

Realism and Peaceful Change

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ANDERS WIVEL, FEB 9 2018

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Realism is most often depicted as a tradition or perspective on international relations explaining war and military conflict. This is not without reason as realists have focused on war as a major or even the primary mechanism of change in international relations. Thucydides, in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, written in the fifth century BC, and a standard reference in textbook accounts of the realist tradition, found that '[t]he growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon, made war inevitable' (Thucydides 431 BC, 1.23). This position is echoed in realism up until today. For instance, in his modern classic, aptly entitled *War and Change in World Politics*, Robert Gilpin asserts that 'a precondition for political change lies in a disjuncture between the existing social system and the redistribution of power towards those actors who would benefit most from a change in the system', and that change in international relations typically equals war (Gilpin 1981, 9). Likewise, John Mearsheimer, in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, argues that the most war-prone regions are those characterised by unbalanced multipolarity with a potential hegemon seeking to change the established order in its favour by military means, and that the growth of China constitutes the greatest danger to world peace (Mearsheimer 2001).

This does not mean that realists are unconcerned with peace. Acting as policy advisors or foreign policy commentators, realists have often been among the most vocal critics of war. Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, arguably the two most prominent realists in the latter half of the twentieth century, were both highly critical of US military intervention in Vietnam (Rafshoon 2001; Humphreys 2013). More recently, 'almost all realists in the United States – except for Henry Kissinger – opposed the war against Iraq' in 2003 (Mearsheimer 2005), and realists have been highly critical of the US military interventions during the Obama administration from 2009 to 2017 (Walt 2016). However, despite this concern with peace, war remains the primary mechanism for change in realist theory, and realists have been surprisingly reluctant to explore the potential for peaceful change.

This chapter seeks to remedy this shortcoming by exploring how the logic(s) of realism may help to explain peaceful change. The intention is not to test realist hypotheses on peaceful change, but rather discuss what dynamics of peaceful change we see when we look through the realist lens (cf. Smith 2007; Sterling-Folker 2006). I develop my argument in five steps. First, I define what peaceful change is when looking through realist lenses. Second, I explain why realists should be concerned about peaceful change and explain why peaceful change has until now played a marginal role in realist analyses. Third, I challenge what is typically perceived as a mission impossible in structural realism arguing that even offensive realist logic leaves room for peaceful change and may explain why peaceful change is a useful strategy for power-maximising states. Fourth, I take this argument further by exploring how increased interaction capacity has changed the power-calculus of interest maximising states, and fifth, in the last section before the conclusion, I explore how structural incentives interact with domestic politics.

What is Peaceful Change?

Realism and Peaceful Change

Written by Anders Wivel

Realists agree with most standard definitions that peace entails the 'absence of war and other forms of overt violence' (Anderson 2004, 102). However, to the realist, 'peaceful' does not equal power free. In contrast, realists find that the prospects for peace are conditioned on the distribution of power, although they do not provide clear guidance as to which distribution will most effectively promote peace. Highly asymmetrical distributions of power such as bipolarity and unipolarity may underpin peace understood as the absence of war, because of the clarity of signals and information when there is little doubt on which actors are the strongest and there is little chance of challenging the most powerful states (Waltz 1979; Hansen 2011).^[1] However, while bipolarity is highly asymmetric when we look at the great powers *vis-à-vis* the rest, it is highly symmetric when we look at the balance between the two great powers.

The balance of power, in bipolar and multipolar systems, has been viewed as a major source of peace in realist theory, because the actors in this system are expected to deter each other from attacking (Doyle 1997, 167). Within any distribution of power, states may pursue various strategies for maintaining or changing the status quo by violent or peaceful means or by seeking to 'pass the buck', i.e. getting another state to bear the costs of maintaining or changing the status quo. Realists have typically focused on violent means of change, i.e. the use or threat of military action. To the realist, peaceful change entails the use of strategies of diplomatic or economic statecraft. Diplomatic strategies for peaceful change include soft balancing, where states seek to restrain the action of other states by institutional and diplomatic means, taking advantage of information asymmetry and the ability to shift between and act outside institutional settings in order to amend or change the actions of other states but stopping short of using military means (Paul 2017).^[2] Economic strategies for peaceful change are fundamentally about changing the behaviour of other states through economic incentives such as trade agreements or economic sanctions (Lobell and Ripsman 2016).

