For example the recent nuclear disarmament agreement between Russia and the United States is clear evidence that even past disagreements is put aside and major, powerful states are content with minimising their military power. Realists disagree with that by demonstrating that the nature of world politics has not changed. Even after the end of the Cold War, the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, constant threat of war and chaos in the Middle East and the Iraq War in 2003 shows how the world we live in now may not be as safe as we would have hoped. From the analyses of international relations, it seems, if security is achieved, cooperation will follow automatically. However the concept of security is a sharply contested concept. After the end of the Cold-War, new security issues were raised like environmental degradation, poverty, hunger and diseases and weak/failing states. Scholars also started to believe that security should be centred on people, not the state. Security should provide personal safety to individuals and freedom from threats.[15] Security for the Third World and underdeveloped states is different from security of developed states. After the decolonisation, the number of states increased dramatically. These states had a very limited time to develop and catch up to European states so therefore the security in the Third World does not just refer to military dimensions but also search for food, health and economic security. So unlike European states, the security of Third World countries comes from within the states, not external.[16] The events of 9/11 have also changed the way we think about security and cooperation. While a few years ago conflicts may have occurred between states or leaders, after 9/11 we are fighting an unknown enemy, a group of people rather than a state.[17] If there is no clear explanation of what security is, how can the states achieve it? Will we ever live in a world where cooperation is constant and war and conflict is just the thing of the past? Many

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predictions have been made about this, but as history shows predictions often turn out to be incorrect and the answer to this question is simply unanswerable. Let's also not forget the other obstacles that many theories do not take into consideration. The widening gap between the rich and the poor, food sufficiency, finite natural resources like oil and occasional economic recessions can all lead to more conflict. The world at the moment looks bleak and only time will tell if we can come up with some solutions to these never ending problems.

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