Theories and approaches in International Relations: realism, liberalism, Marxism, constructivism and the critical schools

This document covers the theory section of CSS International Relations Paper I: what each school claims, its main writers, its evidence and its weaknesses, with evaluation points for essays, application to South Asia and Pakistan, and a Quick check with worked answers.

1. What a theory of International Relations does

1.1 Why theory is needed

International politics produces an endless stream of events: wars, treaties, sanctions, summits, trade deals. A theory tells us which facts matter, how they relate and what to expect next. Every analyst uses a theory, whether or not they admit it; studying theory makes the choice conscious and open to testing.

> **Definition to learn.** A theory of International Relations is a simplified, systematic account of how actors in world politics behave, which identifies the key actors, the structure within which they act, the forces that drive them, and the outcomes we should therefore expect. A good theory is clear, internally consistent, supported by evidence and capable of being proved wrong.

1.2 Three jobs of a theory

1. **Explanation.** Why did it happen? Realism explains the 1962 Cuban missile crisis as a contest over the balance of power; constructivism asks why nuclear weapons became taboo.
2. **Prediction.** Neorealists predicted that Europe would become less stable after the Cold War; liberals predicted that institutions such as the European Union would keep it stable.
3. **Prescription.** Realism counsels prudence and balance; liberalism counsels institutions and trade; critical theory counsels emancipation.

1.3 The great debates

The discipline is often taught through four debates: idealism against realism in the 1930s and 1940s (E. H. Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, 1939, attacked the inter-war "utopians"); traditionalism against behaviouralism in the 1950s and 1960s (Hedley Bull against the quantitative school); the inter-paradigm debate of the 1970s and 1980s between realism, pluralism and structuralism; and, from the late 1980s, rationalism against reflectivism, in which constructivists and the critical schools questioned whether IR can be studied like a natural science.

1.4 Positivism and post-positivism

Positivist theories (neorealism, neoliberalism) assume that the social world has regular patterns an observer can discover from outside, as a physicist studies gases. Post-positivist theories argue that the observer is part of the world, that facts are shaped by language and power, and that theory is never neutral. This distinction explains why the critical schools argue differently from the mainstream rather than simply reaching different conclusions.

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2. Classical realism

2.1 Roots

Thucydides' Melian Dialogue has the Athenians tell the Melians that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must". Machiavelli's *The Prince* (written 1513) judged policy by results, not Christian morality. Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) described life without a sovereign as a "war of every man against every man"; realists apply this to states, which have no sovereign above them.

2.2 Core assumptions

- **Statism.** The state is the main actor; others matter only through states.
- **Anarchy.** There is no world government; each state must look after itself (self-help).
- **Power.** Politics is a struggle for power, measured mainly in military and economic capability.
- **Survival.** The first interest of every state is survival.
- **Human nature.** For classical realists, conflict comes ultimately from a drive to dominate rooted in human nature.

2.3 Hans Morgenthau and the six principles

Hans J. Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* (1948) made realism the dominant theory in the United States after the Second World War. His six principles are a standard examination topic.

Morgenthau's six principles (learn the sense of each).

1. Politics is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature.
2. The main signpost of political realism is the concept of interest defined in terms of power.
3. Interest defined as power is a universal category, but its content changes with time and place.
4. Universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract form; prudence is the supreme virtue in politics.
5. The moral aspirations of a particular nation must not be identified with the moral laws that govern the universe.
6. The political sphere is autonomous: the realist asks "how does this policy affect the power of the nation?", not "is it lawful?" or "is it moral?"

2.4 The balance of power and the national interest

Classical realists see the balance of power as the mechanism that preserves the independence of states: when one grows too strong, others combine against it. The national interest, meaning above all the security and power of the state, is the guide to policy, pursued with prudence. Diplomacy is the preferred instrument because it adjusts interests without war.

2.5 Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths: explains the persistence of war, arms races and alliances; warns against crusading foreign policies; fits great-power behaviour from the Concert of Europe to the Cold War.

Weaknesses: "human nature" explains everything and therefore nothing, since it cannot say why

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peace sometimes lasts; the national interest is vague; it ignored economics and non-state actors; it is a theory written from the position of great powers.

3. Neorealism (structural realism)

3.1 Kenneth Waltz and the move to structure

Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979) rebuilt realism without human nature. The cause of recurring conflict is the structure of the international system, which has three features: its ordering principle (anarchy), the character of its units (functionally alike sovereign states) and the distribution of capabilities (how many great powers there are). Only the third varies, so the key question for neorealism is polarity.

