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## **Political Realism in International Relations: The Pursuit of Power, Self-Interest, and the National Interest**

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### **Abstract:**

Hans J. Morgenthau's "Politics Among Nations" is a seminal work in the field of international relations that lays out his political realism theory. Morgenthau argues that the international system is characterized by a constant struggle for power and influence among states, and that the pursuit of power and self-interest is the primary driving force behind state behavior. He also stresses the importance of diplomacy in advancing national interests and maintaining the balance of power, as well as the concept of the "national interest" as the primary guiding principle of foreign policy. The statesman also plays a crucial role in Morgenthau's political realism, as he must understand the complexities of the international system and make decisions in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity. In conclusion, Morgenthau's political realism provides a nuanced understanding of international relations and the behaviour of states in the pursuit of power, self-interest, and national interest.

**Keywords:** Political Realism, Pursuit of power, self-interest, National interest.

### **Introduction**

Hans J. Morgenthau's "Politics Among Nations" is one of the most influential works in the field of international relations. Published in 1948, the book lays out Morgenthau's political realism theory, which argues that the international system is characterized by a constant struggle for power and influence among states. According to Morgenthau, the pursuit of power and self-interest is the primary driving force behind state behavior in the international system, and that diplomacy and negotiation are the primary means by which states pursue their national interests and maintain the balance of power. Morgenthau also places a strong emphasis on the concept of the "national

interest,” which he defines as the sum total of a state’s goals and aspirations. He argues that the national interest is the primary guiding principle of foreign policy and that foreign policy decisions must be evaluated in light of their impact on the national interest. The statesman also plays a crucial role in Morgenthau’s political realism, as he or she must be able to understand the complexities of the international system, to see beyond immediate, short-term interests, and to consider the long-term implications of foreign policy decisions for the national interest. In this paper, I will provide an overview of Morgenthau’s political realism and its key themes, including the role of power and self-interest in international relations, the importance of diplomacy and negotiation, the concept of the national interest, and the role of the statesman in foreign policy.

### **Political Realism**

Political realism is a theoretical perspective in international relations that emphasizes the role of power and self-interest in shaping state behavior. Realists argue that states are the primary actors in international politics and that they act rationally to pursue their own interests, which are often driven by considerations of national security and economic advantage.

Critics of political realism argue that the perspective is overly pessimistic and fails to account for the potential of cooperation and institutions to mitigate conflict and promote peace. Realism also tends to neglect the role of non-state actors, such as international organizations, civil society, and transnational corporations, which can also play important roles in shaping the international system.

Another criticism of realism is that it oversimplifies the nature of power and the motivations of states. Realists often view power as a zero-sum game, where one state’s gain is another state’s loss. However, many contemporary international relations scholars argue that power can be exercised in non-zero-sum ways, such as through cooperation and interdependence.

Realism is also criticized for being insensitive to issues of justice and morality in international relations. Realists argue that the primary responsibility of states is to ensure their own survival and that considerations of justice and morality are secondary. However, many argue that this perspective fails to recognize the importance of norms and values in shaping state behavior and that a just and moral international system is necessary for sustainable peace and stability.



Realism is sometimes criticized for its inability to explain certain historical events and trends, such as the end of the Cold War and the spread of globalization. Some argue that these events challenge realist assumptions about the stability of the international system and the primacy of power as the main driver of state behavior.

Hans Morgenthau was one of the most prominent figures in the development of political realism as a theory of international relations. In his seminal work, “Politics Among Nations,” Morgenthau argued that international politics is governed by objective laws that are rooted in the nature of man and society. According to Morgenthau, the pursuit of power is the central driving force behind state behavior in international politics, and states must act in their own self-interest to ensure their survival.

Morgenthau rejected the idealistic notion that international relations could be based on universal principles of justice and morality. Instead, he argued that the pursuit of power and national interest often leads to conflict, and that states must be prepared to use force to defend their interests. He also emphasized the importance of maintaining a balance of power among states, as a way of preventing any one state from dominating the international system.

Morgenthau’s realism was also distinguished by his emphasis on the role of morality in international politics. He argued that states must be guided by moral principles, even as they pursue their national interests. He maintained that a sense of morality and ethics was essential to maintain the stability of the international system and to prevent the horrors of war.

