



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Realism in international relations, from classicism to current affairs in the Putin- Trump era

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### Abstract:

Within the study of international relations there are many ideologies analyzing the state foreign affairs, whether the theory is liberalism, Marxism, constructivism, or any of the others, realism in international relations is still one of the most dominant theories. Since World War II, realism has been considered the most dominant school of thought, and it remains an ever-present in twenty-first century politics. The theory of realism consists of several outlines: International politics is anarchic, sovereign states are main actors in international politics; states are acting under their own national interests; the state's primary goals are its own national security and survival and national power and capabilities are a key test. So, in times of war, states will speak and act as one with their own national interests in mind. Realists believe that conflict will always be a part of world events and international relations; as governments pursue their national interests, they will inevitably come into conflict with one another. This conflict will occasionally be played out in military terms, which raises the prospect of war. Realism often proves to be just as conditioned in practice as any other mode of cognition. In contemporary times, the realist school of thought comes into the limelight with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Offensive realists like John Mearsheimer blamed the west and its military arm NATO for the Russian actions. He blamed the US and its European allies for provoking the Kremlin by expanding the membership of NATO by incorporating members like Ukraine and Finland. He sympathizes with Russia's action to defend its national interest and sovereignty.

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The recent tensions on the international scene provide us with yet another opportunity to relaunch the analysis of the relevance of the theory of realism. This theory, although it is the most popular school of thought in international relations, is also the oldest and, although it emphasizes the state as the main actor in international relations in the present world, dominated by civilization, communication and diplomacy. Let us recall that the perspective of realism states that, in achieving the national interest, the state must assert its position within an anarchic international system in order to establish and maintain its power.

In the context of actions aimed at ensuring peace and security, realism believes that conflict cannot be avoided due to the struggle for power between states or communities, and there is no higher authority and legal system that can regulate the state. Therefore, to prevent threats from other states, the state must increase its military capacity. Realists believe that a state should not depend on other states. This is based on the assumption that there are no permanent friends or enemies, and “if you want peace, prepare for war.” Therefore, military capacity is necessary as an absolute condition that a state must have to maintain its security.

An important component of realist theory is human nature. Realism assumes that the conflict world is influenced by the imperfection of people, who are born into a conflict situation. In this case, the behavior of a state in its interaction with other states is influenced by basic human characteristics, which is why realists tend to be pessimistic about the role of morality and good intentions in achieving world peace.

The end of the Cold War, namely the end of the military rivalry between the two world powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, opened up new hope for a better world. At the dawn of those new realities, it was hoped that countries would tend to prioritize cooperation and peace and focus on non-military issues. Levers appeared to expand all forms of economic, scientific, cultural, etc. cooperation.

But this period did not last long. We can now see a reversal in efforts to reduce nuclear weapons compared to the past 30 years. Currently, the number of nuclear warheads in the world is still very high, at around 12,500 warheads by early 2023, and over the past eight years, global military spending has increased significantly. This shows that there is a trend for countries to maintain and increase their armament capacity. Moreover, given the current conflict situation, there is the potential to further force countries to increase their military capacity in order to maintain their security.

Recently, conflicts between countries have become more common in various regions. States engage in conflicts to gain power by employing military force. In addition, some countries are currently trying to increase their military capacity to ensure that their countries are safe from threats from other countries. This behavior indicates that military issues are still important in interactions between states, and the competition of military power for power is still a concern for some large states. In this case, the predictions of the post-Cold War world are at odds with the current world situation.

For example, in the Middle East, the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Palestine, is a conflict that has involved massive military force, missiles and the development of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), a type of weapon operated by a satellite navigation system with video cameras and radio networks, which confirms that Hamas is making efforts to increase its military capacity in order to compete with Israel, one of the states with enormous military capacity (among the 20 countries with the best air power in the world, ranked 12th in the top of land powers, 50 countries with the best

maritime power and in the top 10 arms exporters in the world, holder of approximately 90 nuclear warheads).

In other regions, such as Africa, the same phenomenon is manifested, conflicts related to the struggle for power appear everywhere, indicating behaviors specific to the struggle for power. In recent years, cases of military coups in Africa have become more frequent, confirming the struggle for power coupled with increased spending on military forces and arms purchases.