> **Definition to learn.** Anarchy, in neorealism, does not mean chaos. It means the absence of a central authority above states. Because no one will come to a state's rescue, each state must provide for its own security (self-help), and this pressure produces similar behaviour from very different kinds of state.

3.2 The security dilemma

The term was coined by John Herz (1950) and developed by Robert Jervis (1978). When state A arms for defence, state B cannot be sure the arms are defensive, so B arms too; A then feels less secure and arms further. Both end up poorer and no safer. The dilemma is sharpest when offensive and defensive weapons cannot be told apart and when offence has the advantage.

3.3 Polarity and stability

Waltz argued that bipolarity (two great powers, as in the Cold War) is the most stable arrangement: the rivals can watch each other, miscalculation is less likely, and they do not depend on unreliable allies. Multipolarity (several great powers, as before 1914) is less stable because alliances shift and responsibility for balancing is unclear. Unipolarity (as after 1991) is unlikely to last because others will balance against the hegemon.

3.4 Balance of power and balance of threat

Waltz predicted that balances form automatically, whether or not any state intends them. Stephen Walt's *The Origins of Alliances* (1987) refined this: states balance against threat, not raw power, and threat depends on aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capability and perceived intentions. This explains why many states aligned with the distant United States rather than against it during the Cold War.

3.5 Defensive and offensive realism

	Defensive realism (Waltz, Jervis, Walt)	Offensive realism (John Mearsheimer)
How much power?	Enough for security; too much provokes balancing coalitions	As much as possible; the only safe position is regional hegemony
Why?	Expansion usually fails and is self-defeating	Intentions can never be known, so capability is all that counts
Key work	*Theory of International Politics* (1979)	*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001)

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Prediction for China	Can be accommodated if it does not threaten neighbours	Will seek to dominate Asia and the US will try to stop it

3.6 Evaluation

Strengths: parsimonious (explains a lot from a few assumptions); explains why states with very different ideologies behave alike; predicted that NATO expansion would antagonise Russia.

Weaknesses: could not explain the peaceful end of the Cold War; treats states as "black boxes" (neoclassical realists such as Gideon Rose and Randall Schweller add domestic variables to repair this); explains repetition, not change; has no account of where interests come from.

4. Liberalism

4.1 Roots

Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace* (1795) argued that republics, a federation of free states and commerce would together make war less likely. Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* (1910) argued that conquest no longer paid. Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points (1918) carried liberal ideas into the League of Nations: open diplomacy, self-determination, collective security.

4.2 Core assumptions

- States are not the only actors; individuals, firms, international organisations and NGOs matter.
- States are not unitary; foreign policy comes from the competition of domestic groups.
- Interests are broader than security: welfare, trade and values matter.
- Anarchy makes cooperation harder but institutions can overcome the problems.
- Progress is possible: the system can be reformed.

4.3 Complex interdependence

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (1977), described a model that is the opposite of realism's and argued that the real world lies between the two.

The three features of complex interdependence (learn word for word).

1. **Multiple channels** connect societies: inter-state, trans-governmental (between bureaucracies) and transnational (between firms, banks, NGOs).
2. **Absence of hierarchy among issues:** military security does not always dominate the agenda.
3. **Minor role of military force:** among states linked by complex interdependence, force is not used to settle disputes.

Keohane and Nye distinguish **sensitivity** interdependence (how quickly change in one country affects another) from **vulnerability** interdependence (how costly it is to adjust once policies change). Vulnerability is the better measure of power.

4.4 Neoliberal institutionalism

Keohane's *After Hegemony* (1984) accepted the neorealist starting points (states, anarchy, rational

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self-interest) and still showed that cooperation is possible. In the prisoner's dilemma two rational actors both lose because each fears the other will cheat. Institutions (regimes) solve this by providing information, lowering transaction costs, lengthening the "shadow of the future" so that cheating today is punished by lost cooperation tomorrow, and allowing issues to be linked. Robert Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation* (1984) showed that tit-for-tat reciprocity can sustain cooperation among egoists.

> **Definition to learn.** An international regime (Stephen Krasner, 1983) is a set of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations. Examples: the non-proliferation regime built on the 1968 NPT; the trade regime of the GATT and the WTO.

Keohane's title answers hegemonic stability theory (Kindleberger, Gilpin), which held that an open world economy needs a leading state to provide public goods: institutions built under hegemony can outlast it. Neorealists (Joseph Grieco) replied that states worry about **relative gains** (who gains more), not just **absolute gains**, so cooperation remains fragile.

