

A LEVEL POLITICS

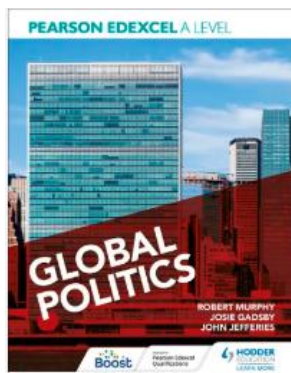
Year 13 Transition 2026



Understanding Realism, Liberalism and Comparative Theories in Global Politics

Welcome to Year 13 Politics!

For Year 13 you have three choices, you need to purchase **ONE** of the following over summer:

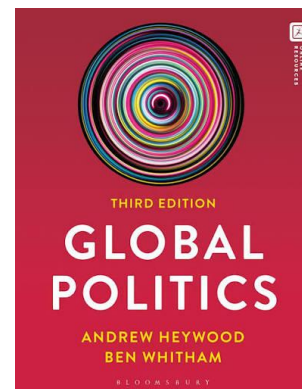


The **Global Politics** textbook – the same format and style as the book we used for Year 12.

Approx £35 new, sometimes available second hand via Vinted/World of Books for £5-10.



A subscription to **Politics Online** (<https://www.politicsonline.co.uk/>) which will give you everything for Global Politics in addition to updated material for UK Politics and UK Government for Paper 1 and 2. **£30 for one year.**



Andrew Heywood's Global Politics – encouraged for students aiming for A-A*, available for £35 new, or second hand via Vinted/World of Books for £3-5.

If you were entitled to free school meals in Year 11, we can support with resources. Please speak to Miss Brady/Mrs Spickett **before** the end of term.

This transition booklet focuses on **comparative theories** in Global Politics – mainly **Realism** and **Liberalism**. These are the two dominant lenses through which global affairs (power, conflict, cooperation) are understood.

Why this matters:

There **will** be a 12-mark question in your Paper 3 exam about these theories. You must understand and compare them clearly; this is the only compulsory question across all three Politics papers.

Stretch and Challenge

Throughout this booklet you will see **information in purple – this indicates it is A-A* content.**

Learning Tasks (Due: Tuesday 1st September)

There are 8 tasks for completion as you work through this booklet to help introduce you to Realism and Liberalism. You can complete these in any order over the summer. Aim to spend around 15 hours in total. Use the internet, your Politics textbook, or recommended sources below.

Specification

Subject content	Students should gain knowledge and understanding of:
6 Comparative theories Key terminology Realism Liberalism International anarchy Security dilemma Complex interdependence Global governance Anarchical society and society of states	6.1 Main ideas of realism. • States as key actors in global politics and the balance of power (state sovereignty). • International anarchy and its implications. • Inevitability of war. • The security dilemma. 6.2 Main ideas of liberalism. • The significance of morality and optimism on human nature. • Possibility of harmony and balance. • Complex interdependence. • Likelihood of global governance. • Impact and growth of international organisations. 6.3 Divisions between realism and liberalism in relation to: • human nature and power • order and security and the likelihood of conflict • impact of international organisations and the significance of states. 6.4 Main ideas of the anarchical society and society of states theory. • Acceptance that there is anarchy in the global system – absence of overarching authority. • States have an informal understanding that ensures a degree of co-operation – based on norms and rules that increase levels of trust and reciprocal behaviour. 6.5 An evaluation of the extent to which realism and liberalism explain recent developments (since 2000) in global politics. This should be done through the study of relevant case studies that cover each of the other content sections: • the state and globalisation • global governance: political and economic • global governance: human rights and environmental • power and developments • regionalism and the EU.