Another case, in Europe, is the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The discourse that Ukraine's membership in NATO poses a threat to Russia's security is a factor in the conflict. Vladimir Putin has stated that "Russia is ready for war against NATO." Such narratives ultimately reinforce the realist principle "If you want peace, prepare for war."

The relevance of realism in this case must also be examined from the involvement of many actors, including NATO member states, in this conflict, where they demonstrate attitudes and actions according to which military power is still the main force. On the other hand, Russia is the state with the second most powerful army in the world, after the United States. Its military budget is also growing every year. Currently, we also observe a competition between the United States and China. Even if there has been no physical confrontation through military attacks, there are indications that both countries are trying to establish their military capacity. The development of China's army is part of an effort to counter or balance the United States and its allies.

The above cases are just a few of the many incidents that indicate that realism is still relevant in today's world. There is still much evidence that indicates that after the Cold War, instead of minimizing the development of weapons, countries have actually increasingly engaged in arms races. In addition to ensuring national security, measures to increase weapons are part of the state's efforts to gain power. Because it cannot be denied that a good military capability is a considerable bargaining position for a country in its interactions with other countries, in order to achieve other national interests (hegemony, economy, politics, geopolitics, etc.).

Many of these conflicts can be explained by analyzing realist theory, the predominant concept being "statism", which means that "the state is the preeminent actor, and all other actors in world politics are of lesser importance" (Dunne & Schmidt, 2008: 103). Realists believe that states have the highest authority in the international system, given the condition of anarchy, states are the ones who form international organizations, and, consequently, have an influence on their actions.

A relevant example in this regard is the actions of Russia, which, together with China, as permanent members of the Security Council, rejected three UN resolutions aimed at sanctioning the Syrian regime and ending the violence. As a result, these states had the necessary influence to block the United Nations support for foreign military intervention in Syria. The Russian political class attaches great importance to sovereignty and illustrates this point with statements such as: "The Kremlin tells the world that neither the UN nor any other body or group of countries has the right to decide who should or should not govern a sovereign state."

The realist claim that states are selfish can help to provide a deeper analysis of the reasons behind the above-mentioned decisions. In the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya (adopted in 2011), Russia abstained. Its neutral status in this conflict can be explained by its lack of interests in the North African country. As for Syria, the Eastern European state has several major interests, one of which is maintaining a high

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level of ammunition exports to the Syrian army, which would have weakened if the conflict had stopped (Rosenberg, 2012), therefore, it pursued its own enrichment to the detriment of humanitarian intervention, which coincides with the realist-Machiavellian principle of pursuing self-interest.

But not only economic reasons justify such a position, but also the need of man and implicitly of the states of power, called by Morgenthau as "animus dominandi". Moreover, analysts have assessed that Syria is the only country in the Middle East where Russia exercises a certain tangible influence.

As such, we can consider that what influences the behavior of states is the need to satisfy the need for power and influence, as realists believe.

On the other hand, we cannot limit ourselves to explaining Russia's actions only by its desire for power and greatness. For Russia, even global influence is relevant and it acts on the principle: "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". Russia's geostrategic interest in Syria, in the Middle East, for example, close to Iran, is determined by the complexity of the relations between Moscow and Tehran, the two having in common both economic cooperation and the attitude towards America and "a common fear of radical Sunni Islamist movements, such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban" (Katz, 2012).

Regarding the United States-Russia relationship, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it can be observed that the animosities of the Cold War still reign. Between 1947 and 1991, the international system was characterized by bipolarity; Russia and the United States of America had the status of superpowers and, as the realist John Mearsheimer (1990: 36) appreciated, due to the balance of power determined by the bipolar system, "the post-war era, the Cold War period, was much more peaceful".