4.5 Democratic peace theory

Michael Doyle (1983) revived Kant's argument with evidence: liberal democracies have almost never fought wars against each other, although they fight non-democracies as often as other states do. Two explanations are offered.

- **Institutional:** leaders answerable to voters and parliaments find it hard to mobilise for war, and both sides know this, so crises between democracies are slow and transparent.
- **Normative:** democracies resolve internal disputes by compromise and extend the same trust to other democracies; non-democracies are viewed with suspicion.

Criticisms: the number of democracies before 1945 was small, so the finding may be chance; definitions of "democracy" and "war" can be adjusted to fit (the 1999 Kargil conflict, fought under two elected governments, is excluded by some on these grounds); the theory was used to justify "democracy promotion" by force in Iraq (2003).

4.6 Evaluation

Strengths: explains the growth of institutions (UN, WTO, EU, ASEAN), the peace among Western democracies since 1945 and economic integration; it is a theory of change and progress.

Weaknesses: institutions fail where great-power interests clash (the Security Council on Syria, Ukraine, Gaza); interdependence can be a source of conflict (energy coercion, trade wars); democratic peace is contested; liberalism can slide into a justification for Western intervention; it says little to regions, such as South Asia, where interdependence is thin and security dominates.

5. Marxism, dependency and world-systems theory

5.1 Marxist foundations

Marx wrote little directly about international relations, but his method is the basis of this school: the economic base (the mode of production and class relations) shapes the political and ideological superstructure; history moves through class struggle; capitalism is expansive and global. The main

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actors are classes, not states, and the main division in the world is between capital and labour, which crosses borders.

5.2 Lenin on imperialism

Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) argued that monopoly capitalism, dominated by finance capital, forces advanced states to export capital and divide the world into colonies and spheres of influence. The First World War was a war to redivide the world. This gives Marxism its own theory of war: not anarchy or human nature, but the competition of capitalist states.

5.3 Dependency theory

Dependency theory arose in Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s. Raúl Prebisch observed that the terms of trade move against exporters of primary products over time (the Prebisch-Singer thesis), so comparative advantage locks poor countries into poverty. Andre Gunder Frank argued that underdevelopment is the result of the periphery's integration into the world economy: the periphery is poor because the core is rich. Fernando Henrique Cardoso allowed for "dependent development", in which some industrialisation occurs on terms set by foreign capital.

> **Definition to learn.** Dependency is a situation in which the economy of a group of countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which it is subjected, so that the dependent countries can grow only as a reflection of the growth of the dominant ones. (The sense of Theotonio dos Santos's definition.)

5.4 World-systems theory

Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System* (1974), argued that since the sixteenth century a single capitalist world-economy has existed, with one division of labour but many political units. It has three zones.

Zone	Role	Examples (historically)
Core	High-skill, capital-intensive production; strong states; captures most of the surplus	Western Europe, United States, Japan
Semi-periphery	Mix of core and peripheral activities; stabilises the system by offering hope of promotion	Brazil, India, China (now moving up), South Africa
Periphery	Low-skill, labour-intensive production, raw materials; weak states	Much of Africa, parts of South Asia and Latin America

Unlike dependency theory, world-systems theory allows mobility between zones and sees the state system itself as a product of the world-economy.

5.5 Gramsci and neo-Gramscian IR

Antonio Gramsci, writing in Mussolini's prisons in the 1930s, asked why the working class in advanced countries did not revolt. His answer was **hegemony**: a ruling class governs by consent as well as force, by making its ideas seem natural and in the general interest. Robert Cox applied this to world order (Section 8.1): the dominant state leads by making its values (free trade, liberal democracy) seem universal, and international institutions help to spread them.

5.6 Evaluation

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Strengths: the only mainstream theory that puts the global economy and inequality at the centre; explains why the gap between rich and poor countries persists; gave a voice to the Third World in the 1970s demands for a New International Economic Order.

Weaknesses: economic determinism cannot explain wars between communist states (China and Vietnam, 1979) or peace among capitalist ones; dependency theory could not explain the rise of South Korea, Taiwan and China, which grew by joining the world economy; it underrates the state and nationalism.

6. The English School

6.1 International society

The English School (Martin Wight, Hedley Bull, Adam Watson, later Barry Buzan, Tim Dunne, Nicholas Wheeler) takes a middle position between realism and liberalism. Its central claim is that states form not just a system but a society.