Key Terms

Term	Acronym	Definition
Realism	–	A theory that argues states act in their own self-interest. Conflict is inevitable, and military power is key.
Liberalism	–	A theory that argues cooperation between states is possible and desirable, especially through international organisations and shared norms.
Anarchy	–	In global politics, this means a lack of overarching authority – no world government.
Security dilemma	–	When one state builds up its defences, others respond in kind, increasing the chance of conflict.
Sovereignty	–	The right of a state to govern itself without outside interference.
Hard power	–	Use of force or threats to influence others (e.g. military force).
Soft power	–	Persuading others through culture, values, or diplomacy.
Smart power	–	A combination of hard and soft power.
Intergovernmental Organisation	IO/IGO	An organisation composed primarily of sovereign states (e.g. UN, EU, NATO) that work together on common issues.
Non-Governmental Organisation	NGO	A non-profit group, often independent from governments, working on issues like development, environment, or human rights (e.g. Oxfam, Amnesty International).
United Nations	UN	A global IGO founded in 1945 to promote peace, security, and cooperation between states.
North Atlantic Treaty Organization	NATO	A military IGO formed in 1949 for collective defence among Western states.
World Trade Organisation	WTO	A global IGO that regulates international trade.
European Union	EU	A political and economic IGO in Europe promoting integration, trade, and shared governance.
Transnational Corporation	TNC	A business that operates in multiple countries, influencing global economics and politics (e.g. Apple, Google).
Complex Interdependence	–	The liberal idea that global cooperation and interconnectedness reduce the likelihood of conflict.

Introduction

In global politics, a **theory** is a structured way of understanding the world. It offers a framework for explaining, interpreting, or evaluating political events and behaviour.

Theory vs Ideology: Key Differences

A theory is an analytical framework used to explain, interpret, or evaluate political events, relationships, or behaviours. It asks: <i>"What is happening, and why?"</i> • Purpose: To understand or explain the world. • Types: Explanatory (descriptive), interpretive, normative. • Examples: Realism, liberalism, Marxism (as IR theories), social contract theory, deterrence theory. • Characteristics: ○ Often evidence-based and open to challenge or revision. ○ Can be used as a tool regardless of political beliefs. ○ Not necessarily action-driven.	An ideology is a set of normative beliefs, values, and goals about how society <i>should</i> be organised. It asks: <i>"What is the best way to organise society and govern people?"</i> • Purpose: To shape political action and influence public policy. • Examples: Conservatism, socialism, liberalism (as political ideologies), nationalism, feminism. • Characteristics: ○ Prescriptive and value-driven (concerned with <i>ought</i>, not just <i>is</i>). ○ Aimed at promoting a specific vision or agenda. ○ Often forms the basis of political movements and parties.
---	--

Summary

Feature	Theory	Ideology
Main function	Explain and understand reality	Prescribe how the world <i>should</i> be
Nature	Analytical, explanatory or interpretive	Normative, value-laden
Basis	Evidence, logic, reasoning	Beliefs, values, moral convictions
Outcome	Understanding or critique	Political action, agenda-setting
Examples	Realism, liberal institutionalism	Socialism, conservatism, nationalism

Think of a **theory** as a **lens** to study the world, and an **ideology** as a **blueprint** for how to change or maintain it.

A-A* Types of Theory

Explanatory Theory <i>Also called: descriptive or empirical theory</i>	Interpretive Theory <i>Also called: constitutive theory</i>	Normative Theory <i>Also called: prescriptive or political theory</i>
- Seeks to explain why or how things happen in global politics. - Generates causal propositions that can be tested against evidence. - Examples include most forms of realism and liberalism, which often rely on data or observable facts. - Common in traditional approaches to international relations.	- Focuses on understanding meanings and how political actors interpret the world. - Emphasises that political reality is shaped through human reflection, language, and context. - Less concerned with 'hard facts' and more with subjective perspectives. - Associated with critical theories like constructivism or post-structuralism.	- Concerned with what ought to be rather than what is. - Focuses on ethical values, justice, rights, and desirable standards of global behaviour. - Often overlaps with interpretive theory by blending facts and values.
Example: A realist might use explanatory theory to argue that states act in self-interest due to the structure of the international system (anarchy).	Example: A feminist theorist might explore how global politics reflects and reinforces gendered assumptions about leadership or conflict.	Example: A normative liberal might argue that global institutions should be designed to promote democracy and human rights.