Instead, the last decade has led to a multipolar global reality, shaken by several violent conflicts, which to some extent confirm Mearsheimer's theses about the effectiveness of bipolarity in maintaining discipline. Some authors believe that the current international system does not imply the concept of "superpower", given the power that China has acquired, and not only from an economic point of view, but also the power of the European Union which leaves its mark on the stability of international relations with regard to its member states. However, Russia seems to continue its opposition to the US in the potential pursuit of this title or, rather, of the restoration of its position as a great power, a phenomenon some authors call "empire nostalgia". As previously said, Russia is taking measures to maintain its influence over areas such as Syria and Iran, which risk undergoing changes in favor of the United States.

Russia's interest in the Iranian issue also stems from Iran's nuclear policy, a program begun in the 1950s, canceled after the Islamic revolution of 1979 and then resumed in the final part of the war against Iraq, a policy that can be considered in accordance with Machiavellian principles, which focus on prudence and foresight, arguing that a state should "reject any threat posed by its neighbors" (Jackson & Sørensen, 1999: 73). In fact, it is also the argument used by Putin when he considers the expansion of NATO's eastern border a direct threat, although the alliance has a defensive purpose.

Moreover, in all current conflicts around the world, we can observe the antagonism between the great powers, which position themselves in one way or another towards the participants, in relation to both the economic interests they have but also to maximize a state's chances of success and thus impose its position as an influential state, a relevant political power at the global level, by counterbalancing its opponent.

Currently, Iran's main regional adversary is Israel, which is widely believed to possess nuclear energy, although its nuclear capability is arguably the most secretive

weapons of mass destruction program in the world. Each of the two states cites maximizing security and civilian purposes as justification for nuclear proliferation, however, this explanation is strongly questioned by the rest of the world, including organizations such as the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency. Each state views its respective nuclear program as a threat to its existence, a behavior perfectly described by one of the most famous realist statesmen, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck: "The great problems of our time will not be solved by resolutions and majority votes, but by blood and iron."

Practically, extending the analysis from the Middle East to the entire globe, we can appreciate that the aspiration or reality of possessing nuclear weapons can be seen as a desire to impose one's authority and gain regional hegemony, as well as the need to be recognized as a key international actor. The interests of states are to use military capabilities (even nuclear ones) to guarantee their regional and international status, as well as self-sufficient security and stability. As Carr stated, "if your power is recognized, you can generally achieve your objectives without having to use it."

In a realist view of international relations, characterized by an anarchic world, it is expected that states that are capable of competing for hegemony will adopt a revisionist policy, seeking to modify the existing international order. According to realist theory, such revisionist behavior is not only inevitable, but also constitutes the foundation of the security strategy of many global powers. John Mearsheimer (2001), one of the most influential theorists of offensive realism, argues that this behavior is inevitable in an international system characterized by anarchy, where each state acts in its own interest and seeks to maximize its security, often through competitiveness and aggression. In this context, Russia's foreign policy since 2007 can be understood as a clear manifestation of a revisionist strategy, aimed at recovering Moscow's great power status, both regionally and on the global stage.

In the post-Cold War period, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia faced a geopolitical reality significantly different from that of the Soviet period. The world moved from a bipolar order, dominated by the USA and the USSR, to a unipolar one, in which the United States became the main global actor. This was also the moment when NATO, an organization created to counter Soviet influence in Europe, began an accelerated process of expansion towards the East. By the early 2000s, this process was already considered by Moscow as a major challenge to its national security and was interpreted as a policy of gradually removing Russia from its traditional geopolitical influence.

For many authors, the end of the cold war did not change the reality: big, powerful states continue to dominate, seize power, and small states tolerate this behavior. When you have a neighbor that is stronger than you, you invest more in defense to balance the danger, you turn to external balancing, alignment with other states, or you resort to what realist theorists call bandwagoning. The liberal theorists believed that the threat that Putin feels is that, if the Ukrainian model were to succeed - a former Soviet state that becomes a democratic state governed by the rule of law and follows the path of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, this would demonstrate the success of this model and would abolish all Russian conceptions on maintaining an autocracy and economic dependence on the Russian Federation (Călin, L. 2003: 118).

NATO expansion was seen by Russian authorities as a direct threat that could destabilize the regional balance of power. Russia has consistently contested the expansion,

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viewing it as an act of subtle aggression, and Russian officials have made numerous calls to halt the process. In 2004, when NATO accepted former Soviet bloc states such as Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, as well as other former Soviet republics, into its ranks, Moscow interpreted this as a violation of implicit agreements that were supposed to ensure stability in post-Cold War Europe.