What does 'change' mean in this context? Realists agree with Martin Wight that international relations is the 'realm of recurrence and repetition' (Wight 1960, 43). International anarchy and power politics will remain inescapable features of international relations, because any policy-maker who refuses to obey the self-help logic of anarchy runs the risk of endangering the security or even survival of the state he or she represents. As noted by Joseph Grieco: 'states recognise that in anarchy there is no overarching authority to prevent others from using violence, or the threat of violence, to dominate or destroy them. This is in fact the core insight of realism concerning international politics' (Grieco 1990, 38). This understanding leaves only a limited role for peaceful change as a strategy or outcome softening, but not eradicating, power politics. Thus, foreign policy decision-makers may pursue strategies of peaceful change as a prudent way of promoting change and achieving a peace in accordance with their own values and interests, but with only limited impact on transforming the international system or the nature of international relations (Gilpin 1981, 209).

War and Change: Conflating Structure with Outcome

There are two reasons why realists should be concerned with peaceful change. First, a realist focus on interstate war as the primary mechanism of change seems increasingly out of synch with the empirical record. The number of interstate wars has decreased significantly since 1946 making it one of the most profound trends in international relations in the latter half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century (Themnér and Wallensteen 2014). Moreover, the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of what had been one of the two dominant powers for the past 45 years, the Soviet Union, in 1991 did not trigger a great power war. The Soviet Union's successor state Russia largely accepted the single most significant loss of power by any great power without a war in the history of the modern state system. The loss reduced Russia to the size it had had until the successful expansion by Katharina the Great in the eighteenth century and cut off access to some of the most prosperous parts of what had previously been the Soviet Union (Hansen, Toft and Wivel 2009; Wohlforth 2002). Likewise, in Europe, the reunification of Germany in 1990 was accepted by the other states in the region even though a united Germany had been a significant source of unrest and conflict on the continent in the first half of the twentieth century. More recently, the rise of China has not resulted in military confrontation with the declining US superpower despite structural realist expectations that this will almost inevitably happen (Sørensen 2013). In essence, understanding peaceful change is important if we are to understand some of the most important trends and events in international relations over the past decades.

Realism and Peaceful Change

Written by Anders Wivel

Second, realists should be concerned with peaceful change because they have a potentially significant contribution to make. Realists remind us of the close relationship between power and politics and look for the impact of interests even when policies are couched in the language of peace, prosperity and freedom (Mearsheimer 2001, 22-7). For this reason, realists are well positioned to provide a critical perspective on liberal and constructivist explanations on peaceful change. In addition, as I will argue below, there is nothing in the realist logic that prevents realists from making a real contribution to understanding peaceful change, and, in particular, the conditions for peaceful change. Moreover, realists are proponents of a 'practical morality' providing a middle way between 'moral perfection' and 'moral cynicism' in order to navigate – and ideally reconcile – 'what is morally desirable with what is politically possible' (Lieber 2009, 19).^[3] Thus, a realist perspective on peaceful change may entail important advice for foreign policy-makers.

But if realism has potentially a lot to say about peaceful change, then why have realists told us so little? This blind spot stems from an unfortunate dichotomising of potential international realms into (existing) anarchy and (utopian) hierarchy. To be sure, a distinction between international anarchy and domestic politics is a useful and necessary assumption of realist theorising on international relations. However, the structural realist stylised account of international relations as not only a state of nature but a constant state of emergency to be contrasted with rule-governed domestic politics has important, and unnecessary, consequences for the ability of realism to comprehend peaceful change.^[4] If we accept a conceptualisation of anarchy/international politics/war and hierarchy/domestic politics/peace then the international realm is exclusively the realm of coercion and war and domestic politics the realm of persuasion and peace, and by default peaceful change becomes the (unattainable) result of legislative processes and regulation – the very antithesis of realist power politics. However, as classical realists continuously reminded us, and as neoclassical realists are increasingly aware, there is considerable variation in the clarity and severity of security threats (see e.g. Wolfers 1962; Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016).