Theory is not a singular concept—it can take **multiple forms**, serving different purposes depending on context. In Politics, theories are broadly divided into:

- **Traditional Theories** (e.g. realism, liberalism) which we will study for this unit.
- **Critical Theories** (e.g. feminism, postcolonialism, Marxism) which become relevant in the rest of Global Politics.

Theoretical Traditions

In global politics, theories are often grouped into broader **traditions** (also called perspectives, discourses, or paradigms). These reflect deeper **value systems** and assumptions about the world.

Examples of Theoretical Traditions:

- **Realism** – focuses on power, anarchy, and state interests.
- **Liberalism** – emphasises cooperation, institutions, and democracy.

Each tradition includes a range of **sub-traditions or schools of thought**:

- **Realism** - Classical realism, Neorealism
- **Liberalism** - Republican liberalism, Neoliberal institutionalism

Tensions may exist both **within** a tradition (e.g. classical vs. neorealism) and **between** traditions (e.g. realism vs. liberalism).

Traditional Perspectives in Global Politics

Overview

The two dominant traditional theories in global politics are **realism** and **liberalism**. These perspectives have shaped the academic field of **international relations (IR)** theory and offer foundational frameworks for understanding state behaviour on the global stage.

They are considered “traditional” because:

- They are long-established in the study of global politics.
- They reflect a **positivist** approach – the belief that objective knowledge can be gained through observation and that facts can be separated from values.
- They aim to explain the world as it is and provide solutions for policymakers – what theorist Robert Cox calls "**problem-solving theories**".

Shared Focus

- Both realism and liberalism are primarily concerned with the **relationship between conflict and cooperation** in international relations.
- Despite differences, they address similar issues and often “talk to” one another in academic debate.
- Over time, distinctions between the two perspectives have **blurred**, although clear differences still exist.

Realism

Core Assumptions

- Human nature is **selfish, power-seeking, and fearful**.
- The international system is **anarchical** (lacks a global authority).
- States are the **main actors** and behave like individuals in a "state of nature".
- States prioritise **national interest**, especially **security and survival**.
- Conflict is inevitable due to the pursuit of power and mistrust between states.