> **Definitions to learn (Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, 1977).**
>
> A **system of states** exists when two or more states have sufficient contact and impact on one another's decisions to cause them to behave as parts of a whole.
>
> A **society of states** (international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions.

6.2 The three traditions

- **Realist (Hobbesian):** international relations is a state of war; morality stops at the border.
- **Rationalist (Grotian):** states are bound by rules and form a society even without government; the English School's own home.
- **Revolutionist (Kantian):** the real actors are human beings, and the goal is a community of mankind beyond states.

6.3 Institutions of international society

Bull's five institutions are practices, not organisations: the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war (as a tool to enforce rules, within limits) and management of the system by the great powers.

6.4 Pluralism and solidarism

Pluralists (Bull, Robert Jackson) argue that international society can agree only on minimal rules, sovereignty and non-intervention, because states differ deeply on values. Solidarists (Wheeler, *Saving Strangers*, 2000) argue that states can agree on more, including human rights, and that humanitarian intervention can be legitimate when the society of states endorses it. The debate over the responsibility to protect (adopted at the 2005 UN World Summit) is the live form of this argument.

6.5 Evaluation

Strengths: explains why rules and law exist and are mostly obeyed under anarchy; historically rich;

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handles the tension between order and justice honestly.

Weaknesses: Eurocentric, treating the European society of states as the model others joined; lacks a clear method; "society" may describe the great powers' club better than the experience of weak states; better at description than prediction.

7. Social constructivism

7.1 The core claim

Constructivism became prominent after the Cold War, which the material theories had failed to predict. Its key claim is that the most important facts in world politics are social facts, which exist because people agree they exist (money, sovereignty, the Line of Control), rather than brute facts (mountains, missiles). Nicholas Onuf coined the term in *World of Our Making* (1989); Alexander Wendt's article "Anarchy is what states make of it" (1992) and *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999) made it a rival to neorealism.

> **Definition to learn.** Constructivism holds that the structures of international politics are social rather than purely material, that these structures shape the identities and interests of states and not only their behaviour, and that states and structures are mutually constituted: states make the system through their practices, and the system makes states by giving them identities and interests.

7.2 Anarchy is what states make of it

Wendt accepts that there is no world government but denies that anarchy has a single logic. Whether it produces self-help depends on how states see each other. His three cultures of anarchy:

- **Hobbesian:** others are enemies; survival requires their defeat.
- **Lockean:** others are rivals; states compete but recognise one another's right to exist (the Westphalian system).
- **Kantian:** others are friends; disputes are settled without force and states defend one another (the North Atlantic community).

7.3 Norms, identity and norm entrepreneurs

Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) described a **norm life cycle**: emergence (norm entrepreneurs persuade), cascade (a tipping point after which states adopt the norm to belong), then internalisation. Examples: the ban on slavery, the 1997 landmine ban, the nuclear taboo (Nina Tannenwald). Peter Katzenstein (1996) showed that identity shapes what states count as threats. Rationalists assume a logic of consequences (cost-benefit calculation); constructivists add a logic of appropriateness (what is expected of someone in my role).

7.4 Evaluation

Strengths: explains change (the end of the Cold War, the spread of human rights, decolonisation) where neorealism sees only repetition; shows where interests come from.

Weaknesses: explains everything after the event and predicts little; says little about which ideas win and why (power may decide, as realists point out); Wendt keeps the state as the main actor and is criticised by other constructivists for staying close to neorealism; weak on how norms are enforced

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against determined violators.

8. The critical schools

These approaches share the post-positivist view that theory is never neutral. Each identifies a form of domination hidden by mainstream IR and seeks to expose it.

8.1 Critical theory (Frankfurt School and Cox)

Critical theory draws on the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermas), which argued that knowledge should serve human emancipation rather than the management of existing society. Robert Cox's article "Social Forces, States and World Orders" (1981) brought it into IR.

> **Learn word for word.** "Theory is always for someone and for some purpose" (Robert Cox, 1981). **Problem-solving theory** takes the world as it finds it, with its prevailing power relations and institutions, and works out how to make them run smoothly; neorealism is Cox's example. **Critical theory** asks how that order came about, whose interests it serves and how it might be changed.

Cox's historical structures consist of material capabilities, ideas and institutions, interacting at three levels: social forces, forms of state and world orders. Hegemony in world order is the fit between all three. Andrew Linklater took the Habermasian route: the task of critical theory is to extend the moral community beyond the state through open dialogue, so that boundaries which exclude outsiders from moral consideration are questioned and widened.