Morgenthau’s political realism is often considered to be a classical or traditional form of realism. It emphasizes the role of power and self-interest in shaping state behavior, and argues that states are the primary actors in international politics. Morgenthau rejected idealistic approaches to international relations and emphasized the importance of power and national interest in shaping state behavior.

One of the key aspects of Morgenthau’s realism is the idea that the pursuit of power is the central driving force behind state behavior. He argued that states must act in their own self-interest to ensure their survival, and that this pursuit of power often leads to conflict. Morgenthau maintained that the international system is anarchic and that states must be prepared to use force to defend their interests.

Another important aspect of Morgenthau's realism is his emphasis on the importance of morality in international politics. He rejected the idea that international relations could be based on universal principles of justice and morality, but argued that a sense of morality and ethics was essential to maintain the stability of the international system and to prevent the horrors of war. Morgenthau maintained that states must be guided by moral principles, even as they pursue their national interests.

Morgenthau's realism also emphasized the importance of maintaining a balance of power among states. He argued that a balance of power was necessary to prevent any one state from dominating the international system and to maintain stability.

Overall, Morgenthau's political realism remains an important and influential perspective in international relations. While it has been subject to critique and revision by contemporary international relations scholars, its emphasis on power, self-interest, and morality continues to shape our understanding of the international system and state behavior.

However, Morgenthau's views on political realism emphasized the importance of power and self-interest in shaping state behavior in international politics. He rejected idealistic notions of universal principles of justice and morality, but argued that morality and ethics were still important in shaping state behavior and maintaining the stability of the international system.

### **Pursuit of power**

Morgenthau argues that the pursuit of power is a fundamental and persistent feature of international politics. He contends that states are driven by the desire to accumulate and maintain power in order to ensure their security and national interest.

Morgenthau believed that the pursuit of power was not necessarily evil or immoral, but rather a necessary and inevitable aspect of international relations. He argued that a state's pursuit of power is a rational response to the insecurity and uncertainty of the international system, and that it is essential for states to protect themselves from external threats.

However, Morgenthau also recognized that the pursuit of power can lead to conflict and instability if not managed properly. He stressed the importance of balancing power through



international cooperation and institutions, and emphasized the need for ethical considerations to be taken into account in the conduct of international affairs.

Hans Morgenthau defined the pursuit of power as the primary motive driving state behavior in international politics. According to Morgenthau, states are driven by the need to accumulate and maintain power in order to ensure their security and to advance their national interests. He believed that the pursuit of power was a rational response to the insecurity and unpredictability of the international system, and that it was essential for states to protect themselves from external threats.

In his book “Politics Among Nations”, Morgenthau wrote that the pursuit of power is “the striving of states to achieve and maintain a position of dominance over other states in the international system”. He argued that this pursuit is motivated by the state’s desire to ensure its security and to advance its national interests. According to Morgenthau, the pursuit of power is not a matter of choice, but rather an inevitable and necessary aspect of international politics.

Morgenthau also emphasized that the pursuit of power was not necessarily evil or immoral, but rather a necessary and persistent feature of international relations. He recognized that the pursuit of power could lead to conflict and instability if not managed properly, and stressed the importance of balancing power through international cooperation and institutions.

The pursuit of power is a central concept in the study of International Relations (IR), and it has been the subject of much critical analysis over the years. Power can be defined as the ability of a state or actor to shape and influence the behavior of others and achieve its desired outcomes in the international system.

One of the central criticisms of the pursuit of power in IR is that it can lead to conflict and war. Realist theorists argue that the anarchic nature of the international system means that states must pursue power as a means of self-preservation and survival. However, this pursuit of power can result in an arms race, where states feel the need to increase their military capabilities in order to counteract the growing power of their rivals. This can lead to an increase in tensions and the likelihood of conflict.

Another criticism of the pursuit of power is that it can perpetuate inequality and oppression. Those with more power often use it to maintain their dominant position and to suppress weaker

actors. This can result in a world where a few powerful states dominate the international system, leaving weaker states with little voice or agency.