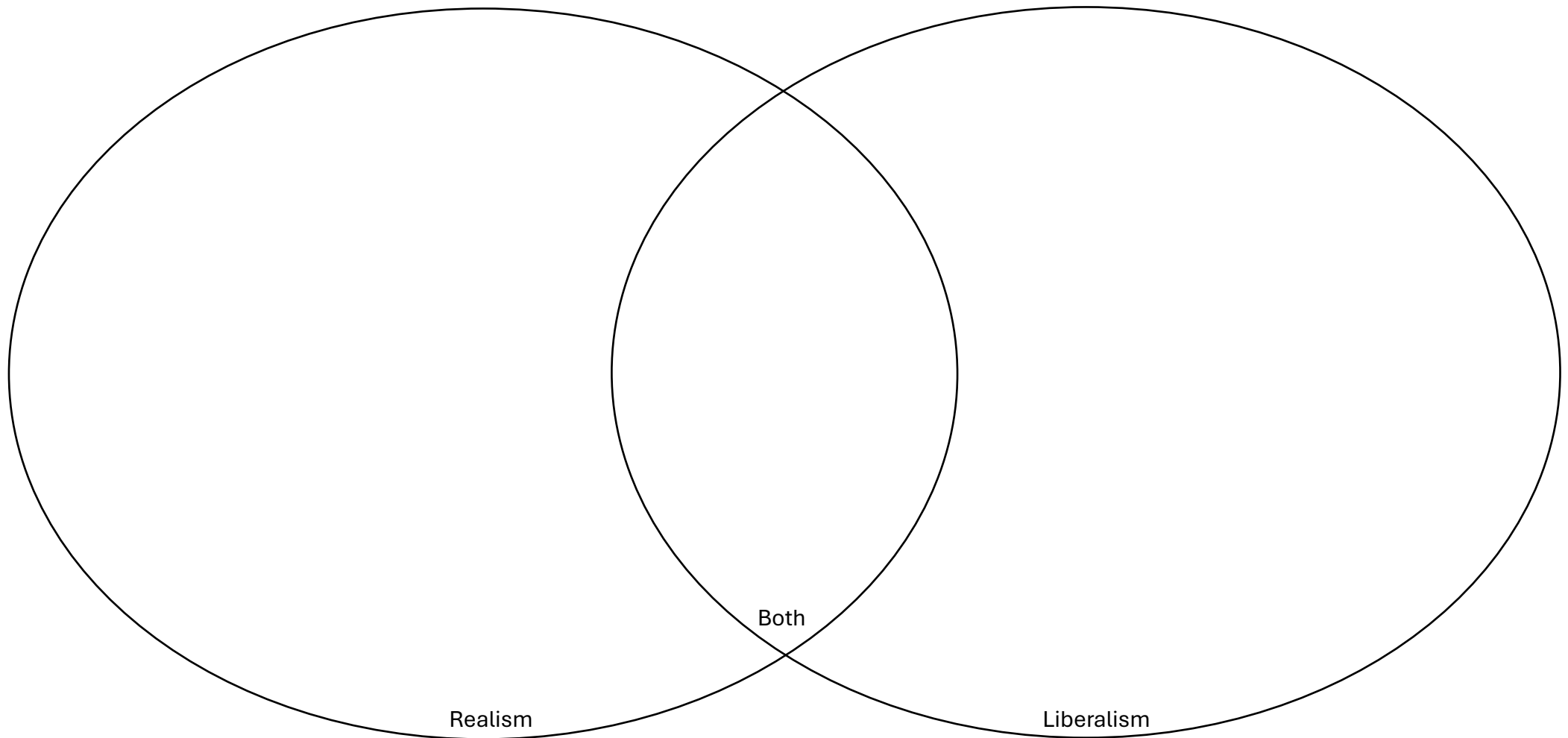
Liberalism

Core Assumptions

- Human beings are **rational and capable of cooperation**.
- International politics is **not inherently anarchic**; institutions and law can reduce conflict.
- States and **non-state actors** (e.g. IGOs, NGOs) both matter.
- Economic and political **interdependence** makes war less likely.
- **Democracy, free trade, and international institutions** help build lasting peace.

Task 1 – Create a Venn Diagram of Realism and Liberalism

Using the information on the previous page, **and information in your textbook**, complete the Venn diagram below.



Non-Traditional Perspectives in Global Politics

As you move beyond the foundational theories of realism and liberalism, global politics increasingly includes non-traditional perspectives that challenge many of the assumptions of traditional IR theory. These approaches open up new ways of understanding power, identity, and global order.

Constructivism

Constructivism argues that the international system is not shaped by objective structures alone (like power or institutions) but by ideas, norms, identities, and shared understandings.

Core Assumptions:

- Anarchy is what states make of it (Alexander Wendt): meaning is socially constructed, not fixed.
- States' interests and identities are shaped by their interactions with others.
- Norms (e.g. human rights, environmental norms) can change state behaviour.
- Change in global politics is possible through changing ideas, not just power balances.

Challenge to Realism and Liberalism:

- Questions the "naturalness" of self-interest, conflict, and even cooperation.
- Emphasises how ideas shape material interests, rather than the other way around.

Marxism / Neo-Marxism

Marxist and neo-Marxist theories focus on economic structures, especially capitalism, and how they generate global inequality and conflict.

Core Assumptions:

- The global system is driven by class struggle and the interests of capitalist elites.
- States serve the interests of the bourgeoisie (ruling capitalist class), not the people.
- Global institutions (e.g. IMF, World Bank) reinforce inequality between the Global North and South.
- True peace requires the overthrow or transformation of exploitative economic systems.

Challenge to Traditional Theories:

- Sees the state not as a neutral actor but as part of the global capitalist structure.
- Prioritises economic power over military or institutional power.