Thucydides' classic statement, "The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must," remains a relevant explanatory principle for the behavior of states in an anarchic international system. This observation was first formulated in the context of the Peloponnesian War, but it is also applicable to the analysis of Russia's behavior in its relations with the West over the past two decades. In the case of Russia, this type of reasoning has materialized in a series of political and military actions aimed at consolidating a regional sphere of influence, especially in neighboring regions. These actions can be seen as a reaction to the fear that the expansion of Western influence threatens Russia's internal stability and external security.

As Mearsheimer (2001) has pointed out, "states act in their national interest, and this often involves a policy of confrontation and power maximization." In this context, Russia began to adopt a foreign policy increasingly oriented towards regaining its superpower status, and this process was accompanied by a series of provocative actions in the field of security and international relations.

To better understand Russia's foreign policy, we must also examine the internal factors that contributed to Russia's aggressive rise under Putin. After 1991, Russia went through a period of economic and political instability, during which Putin managed to consolidate control over the state and restore Russia's image as a great power. In this context, geopolitical expansion became a means of consolidating domestic authority. In addition, the success of military actions in Georgia and Ukraine strengthened Putin's position both domestically and internationally.

Russia has also used economic and political instruments to achieve its goals in Ukraine. For example, in the run-up to the Ukraine crisis, Moscow exerted economic pressure on Ukraine by concluding favorable trade agreements to limit its rapprochement with the European Union. When Ukraine refused to sign the association agreement with the EU, Russia was prepared to intervene militarily to prevent Ukraine's territorial integrity and to prevent the advance of Western influence in the region.

The conflict in Ukraine has been marked by Russia's mixed approach, combining conventional warfare with hybrid warfare techniques. In this regard, Russia has used a combination of direct (through military forces) and indirect (through support for separatist groups and cyber attacks) interventions to destabilize Ukraine. Thus, the annexation of Crimea and support for rebels in Donbas were just some of the manifestations of this type of conflict.

From a realistic perspective, the use of hybrid warfare can be seen as a way for Russia to test the limits of international responses and evaluate strategies to maximize gains and minimize risks. Russia has also tested NATO solidarity by provoking reactions from the Alliance on the military and economic fronts. Despite international sanctions, Russia has not only managed to maintain its influence in Ukraine, but has also consolidated its status as a regional great power vis-à-vis the West.

One of the most significant examples of this revisionist policy was the 2008 war in Georgia. Georgia, a former Soviet republic, began to make significant progress towards integration into Western international structures, including NATO. In this context, Russia reacted quickly and militarily, intervening in the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South

Ossetia. This was not just a response to Georgia's actions, but a direct action to prevent NATO expansion in its vicinity and to strengthen its influence over a region that was considered part of Moscow's "sphere of influence".

In 2014, Russia launched another decisive action that had a significant global impact: the annexation of Crimea. This action was perceived by most Western countries as a serious violation of international law, and the response was prompt, with the imposition of drastic economic sanctions. The annexation of Crimea had not only a major geopolitical impact, but also a profound effect on international relations, consolidating Vladimir Putin with considerable domestic political capital, in the context of a Russia that still felt humiliated by the loss of its great power status after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Another significant moment in the analysis of Russia's revisionist behavior was the Ukraine Crisis, which occurred in late 2013 and early 2014. Ukraine, another former Soviet state, tried to regulate its foreign relations in a balanced manner, caught between Moscow's influence and the desire for integration into European structures. When former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich abandoned an association agreement with the European Union and chose to align with Russia, mass protests in Ukraine led to the overthrow of his regime. This change was seen by the Kremlin as a loss of important strategic influence, and Russia reacted with a combination of direct military intervention and support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

This intervention was not only a reaction to internal events in Ukraine, but also a strategic action, aimed at protecting Russia's interest in maintaining a sphere of influence and preventing a possible NATO expansion into Ukraine. As Mearsheimer (2014) points out, NATO's expansionist policy in the East was a key factor determining Russia's revisionist behavior, and Ukraine's integration into Western structures was seen by the Kremlin as a direct threat.