At the same time, domestic change is often the result of developments unrelated to government regulation (e.g. bargaining on the labour market between employers and union representatives or negotiations between producers and distributors of food over the placement of products in supermarkets). Thus, whereas the anarchic international system may lack an ultimate arbiter and legislator, even in domestic politics 'the most important changes in the structure of society and in the balance of forces within it are effected without legislative action' (Carr 1981, 194). These changes are, as observed by Carr, by themselves the result of power politics. They typically result from bargaining among parties, and they are achieved in the shadow of threats perceived to be more costly or dangerous than peacefully agreeing to change, and in that sense similar to peaceful international change often agreed in the shadow of an implicit or explicit threat of war (Carr 1981, 199). Thus, whereas structure is important for outcome in realist theory, we should not conflate structure with outcome: change by violent means and peaceful change occur in both domestic and international politics, and both may be the result of power politics.

Mission Impossible? Peaceful Change in International Anarchy

'The problem of peaceful change', writes E.H. Carr, 'is, in national politics, how to effect necessary and desirable changes without revolution, and, in international politics, how to effect such changes without war' (Carr 1981, 191-192). In domestic politics, the spread of liberal democracy and the rule of law have created mechanisms for change such as parliamentary and presidential elections and secured a regulated use of tools for change such as strikes and political protest. However, as Carr notes, 'in international politics, the question of procedure is complicated by the unorganised character of the international community' (Carr 1981, 193). The effect is fewer and less effective checks on the use of violence as a tool for change than in the domestic realm.

Students of international relations, realists in particular, typically conceptualise the unorganised character of the international realm as 'anarchy'. To structural realists, anarchy, understood as the absence of a legitimate monopoly of violence, explains the recurrence of war in international relations. As noted by Waltz, 'competition and conflict among states stem directly from the twin facts of life under conditions of anarchy: States in an anarchic order must provide for their own security, and threats or seeming threats to their security abound' (Waltz 1988, 619). The offensive realist variant of structural realism views state behaviour as a rational response to structural incentives (Mearsheimer 2001). Security seeking states will seek to accumulate power as power deters other states from

Realism and Peaceful Change

Written by Anders Wivel

attacking or dominating them in international anarchy. Power is conceptualised as latent power, composed of societal resources, most importantly population and wealth, underpinning military power, which is viewed as the final arbiter in the anarchic international system. Rational states will seek to minimise their own costs and incur costs on other states. For this reason, great powers tend to pass the buck, rather than balance, when confronted with a rising power in order to avoid spending on deterring the rising power themselves and potentially weaken rivaling states that spend the costs necessary for deterring the rising power. The most powerful state in the system is also the most secure state as power deters other states from attacking and threatening its survival (Mearsheimer 2001, 33). However, global hegemony is practically unattainable and the competition between states attempting to gain power at the expense of others is therefore endemic: 'international politics has always been a ruthless and dangerous business, and it is likely to remain that way (Mearsheimer 2001, 2).

Paradoxically, offensive realism allows us to explain why this competition for domination rarely leads to war. States, according to the theory, do not lust for war, but rationally aim to increase their power in the most cost-effective way. If they do not succeed, they risk their survival. Following this line of logic, we will expect states to prefer strategies that allow them to maximise power on the cheap over costly strategies, and accordingly to prefer peaceful change in their favour over war, which is likely to be costly and to endanger the long-term survival of the state. As predicted by the logic of the theory (but not by its main proponent John Mearsheimer), this seems to hold true if we look at the behaviour of the great powers over the past decades.

The United States and Germany have both successfully achieved hegemony peacefully but under the implicit – and sometimes explicit – threat to the economic survival of the states dominated and taking advantage of their weakness after a war or crisis. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the United States made economic aid to the war-torn European states dependent on political and economic cooperation among them in the OEEC. By combining strong support for European integrations with a US security guarantee for Western Europe and conditional economic aid, the United States succeeded in creating an “empire” by integration’ (Lundestad 1998). In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Germany (supported by a coalition of smaller EU member states) demanded a set of economic reforms and policies of Southern European EU member states, Greece in particular. If Greece would not comply with strict austerity measures, the country would be forced to leave the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), thereby closing off lending opportunities and most likely triggering an economic collapse of the country. This was a credible threat as the Greek economy accounts for only two percent of the Eurozone economy and a collapse of the country's economy was unlikely to trigger a collapse in any other economy or the dissolution of the EMU. In effect, the crisis solidified German economic and political hegemony within the Union and support to Germany from a number of small North European countries viewing German hegemony as a bulwark against economic chaos.