Feminism

Feminist approaches examine how gender and power dynamics shape international relations, often neglected by traditional theories.

Core Assumptions:

- Global politics is gendered: masculine norms (e.g. aggression, militarism) dominate policymaking and academic theory.
- Traditional theories ignore the roles and experiences of women and marginalised groups.
- Security should be understood beyond state survival, including human security (access to food, health, education, freedom from violence).

Challenge to Traditional Theories:

- Critiques the focus on war, power, and the state as narrow and exclusionary.
- Highlights how international issues (e.g. war, peacekeeping, development) affect men and women differently.

Green Politics / Environmentalism

Green political theory emphasises the ecological limits of the global system and the urgent need for sustainability.

Core Assumptions:

- The environment is not a separate issue but central to global politics.
- The traditional focus on state interest ignores planetary survival.
- Cooperation is essential: climate change cannot be solved unilaterally.
- Future generations have a right to a liveable planet – challenging short-term, state-centric thinking.

Challenge to Realism and Liberalism:

- Realism ignores ecological interdependence; liberalism overestimates the capacity of current institutions to address the crisis.

Task (Stretch Challenge):

Choose one non-traditional perspective.

Answer the following in a short essay (300–400 words):

- How does this theory challenge the assumptions of realism and liberalism?
- What global issue(s) does this theory help explain more effectively than traditional perspectives?
- Do you think this theory should be taken more seriously in global policymaking? Why or why not?

6.1 Realism

Realism is the belief that nation states are the most powerful and important actors in global politics. Realists argue that the international system is anarchic – there is no higher authority above the state – so each state must act in its own national interest to survive. This includes building military strength and being prepared to act alone if necessary. Realists believe conflict is inevitable, as all states compete for power, and international organisations have limited influence because states will always prioritise sovereignty and self-interest.

Key Beliefs

- **States are the most important actors** - IGOs like the UN are less powerful.
- **States act in self-interest** - National interest always comes first.
- **The world is anarchic** - No authority can force states to follow rules.
- **Military power is essential** - States must protect themselves.
- **Conflict is inevitable** - There's always competition and mistrust.

Examples of Realism in Action:

- **Iraq War (2003):** The USA invaded Iraq despite opposition, claiming it was in its national interest.
- **Russia & Crimea (2014):** Russia annexed Crimea unilaterally to protect its strategic interests.
- **Brexit slogans:** “Take back control” reflected realist ideas about regaining sovereignty.

Examples of Key Thinkers



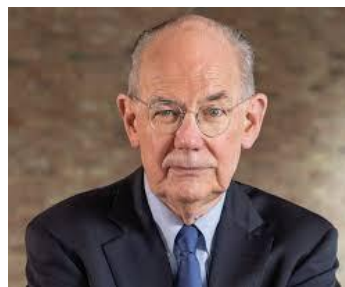
Hans Morgenthau

A classical realist thinker. Political man is a naturally selfish creature and will always try and dominate. In this way so are nation states. Moral considerations in global politics are less important than the national interest.



Kenneth Waltz

Nation states are most influenced by National security - the idea that states are **security maximisers**. That if states do want to work together it should be an agreement between two nations only (bipolarity and not multipolarity)



John Mearsheimer

An offensive realist thinker. Explained that conflict and competition for power between the great world powers will continue. Conflict is inevitable and that powerful states would always overcome weaker ones. States are trying to secure hegemony, meaning they want to dominate all other states within a region.



Hedley Bull

Identified the idea of anarchical society in global politics (idea there is not any global governance that works).

6.2 Liberalism

Liberalism sees global politics as a space where cooperation is not only possible, but essential. Liberals believe that states are increasingly interdependent and share common goals, such as peace, development, and environmental protection. Working together through international organisations (IGOs like the UN or WTO), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and trade agreements can reduce conflict and increase global stability. Liberals argue that promoting democracy, human rights, and international law helps states achieve mutual benefits and build a more peaceful world order.