There are also criticisms of the way power is defined and measured in IR. Power is often seen as being held by states, but this overlooks the role that non-state actors, such as multinational corporations and international organizations, play in shaping the international system. There is also debate over how power should be measured, with some arguing that traditional measures, such as military capability or economic power, are too limited in scope and that other factors, such as cultural influence or normative power, should be taken into account.

Moreover, for Morgenthau, the pursuit of power is a central and persistent aspect of international politics, driven by the state's need for security and the advancement of its national interests. He believed that this pursuit must be balanced by ethical considerations and managed through international cooperation and institutions in order to promote stability and peace in the international system.

### **Self-interest**

According to Morgenthau, self-interest is a fundamental aspect of state behavior in international relations.

In his view, self-interest is not necessarily synonymous with selfishness or greed, but rather refers to the pursuit of a state's national interests. Morgenthau argued that a state's national interest is determined by its power, security, and prosperity, and that states will always act in their own self-interest in order to pursue these goals. He believed that states were rational actors that were motivated by self-interest and that this drive for self-preservation was the primary force shaping international relations.

Morgenthau also emphasized that self-interest should not be confused with national egoism, as the pursuit of national interests is not always in conflict with the interests of other states. He believed that cooperation between states could occur when their interests align, and that self-interest could serve as a basis for stable international relations.

In his view, self-interest is not synonymous with selfishness or greed. Rather, it is a means of ensuring one's own survival and security in a competitive and uncertain world. For states, self-



interest is manifested in their pursuit of power and the protection of their sovereignty and national interests.

Morgenthau also recognized that the pursuit of self-interest can sometimes lead to conflict between states. He believed that the international system is anarchic, meaning that there is no central authority to regulate the behavior of states. In such a system, states must rely on their own power to protect their interests and ensure their security.

However, Morgenthau also believed that the pursuit of self-interest can lead to cooperation and the resolution of conflicts through diplomacy and international negotiations. He argued that states can cooperate to achieve common goals and resolve conflicts in a way that benefits both parties.

In summary, for Morgenthau, the pursuit of self-interest is a universal phenomenon that drives the behavior of states in the international system. He believed that states must balance their pursuit of self-interest with the need to maintain their power and security, and that this balance can sometimes lead to conflict and cooperation.

### **Criticism:**

The concept of self-interest in international relations has been subject to much critical analysis and debate over the years. Some of the main criticisms of the idea of self-interest in IR are as follows:

***Over-simplification:*** Some scholars argue that the concept of self-interest oversimplifies the complex motivations and decision-making processes of states in international relations. They argue that there are many factors that influence state behavior, such as ideology, culture, and norms, that cannot be reduced to simple self-interest.

***Reduction of morality:*** Critics argue that the focus on self-interest can lead to a reduction of morality in international relations. They argue that states should be guided by moral principles and values, rather than solely by self-interest.

***Ignores systemic factors:*** Critics argue that the concept of self-interest overlooks the impact of systemic factors on state behavior. They argue that states are influenced by the structure of the

international system, such as the distribution of power and the norms and rules that govern international behavior, in ways that are not solely driven by self-interest.

***Emphasizes conflict:*** Some argue that the focus on self-interest can lead to an emphasis on conflict and competition in international relations, rather than cooperation and collaboration.

***Ignores agency of non-state actors:*** Critics argue that the concept of self-interest ignores the agency of non-state actors, such as international organizations, transnational corporations, and civil society groups, which also play important roles in shaping international relations.

However, the concept of self-interest in international relations has been subject to much criticism, with scholars arguing that it oversimplifies the complex motivations and decision-making processes of states, reduces morality in international relations, ignores systemic factors, emphasizes conflict, and ignores the agency of non-state actors. Despite these criticisms, the idea of self-interest remains an important and influential concept in the study of international relations.

### **National interest**

According to Morgenthau, the national interest of a state is determined by its political and economic power, and is defined in terms of preserving and enhancing that power.

In his famous work, "Politics Among Nations," Morgenthau argued that the pursuit of national interest should guide the foreign policy of a state, and that the ultimate goal of foreign policy is to ensure the security and survival of the state. He also believed that the national interest should be distinguished from the interests of particular groups within a state or from ideological considerations.