Even Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, often depicted as ‘aggressive’ by US and European commentators and policy-makers, has only resorted to violent change after multiple attempts at peaceful change in favour of Russian interests. For instance, only a few months prior to the annexation of Crimea, Russia offered Ukraine a lucrative economic deal for forgoing closer relations with the European Union including discounted energy prices and a 15 billion US dollar government loan. Thus, viewed through the offensive realist lens peaceful change may be regarded as an often used and cost-effective tool for maximising power.

Like offensive realism, the defensive realist variant of structural realism starts from an assumption of security seeking states in an anarchic international system. However, rather than power-maximising buck-passing, they predict that states tend to act as ‘defensive positionalists’ (Grieco 1990, 40). They guard the status quo by balancing power in order to maximise the chance of securing survival in a system without a legitimate monopoly of violence, i.e. an anarchic system (Waltz 1979, 117-23), and war is typically the result of either overreaction or miscalculation (Waltz 1979, 172-3). Based on this logic, defensive realism has a hard time explaining not only peaceful change, but change in general: if international relations are characterised by states defensively balancing any rising power then it is difficult to explain any change (Schweller 1996).

However, though left largely underdeveloped by defensive structural realists, the theory points to two important processes of peaceful change in international anarchy: competition and socialisation. Competition and socialisation constitute a transmission belt between structural effects and states behaviour (Thies 2010; Waltz 1979, 74–7). As

Realism and Peaceful Change

Written by Anders Wivel

noted by Waltz, 'if some state do relatively well, others will emulate them or fall by the wayside' (Waltz 1979, 118). Thus, the 'sameness' of state practices in terms of each state having its own defence forces or judicial system is explained as a gradual process of adaptation over time allowing those successfully adapting to ensure their survival. This development towards 'like units' central to structural realist thinking is reinforced by competition eliminating those states that do not compete well. Competition and socialisation may be understood as macro-processes of peaceful change, but if we are to understand how they work in practice, we need to investigate in more detail the 'process variables' or 'structural modifiers' in the international system that affect socialisation and competition.

The Power Politics of Peaceful Change: Structural Modifiers in Action

Realists do not believe that structure determines state behaviour.^[5] How structure affects states is affected by processes in international anarchy that are not part of the structure, yet systemic, i.e. interconnectedness between units and the consequences of this interconnectedness that by definition are neither part of the structure of the system (anarchy, polarity), nor attributes of any unit (state) in the system.^[6] One such factor is the interaction capacity of the system, i.e. the 'absolute quality of technological and societal capabilities across the system' (Buzan 1993, 79). The development of communication and transportation technologies has underpinned the development of one globalised international system and has facilitated the increase of societal capabilities including shared norms and institutions.^[7] To the realist, the shared norms and institutions have a material base, both in the technological development making it possible and in the most powerful actors of the system promoting some norms and institutions over others.

Following this logic, we might argue that the violent change, i.e. annexation of new land if necessary by the use of military means, associated with the expansion of international society through European colonisation under the condition of low interaction capacity has today been replaced by peaceful change underpinned by high interaction capacity, leading to the creation of one global market. Viewed through the realist lens, nineteenth century colonisation and twenty-first century globalisation are both essentially a case of great powers expanding their economic base and sphere of dominance, but expansion now takes the form of peaceful change due to technological developments making peaceful change more effective than war in most cases. The high interaction capacity of the present system intensifies socialisation by speeding up market integration and thereby, at the same time, increasing competition and socialisation (Wivel 2004, 14). Therefore, one global marketplace makes competition fiercer, and it is more transparent who is winning and who is losing. Moreover, the high interaction capacity has raised the costs of warfare making security less scarce and replacing security competition with geo-economic competition as the main parameter for great power competition (Mastanduno 1999; Schweller 1999).^[8]

This underpins the spread of the neoliberal practices of the US superpower and its allies and thereby provides the basis for even fiercer globalisation in the future. Although accompanied by institutions and regulations of the global marketplace, these institutions are often skewed in favour of the powerful and joined by many third world countries, not because they provide opportunity for growth, but because it is even more costly to be left outside the institutions (Gruber 2000). Thus, to realists, globalisation is at the same time power politics and peaceful change. It is characterised by 'the increasing interconnectedness of the world economy, [and] occurs within the context of the global dominance of American economic and political ideas, accompanied by the spread of American mass culture' (Wolfowitz 2000, 317).