8.2 Feminism

Cynthia Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (1989) asked "where are the women?" and found them wherever international politics is made: diplomats' wives, plantation workers, sex workers near military bases, garment workers in export zones. J. Ann Tickner's *Gender in International Relations* (1992) argued that realism's core concepts (power as domination, autonomy, security as defence of the state) rest on a masculine model, and that security should include freedom from domestic violence, poverty and environmental harm. Strands:

- **Liberal feminism:** add women to existing structures; count women ministers, ambassadors and negotiators (UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000 on women, peace and security).
- **Standpoint feminism:** women's experience gives a distinct and valuable view of security and war.
- **Post-structural feminism:** gender is a system of meaning that ranks the "masculine" (strong, rational, public) above the "feminine" (weak, emotional, private), and this ranking organises international politics, for instance in talk of "protecting" women and children.

8.3 Post-structuralism

Drawing on Foucault and Derrida, post-structuralists (Richard Ashley, R. B. J. Walker, James Der Derian, David Campbell) argue that language does not describe reality but produces it. Key tools: **discourse**, the set of statements that make some things thinkable and others not ("rogue state", "failed state", "war on terror" are not neutral descriptions); **power/knowledge**, since the expert who defines "development" exercises power over those defined as undeveloped; **deconstruction**, exposing the hidden hierarchies in pairs such as inside/outside and order/anarchy; and **genealogy**, tracing how a

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"natural" concept such as sovereignty was historically made. Post-structuralists refuse to offer an alternative grand theory, which is their main vulnerability in debate.

8.4 Post-colonialism

Post-colonial theory begins from the fact that most states were colonies and that IR was written by and for the colonisers. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) showed how Western scholarship produced "the East" as irrational, despotic and backward, which justified rule over it. Gayatri Spivak asked "can the subaltern speak?". Post-colonial IR argues that sovereignty and the Westphalian system were exported by conquest, with a "standard of civilisation" deciding who was admitted; that "failed state" and "humanitarian intervention" continue the colonial relationship in new words; that hierarchy, not anarchy, is the defining feature of the order; and that the Global South produced its own thinking (Bandung 1955, the Non-Aligned Movement 1961, the NIEO) which the discipline ignores.

8.5 Green theory

Green theory grew with environmental politics after the 1972 Stockholm conference and the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. It argues that the sovereign state system and the growth-based economy cause ecological crisis, because damage crosses borders while responsibility stops at them. Robyn Eckersley (*The Green State*, 2004) asks how states can be reformed to take ecological responsibility. Concepts to know: the tragedy of the commons (Garrett Hardin, 1968), ecological security, common but differentiated responsibilities (Rio, 1992), climate justice between North and South, and the limits of regime solutions such as the 2015 Paris Agreement, which rests on voluntary pledges.

8.6 Evaluating the critical schools together

Strengths: they reveal what the mainstream hides: class, gender, race, the colonial past, the environment; they speak most directly to the experience of the Global South; they insist that theory has moral purposes.

Weaknesses: criticism more than explanation, and little guidance to a foreign minister on Monday morning; difficult language; post-structuralism seems to deny any firm ground for judgement; critical theory's ideal of dialogue can look like a Western liberal project in another vocabulary; they disagree sharply with one another.

9. Levels of analysis

9.1 The problem

Where should we look for causes? Waltz's *Man, the State and War* (1959) gave the standard answer: three levels or "images". J. David Singer's "The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations" (1961) named the problem, though he himself used two levels, the international system and the state. The levels are not theories but places to look; each theory favours one.

Level	Causes located in	Example explanation of the 1971 war	Theories that favour it
Individual (first image)	Human nature, leaders' beliefs, perceptions	The decisions of Yahya Khan, Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman	Classical realism; foreign policy analysis

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State (second image)	Type of government, ideology, economy, domestic politics	The breakdown of the settlement between West and East Pakistan after the 1970 election	Liberalism; Marxism; neoclassical realism
System (third image)	Anarchy, distribution of power, alliances	India's superior power, the Indo-Soviet treaty of August 1971, Pakistan's isolation	Neorealism; world-systems theory

Waltz concluded that the third image explains why war is always possible, while the first and second explain particular wars. In an essay, write one paragraph per level and a fourth that weighs them.

