

Q: Critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the Realist, liberalist and constructivist theories of international relations. How do they explain the behaviour of states in international system?

1- Introduction:

International relations is the study of how states interact with each other in a global system characterized by cooperation, competition, and conflict. To explain and predict state behaviour, scholars have developed several theoretical frameworks with Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism as the three dominant theories. They provide different perspectives on why states act as they do, from pursuing power and security to fostering cooperation or being shaped by ideas and social norms. By critically evaluating these theories, the complexities of global affairs can be better understood with diverse factors influencing them.

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2. Theories of International Relations: Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism

i) Core Idea of Realism:

Realism views international relations as a struggle for power in an anarchic world where no central authority exists.

States prioritize survival, and competition is inevitable. Realists argue that they operate in self-help environment, and alliances are often temporary and driven by mutual interests.

Its key thinkers include Niccolò Machiavelli, Thucydides, Hans Morganthau.

ii) Strengths of Realism:

- **Explains Conflict and War:** Realism effectively explains why states engage in wars, arms races, and territorial expansion. Historical events like World War I and II can be understood through the lens of power struggles and security dilemmas.

* Focus on National Interest:

Realism highlights the importance of national interests in shaping foreign policy. This is evident in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, where oil interests and security concerns drive engagement.

* Timeless Relevance:

Realism remains relevant across different eras, reflecting consistent patterns of state behaviour driven by power and competition.

iii Weaknesses of Realism:

> Overlooks Cooperation:

Realism downplays the role of international organizations like the United Nations or others which facilitate cooperation and peace.

> Ignores Economic and Social Factors:

The focus on military and political power often neglects the influence of

economic interdependence, trade, and global institutions.

> Limited in Addressing Non-state Actors:

Realism struggles to explain the rise of ~~the~~ non-state actors (e.g. multinational ~~corp~~ corporations, terrorist groups) and their impact on international relations.

Example of Realism:

Russian-Ukraine War: The conflict reflects realist principles as Russia seeks to expand its sphere of influence and counter perceived threats from NATO's expansion. Russia's actions demonstrate the realist belief in power politics and the desire to maintain strategic dominance.

2- Core Idea of Liberalism:

Liberalism presents a more optimistic view of international relations.

arguing that states can cooperate through international institutions, economic interdependence, and democratic governance. Unlike realists, liberals believe that states are not always in competition but can achieve mutual benefits through diplomacy and trade. It emphasizes the role of international law, human rights and global organizations in fostering peace and reducing conflict.

Key Thinkers:

The key thinkers of liberal school are Immanuel Kant, John Locke, Woodrow Wilson.

i- Strengths of Liberalism:

> Explains Institutional Cooperation:

Institutions like the EU, UN, NATO reflect liberal ideas, showing how cooperation can enhance security and economic prosperity.

> Economic Interdependence:

Liberalism explains why economically

interconnected states, such as China and the U.S., avoid direct military confrontation as war would disrupt trade and economic growth.

> Focus on Human rights and democracy:

liberalism underscores the importance of humanitarian interventions and global governance to promote stability.

ii. Weaknesses of Liberalism:

> Idealistic Assumptions:

Critics argue that liberalism underestimates the role of power and self-interest. Some states prioritize national interests over international cooperation, as seen in the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement (2017).

> Failure to Prevent Conflicts:

Despite liberal institutions, conflicts like the Syrian Civil War and Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014) continue.

challenging liberal assumptions about global cooperation.

> Excludes Authoritarian States:

Liberalism struggles to address the role of authoritarian regimes, which may resist democratic ideals and liberal norms.

Example: European Union (EU): The EU exemplifies liberal principles by promoting economic integration and reducing the likelihood of conflict among member states. Former rivals like France and Germany now cooperate extensively through shared economic and political frameworks.

3. Core Idea of Constructivism:

Constructivism shifts the focus from material factors (military and economic power) to the role of ideas, norms, identities, and social structures in shaping state behaviour. Constructivists

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- argue that the international system is socially constructed, meaning that the beliefs and identities of states influence their actions. Unlike realism and liberalism, constructivism suggests that state interests are not fixed but evolve based on historical, cultural, and social contexts.

Key Thinkers:

Alexander Wendt and Nicholas Onuf are the major proponents of constructivism.

i- Strengths of Constructivism:

> Explains change in Global Politics:

Constructivism helps explain shifts in international norms, such as the growing focus on climate change, human rights, and gender equality.

> Recognizes non-material forces:

The theory accounts the influence of identity, culture and historical narratives on foreign policy, as seen

in the post Cold War U.S. Russia relations.

> Adapts to New Global Challenges:

Constructivism is well-suited to explain emerging global issues that do not fit traditional power politics, such as global pandemics, cybersecurity, and transnational activism.

ii. Weaknesses of Constructivism:

> Lacks Predictive Power:

Since constructivism focuses on evolving norms and ideas, it can struggle to predict future state behaviour.

> Subjective Interpretations:

The emphasis on social constructs can lead to varying conclusions, making it harder to form concrete policies.

Example: Climate Change Agreement (Paris Accord): Constructivism

explains how evolving global norms around environmental responsibility have led to widespread cooperation, even among states with differing material interests.

6. Conclusion:

Realism, liberalism, and Constructivism offer valuable but distinct perspectives on international relations. While realism explains power politics and conflict, liberalism highlights cooperation and institutions, and constructivism focuses on the role of ideas and identities. Together these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of international system, reinforcing the importance of considering multiple approaches in IR analysis.