Also, the change in interaction capacity may help us to explain the shift in state practices from hard balancing, i.e. military build-up and alliances, to soft balancing, i.e. restraining the power of other states by institutional and diplomatic means (Pape 2005; Paul 2005). Increased interaction capacity increases interdependence by increasing the number and density of relations in an international system now characterised by complex interdependence; in fact, this is often what we mean by 'globalisation' (Keohane and Nye 2000). Under these conditions, states need to be able to meet the actions of other states with a more 'flexible response' than the threat of military action. Thus, whereas the past decades have seen little evidence of hard balancing against the US unipole, realists may argue that the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are examples of states in Asia and the Pacific seeking peaceful change by soft balancing the United States (He 2015). Even the US superpower, by far the world's strongest military power, has embarked on a similar soft strategy aiming explicitly for

Realism and Peaceful Change

Written by Anders Wivel

'dissuasion' of potential rivals, although largely as a strategy for peacefully maintaining the status quo rather than changing it (Litwak 2010, 256-9).

Agents of Power and Peace: How Foreign Policy Decision-makers Maximise Interests through Peaceful Change

'[T]he basic task of peaceful change', writes Robert Gilpin, 'is not merely to secure peace, it is to foster change and achieve a peace that secures one's basic values. Determining how this goal is to be achieved in specific historical circumstances is the ultimate task of wise and prudent statesmanship' (Gilpin 1981, 209). Thus far, we have focused on peaceful change as change by peaceful means illustrating how the logic(s) of realism may help us to understand why even interest-maximising states in an anarchic international realm dominated by power politics may choose to pursue change by peaceful rather than violent means. However, for the individual decision-maker or government, peaceful change, like any foreign policy decision or strategy, is a complex task of navigating between structural incentives and domestic values and interests. Therefore, neoclassical realists argue that the response to structural incentives of any given state is conditioned by the clarity of the incentives. Clarity is affected by systemic process variables such as interaction capacity (as discussed in the previous section), and domestic level intervening variables such as strategic culture, the images and perceptions of foreign policy decision-makers, domestic institutions and state-society relations (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016).

By examining the importance and effects of these clusters of variables, neoclassical realism opens realism to a discussion of the agents of peaceful change and the interaction of international and domestic variables. For instance, we may link these insights to the democratic peace literature and hypothesise that transparent domestic institutions with checks and balances on the exercise of power – such as those found in liberal democratic states – facilitate taking the lead in peaceful change, because these institutions make it harder for state leaders to bluff and more costly not to carry out threats once domestic opinion has been mobilised (Kydd 1997; Lipson 2003). This may also help us understand why attempts at peaceful change succeed or fail. For instance, the massive restructuring of the European economic and political sphere through processes of institutionalisation and integration may be compared with the relative failure of similar projects in regions such as East Asia with comparable economic incentives but uneven democratisation. However, as realists, our analysis would not begin and end with domestic institutions. Rather, it would explore how change was affected by the very different strategies of the two most powerful states in the two regions, Germany and Japan, and how each of these states related to the interests of the United States, which pursued different strategies in the two regions (Grieco 1999).

This points to the importance of foreign policy roles. As argued by Cameron Thies, socialisation may have an important impact on state behaviour and allow us to explore the motivations and varying interests of states if we analyse them in the context of role relationships between different states in the system (Thies 2010). Understanding how and why some states take on particular foreign policy roles may be used as springboard for comparative studies on peaceful change. For instance, whereas the Scandinavian countries have a reputation for acting as norm-entrepreneurs for peaceful change (e.g. Ingebritsen 2002), they have taken on very different peace-making roles in the American world order. Sweden has played an active role in developing non-military aspects of EU security policy, Norway has actively pursued a role as international mediator in peace negotiations and Denmark has played the role of staunch military ally to the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere.