10. Applying the theories to South Asia and Pakistan

10.1 Realism and the India-Pakistan rivalry

South Asia is often called a realist's region. Two states born in conflict in 1947 fought wars in 1947-48, 1965 and 1971, a limited conflict at Kargil in 1999, and faced crises in 2001-02, 2008, 2016, 2019 and 2025. The security dilemma is visible in the nuclear programmes: India tested in 1974 and 1998, Pakistan replied in May 1998. The balance of power explains Pakistan's alliances: with the United States through SEATO (1954) and the Baghdad Pact (1955), later with China to offset India's size; Walt's balance of threat explains why Pakistan allied with a distant superpower against a neighbour. Offensive realism explains India's drive for regional dominance. Neorealism also explains the limits of SAARC (founded 1985): institutions cannot work where the main members see each other as threats.

10.2 Liberalism: where it works and where it fails

Liberal mechanisms exist but are weak. The Indus Waters Treaty (1960) survived three wars, which liberals cite as proof that institutions can insulate cooperation from conflict; India's suspension of the treaty in 2025 is cited by realists as proof that institutions last only while the stronger party finds them useful. Trade remains small relative to potential, so complex interdependence is absent. The democratic peace is under strain: Kargil and the 2019 crisis both occurred under elected governments, which supports critics who say nationalism and the quality of democracy matter more than elections. Liberals point instead to the Composite Dialogue (2004-08) and confidence-building measures such as the 1988 agreement not to attack nuclear installations.

10.3 Marxism, dependency and Pakistan's political economy

Dependency theory describes much of Pakistan's economic experience: reliance on cotton and textile exports, more than twenty IMF programmes, debt that constrains policy, and remittances propping up the current account. World-systems theory places Pakistan in the periphery or lower semi-periphery and reads the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (launched 2015 under the Belt and Road Initiative) in two ways: a route out of dependency through infrastructure, or a shift in the core to which Pakistan is attached. Neo-Gramscians add that elite consensus in favour of IMF prescriptions is a form of hegemony.

10.4 The English School and regional society

Is South Asia a system or a society? Its states share institutions (diplomacy, international law, the 1972 Simla Agreement as a rule of bilateral settlement), but shared values are thin and war is not ruled out: closer to a system with elements of a pluralist society. The 2019 revocation of Article 370 by India and Pakistan's appeal to UN Security Council resolutions illustrate the pluralist dispute over whether

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Kashmir is an internal matter (sovereignty) or an international one (self-determination).

10.5 Constructivism: identity and the enemy image

The rivalry is not only about material power but about identity: the two-nation theory, Partition memories and the definition of each state partly against the other. The relationship is Hobbesian in Wendt's terms, and constructivists say it can change if practices change, as the Franco-German relationship did after 1945. The nuclear taboo holds: neither state has used nuclear weapons despite crises, and both maintain doctrines (India's "no first use", 2003; Pakistan's "full spectrum deterrence", 2013) that are statements of identity as much as capability.

10.6 The critical schools and Pakistan

- **Post-colonialism:** the borders, the army's structure, the legal system and the Kashmir dispute are legacies of British rule; the "failed state" label in Western commentary is a case of Orientalist discourse.
- **Feminism:** the costs of the Afghan wars and militancy have fallen heavily on women, who remain a small share of the diplomatic and security establishment.
- **Post-structuralism:** the "war on terror" discourse after 2001 constructed Pakistan as both ally and suspect, shaping aid, drone strikes and sovereignty debates.
- **Green theory:** the 2022 floods, which affected around a third of the country's area by government and UN estimates, showed that Pakistan bears the costs of emissions produced elsewhere; Pakistan led the push for the loss and damage fund agreed at COP27 (2022).
- **Critical theory:** Cox's question applies directly: whose interests does the regional order serve, and what counter-hegemonic project (regional integration, South-South cooperation) could change it?

11. Essay evaluation points

11.1 How theory essays are marked

Examiners look for: a clear statement of what the theory claims; the main thinkers and works, correctly attributed; evidence for and against; comparison with at least one rival; application to a contemporary or regional case; a conclusion that takes a position. History without theory scores poorly, as does theory without any example.

11.2 A model structure

Worked example: planning "Critically examine the realist explanation of the India-Pakistan rivalry" (2,500 to 3,000 words).

1. **Introduction (150 words):** define realism in one sentence, state the thesis (realism explains the pattern of rivalry but not its persistence or intensity), outline the argument.
2. **The realist account (500 words):** anarchy, security dilemma, balance of power and threat, deterrence; cite Morgenthau, Waltz, Walt, Mearsheimer; apply each to a dated event.
3. **What realism explains well (400 words):** alliances, the arms race, the failure of SAARC, the limits of the Indus Waters Treaty.
4. **Where realism fails (600 words):** domestic politics and the military's role (second image),

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identity and Partition (constructivism), economic dependence and shared elite interests (Marxism), the colonial origin of the dispute (post-colonialism).