As for Russia's position regarding the conflict in Ukraine, it is important to note the statement of the President of Russia about the state of the nation in front of the Federal Assembly, a speech that became famous because it refers to the "red lines" that must not be crossed. "As for the red lines, they are obvious. First of all, it is about our national interests, the interests of our external security, the interests of our internal security and not admitting any interference (...) in our elections or in other political processes. It is about the non-acceptance of an offensive discussion with our country, the non-acceptance of damage to the economic interests of our country". He warned the West that it would "regret" any provocation against Russian interests and said Moscow's response would be "swift and tough". (Călin L, 2003, p.116)

NATO expansion was perceived by Russia not only as a military threat, but also as a psychological threat, undermining Russia's great power status. After NATO absorbed the Central and Eastern European countries, Romania, and Poland, Russia felt increasingly marginalized, and Ukraine became a geopolitical battleground between Russia and the West. The "window of opportunity" policy was implemented by Putin as a way to counter this process, strengthening control over regions near Ukraine and, eventually, annexing Crimea.

Another important aspect of Russia's revisionist behavior has been the adoption of hybrid warfare and cyberwarfare strategies, through which Moscow has sought to exert influence without engaging in direct, large-scale conflict. Russia has used tactics of indirect intervention in Western states through cyberwarfare, information manipulation, and support for pro-Russian political groups in European countries and the United States.

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These “covert warfare” methods have been amplified by increasingly advanced technology and have become a defining feature of Russia’s security strategy. Russian interference in the 2016 United States elections and in electoral processes in the European Union has underscored this revisionist behavior, in which Moscow has sought to influence the policy decisions of Western states and destabilize liberal democracies. Russia’s involvement in conflicts in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, has also been a way to strengthen its international presence and test the limits of international responses to its aggressive foreign policy.

Thus, Russia’s foreign policy over the past twenty years has been perfectly aligned with the principles of offensive realism. Russia has actively sought to redefine its position in the international order through a combination of military actions, aggressive diplomatic strategies, and hybrid warfare tactics. Its actions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Crimea reflect Moscow’s desire to regain its status as a regional and global great power. In an increasingly unstable world characterized by intensified global competition for supremacy, Russia continues to test the international system, not only through overt actions, but also by constantly assessing the reactions of Western states.

NATO expansion and the Western policy of integrating the former Soviet republics into international structures are seen by Moscow as an existential threat, and Russia’s revisionist behavior can be understood as a direct response to these challenges. While the West continues to promote values such as democracy and human rights, Russia opts for a strategy based on power, security, and the protection of its strategic interests. In this sense, Russia’s foreign policy remains a major factor of instability in international relations and will continue to play a significant role in the geopolitical patterns of the future.

The United States and Europe responded with sanctions and condemnation, as well as the strengthening of NATO in Eastern Europe, but did little or nothing to defeat Russia. NATO is currently struggling, with the Trump administration questioning its very existence. There are also doubts that the United States under Trump would defend smaller countries, such as the Baltic states, in the event of a Russian invasion, invoking Article 5 of the NATO charter.

The Trump administration has provided ample evidence in favor of the US withdrawal from the Middle East. While he strongly supports Israel and maintains a friendship with Saudi Arabia, Trump condemns Iran and withdrew the US from the nuclear deal.

Russia achieved its objectives by occupying Crimea, violating NATO air and maritime space, compromising sovereignty in a number of areas, and achieving significant progress in the Middle East.

One of the main effects of the Ukrainian crisis was the polarization of international relations between Russia and the West, and in particular with the United States and the European Union. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine, NATO responded with economic sanctions and a series of measures to strengthen the Alliance’s eastern flank. The Baltic states, Poland and Romania were among the first countries to call for a reinforcement of NATO’s military presence in the region, given their proximity to Russia and the perception of possible aggression. These measures to strengthen the eastern flank were criticized by Moscow, which considered these actions a form of direct provocation and a violation of previous agreements, which stated that NATO would not replace the Soviet Union in the region.