Conclusion

'To establish methods of peaceful change is [...] the fundamental problem of international morality and of international politics', recognised E.H. Carr in 1939 (Carr 1981, 202). This problem follows logically from the realist observation that the lack of a legitimate monopoly of power in the international realm leads to 'war's dismal recurrence through the millennia' (Waltz 1988, 620) and little restraint other than those associated with power politics on those seeking change violently. However, realists have rarely sought to tackle the issue of peaceful change explicitly. This chapter has argued that from a realist starting point, logics of peaceful change may originate in the structure of the international system (as a direct consequence of rational power-maximising states responding to the incentives of anarchy), or in processual structural modifiers (such as interaction capacity affecting processes of socialisation and

Realism and Peaceful Change

Written by Anders Wivel

competition), or in the interaction between external incentives and domestic politics (e.g. foreign policy roles and institutional design described by neoclassical realists).

Two points about the nature of peaceful change as seen through the realist lens should be noted. Depending on one's philosophical worldview and theoretical disposition, they may be seen as either caveats of the realist perspective on peaceful change or alternatively as important reminders about the need to respect the logics of necessity in international relations providing the *raison d'être* of realism and proving its continued relevance. First, realist logics of peaceful change may help us to understand peaceful change, but not peaceful transformation, i.e. the end of power politics. The realist logics of peaceful change may bring peace but this peace is always conditioned by power. It is always a peace serving the interests of some actors and going against the interests of others. In that sense realism may be used as a critical theory of peaceful change reminding us that whenever we encounter what Carr termed 'salutary' recognitions of peaceful change, these are rarely outside the realm of power and interest but an integral part of power politics (Carr 1981, 197). However, secondly, and following logically from the first point, the discussion points to no escape from power politics. Any order and any change of order is based on power politics. In that sense, realism seems stuck as what Robert Cox termed a problem-solving theory: 'it takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action' (Cox 1986, 208). For these reasons, the quest for peaceful change is at the same time fundamental to the realisation of the practical morality of realists seeking to reconcile their values with the interests of accommodating to the lesser evil, and under-researched by realists blinded by the perceived state of emergency following from anarchy.

Notes

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[1] For a realist discussion of the importance of systemic clarity of signals and information, see Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell (2016, 46-52).

[2] See, e.g. Drezner (2013), Gruber (2000) and Thompson (2009) for discussions of these types of diplomatic strategies (although not in the specific context of peaceful change).

[3] Lieber's discussion is explicitly focused on the contributors to *The Review of Politics*, but it is here seen as a general trait of political realism. For an attempt to formulate a general 'ethical realism' based on these pragmatic premises, see Lieven and Hulsman (2006).

[4] For an example of this understanding for world politics, see e.g. John Mearsheimer, who notes that '[s]tates [...] are fated to clash as each competes for advantage over the others. This is a tragic situation, but there is no escaping it unless the states that make up the system agree to form a world government. Such a vast transformation is hardly a realistic prospect. However, so conflict and war are bound to continue as large and enduring features of world politics' (Mearsheimer 2001, xi-xii).

[5] Even Kenneth Waltz, the most prominent structural realist, is careful to stress that his theory cannot explain 'why state X made a certain move last Tuesday' (Waltz 1979, 121; for a discussion, see Wivel 2005). Neoclassical realists take this point further by exploring the interaction between international and domestic politics (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell 2016).

[6] For discussions of the international system from a realist perspective, see Buzan (1993), Jervis (1998), Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell (2016) and Snyder (1996).

[7] Thus, we come close to what English School theorists term an international society: 'a group of states (or, more generally, a group of independent political communities) which not merely form a system, in the sense that the

Realism and Peaceful Change

Written by Anders Wivel

behaviour of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of the others, but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognise their common interest in maintaining these arrangements' (Bull and Watson 1985, 1). For a discussion of the English School and realism, see Mearsheimer et al. (2005).

[8] Although, in the anarchic world depicted by realists, there is no guarantee that resources accumulated by geo-economic competition will not one day be used in a geopolitical military conflict.

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Realism and Peaceful Change

Written by Anders Wivel

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Realism and Peaceful Change

Written by Anders Wivel

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Realism and Peaceful Change

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