5. **Synthesis (400 words):** use the levels of analysis; argue that structure sets the limits but ideas and domestic politics decide outcomes.
6. **Conclusion (200 words):** return to the thesis; one sentence on policy implications.

11.3 Evaluation points you can reuse

- Parsimony against richness: neorealism explains much with little; constructivism explains more but predicts less.
- Material against ideational: realism and Marxism start from capabilities and production; constructivism and the critical schools start from meaning.
- Continuity against change: realism explains why history repeats; liberalism and constructivism explain how it moves.
- Whose theory? Realism and liberalism were written by and for great powers; dependency, post-colonial and critical theory from the periphery or on its behalf.
- Testability: democratic peace and neoliberal institutionalism make testable claims; post-structuralism rejects the test.

11.4 Common errors

Calling Waltz a classical realist or Morgenthau a neorealist; treating liberalism as idealism only; confusing dependency theory with world-systems theory; using "constructivism" to mean only "ideas matter"; listing the critical schools as one theory; writing about South Asia with no dates, treaties or doctrines.

Quick check

1. State Morgenthau's second principle of political realism and explain, with one example, what it means in practice. (5 marks)
2. Describe the three features of the international structure in Waltz's neorealism and explain which one varies. (5 marks)
3. Explain the security dilemma and show how it applies to the nuclear programmes of India and Pakistan. (8 marks)
4. Describe the three features of complex interdependence and evaluate whether they describe India-Pakistan relations. (10 marks)
5. State the two explanations offered for the democratic peace and evaluate the theory with reference to South Asia. (10 marks)
6. Distinguish dependency theory from world-systems theory and apply one of them to Pakistan's economy. (10 marks)
7. Define "international society" as used by Hedley Bull and explain the difference between pluralism and solidarism. (8 marks)
8. Explain what Wendt means by "anarchy is what states make of it" and describe his three cultures of anarchy. (8 marks)

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9. Explain Cox's distinction between problem-solving theory and critical theory. Why does he call neorealism problem-solving theory? (6 marks)
10. Using the three levels of analysis, explain the outbreak of the 1971 war. (10 marks)

1. The main signpost of political realism is the concept of interest defined in terms of power. It means that statesmen think and act in terms of power, so an analyst can understand and predict policy by asking how it affects the state's power, regardless of stated motives or ideology. Example: whatever the public justification, Pakistan's alliance with the United States in 1954 is explained as an effort to increase its power relative to India.

2. First, the ordering principle: anarchy, meaning no authority above states. Second, the character of the units: sovereign states are functionally alike, since each must perform the same tasks of defence and government and none can specialise as parts of a hierarchy can. Third, the distribution of capabilities: how many great powers there are. The first two are constant as long as the system is anarchic, so only the third varies. Changes in polarity are therefore the only structural changes.

3. Under anarchy a state cannot know others' intentions, so it judges them by capabilities. When one state arms for security, others see a possible threat and arm in response, which reduces the first state's security and leads to further arming. Both are less secure and poorer, although neither wanted conflict. Application: India's 1974 test was presented as a "peaceful nuclear explosion", but Pakistan, unable to verify intent and having lost its eastern wing and more than half its population in 1971, accelerated the programme it had begun after that defeat. India's 1998 tests, partly aimed at China, were read in Islamabad as directed at Pakistan, which tested within weeks. Missile development on both sides, India's ballistic missile defence research and Pakistan's short-range Nasr follow the same logic: a defensive step by one is an offensive step to the other. The dilemma is sharpened by short distances, which cut warning times, and by the difficulty of distinguishing conventional from nuclear-capable missiles.

4. The three features are multiple channels connecting societies (inter-state, trans-governmental, transnational); no hierarchy among issues, so military security does not always top the agenda; and the minor role of military force among states so linked. For India and Pakistan: channels are thin, since trade is a fraction of its potential and was largely suspended after 2019, visas restrict contact, and transnational business and civil society links are small. Hierarchy of issues is strong: security dominates and other issues (water, trade, sport) are held hostage to it. Force is not minor: the two have fought four times and threaten force in each crisis. The relationship is therefore close to the realist pole of Keohane and Nye's spectrum, though the model shows what a liberal peace strategy would need to build.