Moreover, the crisis in Ukraine highlighted the vulnerability of some political regimes in the former Soviet republics, and in this context, NATO had to adopt a strategy to protect the states in Eastern Europe, and increasing defense spending in these states became a priority.

The Ukraine crisis has had another important effect: strengthening relations between Russia and China. Although the two powers have had differences in the past, especially in their approach to the Central Asian region, Ukraine has become a point of convergence in the context of Western pressure on both states. Russia, isolated by the West due to economic sanctions, has sought a strategic partnership with China, which has a similar vision of a multipolar international system and the rejection of American hegemony. In this regard, Russia and China have strengthened economic relations, including by signing important agreements in the energy field (such as the Power of Siberia gas pipeline) and security cooperation.

The European Union has had a complex position on the Ukraine crisis. On the one hand, many EU members supported Ukraine's integration into European structures, such as the European Union and NATO. On the other hand, the EU was divided on whether to adopt tougher measures against Russia. Germany and France took a more balanced approach, supporting diplomatic dialogue and avoiding escalating the conflict. However, the economic sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia have had a significant impact on the Russian economy, but have also raised questions about the effectiveness of these measures in inducing a

With the decline of liberal internationalism, Russia is facing an emerging new world order. Uncertain about what the new world will look like, how it will function, and what other state responses will be, Russian foreign policy has begun a series of tests to determine what is developing. These tests have included conflict, diplomacy, subterfuge, provocation, economic measures, cyberattacks, and the use of other resources. Most significantly, the tests have involved moving troops into Ukraine, occupying Crimea, providing military and financial support to the Syrian leader, challenging NATO by air and sea, re-engaging in North Korea and Afghanistan, and questioning the legitimacy of Western elections. The creation of Syria as a client state was a major victory that allowed Russia to claim great power status, acquire naval and air bases in the Mediterranean, and gain a prominent position in the Middle East. It won because of the lack of response from both the United States and Western Europe. Sanctions have hurt the Russian economy, but they have failed to bring about behavioral changes. In fact, they have encouraged Putin to intensify these negative actions.

Despite the realist approach to the Ukrainian crisis, it is important to consider other theoretical perspectives, which bring valid arguments and contribute to a more complex understanding of the conflict.

A different approach would be the liberal perspective, which argues that conflicts can be prevented through economic and institutional integration of states. According to this theory, economic cooperation and political integration between states reduce the risks of conflict, since states that are economically interdependent are less likely to go to war with each other. In the case of Ukraine, some analysts suggest that if Ukraine had been better integrated into international economic structures, such as the European Union, conflict would have been less likely. However, this view underestimates the role of security in international relations and the complexity of the integration process.

In contrast, the constructivist perspective would emphasize national identities and conflicting perceptions between different state groups. Thus, the crisis in Ukraine could

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be seen not only as a competition for geopolitical influence, but also as a confrontation between two opposing national identities: a pro-Western one, represented by one part of Ukraine, and a pro-Russian one, represented by the other part of the country. From this point of view, the crisis can be seen more as a struggle to reconstruct a national identity in the face of external influence and internal fragmentation.

Another point of view would be that of resource geopolitics, which suggests that the reason why Russia and the West are confronting each other in Ukraine is related not only to military security, but also to access to vital economic resources. Ukraine is a country that plays a key role in the transit of natural gas from Russia to Europe, but also in ensuring the supply of grain, natural resources being a central element in international geopolitics. Therefore, control over Ukraine can be interpreted as a competition for control of economic resources, but also as an attempt to maintain influence over strategic regions.

In conclusion, it can be said that although it is difficult to determine which theoretical perspective most accurately explains the events taking place at the international level, realism makes a major contribution to understanding the current situation in international relations. Realism investigates the complex motives behind the actions of international actors, thus helping to understand the causes of conflicts and crucial decisions in world politics. Through the case studies presented, this essay has demonstrated that realist concepts such as state supremacy, self-interest, desire for power, balance of power, and security can be used effectively in the analysis of contemporary events. Overall, recent and ongoing events can be clearly understood if they are studied through the lens of this critical explanatory and practical approach.

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