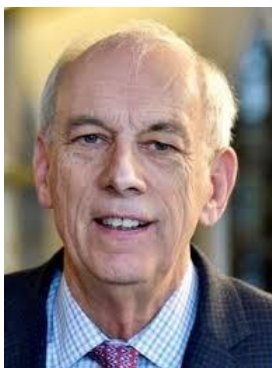
Key Beliefs

- **States can cooperate** - Shared goals like peace and development are possible.
- **IGOs matter** - The UN, EU, WTO, and NGOs play a key role in promoting stability.
- **Law and rules are important** - International agreements and norms help maintain order.
- **Trade and democracy reduce conflict** - States become more peaceful when they're connected.

Examples of Liberalism in Action:

- **The EU:** Promotes peace through shared trade and laws.
- **UN Peacekeeping & Human Rights:** Uphold global norms and cooperation.
- **Obama's Nobel Peace Prize (2009):** Recognised efforts to promote diplomacy and global unity.

Examples of Key Thinkers



Robert Keohane

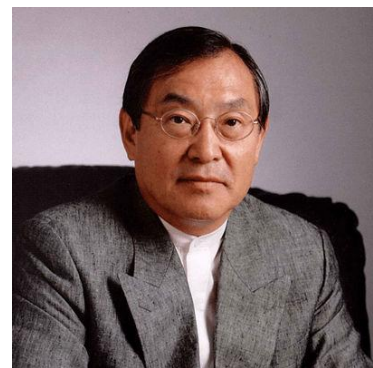
Behind the idea of complex interdependence - the ideas that states should trade more with each other not just to get stronger economically but because the more they become dependent on each other the less likely they will ever be in conflict as it would be mutually harmful



Francis Fukuyama

Conflict should be avoided and that democracy is one of the main ways to avoid conflict

Argued that with the end of the Cold War and defeat of the communist Soviet Union, liberal democracy would become the undisputed form of human government.



Kenichi Ohmae

Globalisation has brought about a revolutionary shift in economic, political, cultural and technological thought

Argues that states are losing their economic power and are no longer the main participants in the global economy

Task 2

Read through each of the statements below. Decide if they would be ascribed to a realist or a liberal. Then, colour-code the statements according to the following categories:

- Human nature
- Security (including order and conflict)
- Power.

Defending internal security and stability is crucial. This is best done through well-defended borders, and clear and enforced laws. REALISM/LIBERALISM	Human nature is naturally selfish and egoist and therefore states are only interested in their own national interests. REALISM/LIBERALISM	Liberals have an optimistic view of human nature that translates to states. Human nature is not fixed, and so states can improve and develop. REALISM/LIBERALISM
Conflict is an unavoidable feature of global politics. It is sometimes necessary to defend national interests and increase a state's power and influence. REALISM/LIBERALISM	States are aware of the limits of soft power. However, they may use smart power, a combination of soft and hard power, to achieve their objectives. REALISM/LIBERALISM	Threats and the use of force are particularly important types of hard power to possess and maximise, especially in a system of international anarchy. REALISM/LIBERALISM
The primary goal and motivation of states is to increase their power. REALISM/LIBERALISM	Powerful states will always be able to overcome weaker states. REALISM/LIBERALISM	Every state is potentially a threat to other states. REALISM/LIBERALISM
Conflict is avoidable, and efforts should be made to prevent and reduce conflict. REALISM/LIBERALISM	IGOs, such as the UN, offer a forum for conflict resolution. REALISM/LIBERALISM	The use of power, particularly military, can be counter-productive. REALISM/LIBERALISM
Humans, and therefore states, are committed to individual liberty and freedom, e.g. on human rights. REALISM/LIBERALISM	When power is shared equally between states it creates a balance of power and this leads to stability. REALISM/LIBERALISM	Conflict is a feature of global politics but must always be avoided and used only as a last resort. REALISM/LIBERALISM
States being bound together in close economic cooperation reduces the likelihood of conflict. REALISM/LIBERALISM	It is possible to impose order on humans and states from above through a rules-based system of international law. REALISM/LIBERALISM	IN 2012 the EU was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for the post-war peace and security it brought to Europe. REALISM/LIBERALISM
Humans, and therefore states, prefer to work in partnership. International cooperation through IGOs is both desirable and possible. REALISM/LIBERALISM	States are motivated by a need to survive. This is especially so in a global system where there is no guarantee that another state or IGO will help them. REALISM/LIBERALISM	Human nature is fixed and driven and cannot be changed, so states too are motivated by a desire to dominate and have power over others. REALISM/LIBERALISM
Soft power and smart power are important means by which states can achieve their intended outcomes. They should be the first option, with hard power used only as a last resort. REALISM/LIBERALISM	As states become more economically interdependent, the risk of conflict recedes. In this way, economic interdependence makes the entire global system more stable and peaceful. REALISM/LIBERALISM	Military power is not the only form of significant power. Economic power and free-trade links can enable states to become richer, more stable and secure. REALISM/LIBERALISM