Morgenthau emphasized the role of power in international relations, and argued that states must act in a self-interested manner in order to protect and enhance their power. He believed that the pursuit of national interest should be guided by a moral code, but that ultimately the primary concern of a state must be its own survival and security.

Morgenthau's concept of national interest has been highly influential in international relations theory and continues to shape the way scholars and policymakers think about foreign policy. In addition to power and self-interest, Morgenthau also emphasized the role of diplomacy and negotiation in the pursuit of national interest. He argued that diplomacy should be guided by



the principles of reason and objectivity, and that states should engage in negotiations and compromise in order to achieve their goals.

Morgenthau's view of national interest also recognized the importance of international law and the role it plays in regulating state behavior. He believed that states should strive to act within the framework of international law, and that the development of international institutions and norms can help to prevent conflict and promote stability in the international system.

Additionally, Morgenthau's concept of national interest has been refined and expanded upon by subsequent realist theorists, who have sought to address some of the criticisms of his original formulation. Some realists have emphasized the importance of ideology and moral considerations in shaping state behavior, while others have argued that the national interest can encompass not just a state's material interests, but also its political and normative goals.

However, some critics have challenged Morgenthau's view of national interest, arguing that it overemphasizes the role of power and self-interest in international relations and neglects other important factors such as ethics and ideology. They also argue that his emphasis on the importance of power can lead to a narrow, self-interested foreign policy that ignores the interests and well-being of other states and the international community as a whole.

Despite these criticisms, Morgenthau's concept of national interest continues to be widely studied and discussed, and remains an important part of the broader debate about the nature of international relations and the role of the state in the international system.

In recent years, Morgenthau's concept of national interest has been debated in the context of globalization and the increasing interconnectedness of the international system. Some scholars argue that the traditional realist view of national interest is outdated in a world where interdependence and global cooperation are increasingly important, while others argue that the fundamental principles of realism, including the pursuit of national interest, are as relevant as ever.

However, Morgenthau's concept of national interest continues to be a central and controversial aspect of international relations theory. It provides a framework for understanding how states behave in the international system and the role of power, self-interest, and diplomacy in shaping foreign policy. Nevertheless, the concept remains the subject of ongoing debate and evolution as international relations continue to change and evolve over time.

***Conclusion:***

In conclusion, the study of Political Realism in International Relations has been a long-standing tradition in the discipline, with a focus on the pursuit of power, self-interest, and the national interest. Realism views the world as an anarchic and self-help system where states must constantly strive to maximize their power and security in order to survive. The concept of self-interest and the pursuit of power are key elements of Realism, as states are seen as rational actors who are always seeking to increase their power and protect their national interests. Political Realism also recognizes the importance of power in shaping international relations, and states are seen as competing for power in a zero-sum game where the gain of one state is the loss of another. The national interest is seen as the ultimate goal of states, and they are willing to use any means necessary, including war and conflict, to protect and promote their national interests. Despite its long history, Political Realism has been criticized for its pessimistic view of international relations, its focus on power, and its neglect of ethical considerations. Critics argue that Realism provides a limited and oversimplified view of the world, and that it fails to recognize the role that non-state actors and international organizations play in shaping international relations. Moreover, the emphasis on self-interest and power in Realism can lead to a narrow and myopic view of the national interest, and can result in a disregard for the well-being and welfare of other states and peoples. Critics argue that Realism neglects the importance of cooperation, diplomacy, and the pursuit of peace, and that its focus on power and self-interest can lead to a dangerous and unstable world. Despite its criticisms, Political Realism remains a dominant and influential perspective in the study of International Relations. Its focus on power, self-interest, and the national interest provides a useful framework for understanding the complex and dynamic nature of international relations. Realism offers valuable insights into the behavior of states and the pursuit of power, and it remains a relevant and important perspective for understanding the world today. In conclusion, Political Realism has played a critical role in shaping our understanding of International Relations and remains an important perspective for students and scholars of the discipline. While its focus on power, self-interest, and the national interest may be narrow and oversimplified, Realism provides valuable insights into the behavior of states and the nature of international relations. As



such, it is an important perspective that should be studied, debated, and understood by students and scholars of International Relations.

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