5. The institutional explanation: democratic leaders are constrained by voters, parliaments and a free press, who bear the costs of war; mobilisation is slow and public, so two democracies in a crisis have time to negotiate and can see that the other is not preparing a surprise attack. The normative explanation: democracies settle internal conflicts by compromise and extend this trust to other democracies, while treating non-democracies as untrustworthy. South Asia: Kargil (1999) occurred under Nawaz Sharif and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis under Imran Khan and Narendra Modi. Supporters reply that Kargil was planned by the army without full civilian control, that Pakistan's democracy was weakly consolidated, and that the crises stayed short of full war, which is itself evidence of restraint. Critics reply that these answers adjust the definition to save the theory, and that nuclear deterrence and American pressure mattered

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more than regime type. Conclusion: elections alone do not produce peace; civilian control, nationalist identity and the absence of interdependence matter more.

6. Dependency theory (Prebisch, Frank, Cardoso) argues that the periphery is poor because of its integration into a world economy dominated by the core: terms of trade fall for primary exporters, surplus is drained by foreign capital, and local elites ally with the core against their own people. In its strong form (Frank) it recommends delinking. World-systems theory (Wallerstein) argues that a single capitalist world-economy with core, semi-periphery and periphery has existed since the sixteenth century; the state system is part of it; zones are structural but countries can move between them. Application of dependency theory to Pakistan: exports are concentrated in textiles and primary products; recurring balance of payments crises have brought more than twenty IMF programmes, which set fiscal and monetary policy; debt service takes a large share of revenue; elites benefit through imports, rents and property, so there is little domestic pressure to change; remittances from labour exported to the Gulf are themselves a dependent relationship. A critic would note that South Korea escaped the periphery by using the world market, not by leaving it.

7. Bull: a society of states exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another and share in the working of common institutions. This is more than a system, where states merely affect each other's calculations. The institutions are practices: balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war and great-power management. Pluralism (Bull, Jackson) holds that because states differ deeply on values, international society can agree only on minimal rules for coexistence: sovereignty, non-intervention, respect for agreements; order is the priority. Solidarism (Wheeler) holds that states can agree on thicker common values, including human rights, so the society may legitimately act, through humanitarian intervention or the responsibility to protect, when a state fails its own people. The dispute is whether justice for individuals can be pursued without undermining order among states.

8. Anarchy (no world government) is a fact, but its consequences are not fixed. Neorealists assume anarchy must produce self-help and fear; Wendt argues that this depends on the identities states hold and the practices by which they treat each other, which are made and can be remade. Self-help is one possible culture of anarchy, not its necessary logic. Hobbesian: states see each other as enemies with no right to exist, so war is the norm. Lockean: states see each other as rivals who compete, sometimes violently, but recognise each other's sovereignty and limit war. Kantian: states see each other as friends, settle disputes without force and act collectively against threats. Each culture can be held by coercion, by self-interest or by genuine belief. Structure has a social content that neorealism misses, and change is possible through new practices.

9. Problem-solving theory takes the existing world, with its power relations and institutions, as the given framework and asks how to make it work more smoothly; it is precise within those limits but conservative, because it treats the present order as natural. Critical theory stands apart from the order, asks how it came into being, whose interests it serves and whether it is changing, and aims at an alternative. Cox calls neorealism problem-solving theory because Waltz treats anarchy and the state system as timeless givens, abstracts from history and production, and asks only how states manage within the structure; in doing so it serves those who benefit from the current distribution of power, especially the leading state, and rules out change by assumption. Hence "theory is always for someone and for some purpose".

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10. Individual level: Yahya Khan's decision to postpone the transfer of power after the Awami League's 1970 election victory and to order military action on 25 March 1971; Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's leadership of the autonomy movement; Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's refusal to accept a Mujib-led government; Indira Gandhi's calculation that intervention was feasible and popular. State level: the inequality between West and East Pakistan in representation, resources and language policy; the failure of a political settlement after the election; the military's role in politics; the refugee flow of around ten million people into India, which created domestic pressure there. System level: the regional imbalance of power in India's favour; the Indo-Soviet Treaty of August 1971, which deterred Chinese intervention and balanced American support for Pakistan; the symbolic limits of the American tilt; the geographical separation of East Pakistan, which could not be defended. Weighing: the system level explains why India could act and win; the state level explains why the crisis arose; the individual level explains its timing and the failure to find a political way out. The second image carries most weight for the origin of the war and the third for its outcome.

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