Models of Understanding

The Billiard Ball Model

One common analogy used to explain **Realism** is the ‘**billiard ball model**’, often linked to John Dalton.

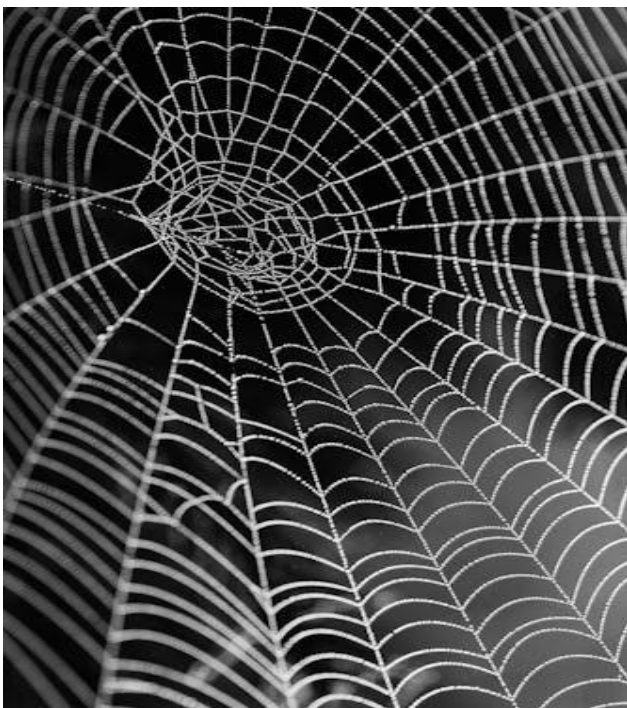
In this model, each **billiard ball represents a nation state**, with its hard outer shell symbolising the state’s **sovereignty and defences**. The hard shell is necessary because, in global politics, states are constantly colliding—through war, ideological clashes, or territorial disputes. The **larger balls** (like the USA, China, or Russia) have more power and influence over how the game plays out. Importantly, there are **no rules governing how the balls move**, reflecting the realist view of an anarchic world without higher authority.

However, this model has been **challenged by liberal thinkers** like **Nye and Keohane**, who argue that **globalisation and economic ties** have created **complex interdependence**. They suggest a better analogy today is the ‘**cobweb model**’, where states are linked and dependent on one another.



The Cobweb Model

The **billiard ball model** has been increasingly challenged by recent global developments. Two key trends explain why.



First, there has been a major rise in **cross-border activity**—such as trade, migration, and communication—making state borders more **porous** (easier to move through). This is largely a result of **globalisation**.

Second, states have become more **interconnected and interdependent**. Challenges like climate change, pandemics, and economic crises cannot be solved by any one country, no matter how powerful. These changes have led to a new idea called ‘**complex interdependence**’, where states are encouraged to cooperate more closely.

This is illustrated by the ‘**cobweb model**’, which shows how states are like strands in a web—if one breaks, it affects the whole structure. It highlights how much states now **depend on each other**.

Task 3

Billiard Ball Model - emphasises state sovereignty and an anarchical international system where states interact like billiard balls—separate, self-interested, and colliding unpredictably.

Describe the key features of the billiard ball model. ► What does it suggest about how states behave?	
Why is the billiard ball model associated with realism? ► How does it reflect assumptions about human nature and international anarchy?	
What assumptions does the model make about sovereignty and state borders? ► Are these still valid in a globalised world?	
In what ways does the billiard ball model help explain international conflict? ► Use an example to justify your answer.	
A-A* question: ► What does the billiard ball model fail to account for in modern global politics (e.g. climate change, terrorism, NGOs)?	

Cobweb Model - presents a more interconnected view of international relations where states, organisations, and people are interdependent—like strands in a cobweb.

Describe the core assumptions of the cobweb model. ► What does it say about global interdependence?	
Why is the cobweb model associated with liberalism? ► How does it reflect beliefs in cooperation and institutions?	
How does the cobweb model challenge the idea of absolute sovereignty? ► Use an example (e.g. the UN, WTO, climate treaties).	
Give an example of a global issue that the cobweb model explains better than the billiard ball model. ► Why is the billiard ball model less useful in this case?	
A-A* question: ► Can the cobweb model underestimate the persistence of power politics and conflict? Use an example.	

6.3 Key Divisions Between Realism and Liberalism

1. Human Nature and Power

Aspect	Realism	Liberalism
View of People	Pessimistic – humans are selfish, fearful, and power-seeking (Hobbes, Morgenthau)	Optimistic – humans are rational, moral, and capable of cooperation (Locke)
Power	Power is essential for survival – a zero-sum game	Power is a tool to achieve prosperity, security, and shared benefit – a positive-sum game
Implications	Conflict is inevitable – states pursue dominance	States can cooperate and uphold shared values like democracy and rights

2. Order, Security and the Likelihood of Conflict

Aspect	Realism	Liberalism
View of System	Anarchy leads to self-help, mistrust, and inevitable conflict	Anarchy can be managed through cooperation and institutions
Security	Gained through power, alliances, and military strength – leads to the security dilemma	Achieved through complex interdependence , diplomacy, and international law
Conflict	Inevitable – only temporarily managed by the balance of power	Avoidable – rational actors can build peace through trust and international norms
Institutions	Weak and ignored if they clash with national interest	Important for building stability and reducing risk of war (e.g. UN, EU, WTO)
Example	Cold War arms race	EU reducing conflict between former rivals through economic cooperation

3. International Organisations and the Role of the State

Aspect	Realism	Liberalism
Main Actor	Sovereign states are the only actors that matter	States are key but international organisations, NGOs and MNCs also shape global affairs
IOs (e.g. UN, WTO, EU)	Weak and powerless – states only comply when it suits them (e.g. US pulling out of Paris Agreement)	Play a central role – foster cooperation, build trust, and promote long-term peace and rules
State Behaviour	States act in self-interest; will abandon IOs when power is at stake	States recognise the mutual benefit of complying with international rules and norms

Task 4

Write a paragraph defending realism as an approach to global politics.

Core Content to Include:

- Clear definition of **realism** (e.g. an approach that sees states as rational, self-interested actors in an anarchic international system).
- Mention of **state sovereignty** and **anarchy** (absence of a global authority).
- Reference to **human nature** as selfish or power-seeking (e.g. drawing on Hobbes).
- Emphasis on **national interest**, **security**, and **the inevitability of conflict**.
- Real-world example (e.g. Russian invasion of Ukraine, US withdrawal from agreements under Trump).

Skills to Demonstrate:

- Use of subject-specific terminology (e.g. "anarchy", "self-help", "sovereignty", "balance of power").
- Logical structure: clear point, development, example.
- Clear and concise explanation of why realism is a useful or valid lens for understanding global politics.
- Reference to at least two realist thinkers (e.g. **Thomas Hobbes**, **Kenneth Waltz**).

Extension / Stretch Elements:

- Brief comparison to alternative perspectives (e.g. realism is more pragmatic than liberalism).
- Critical phrasing (e.g. "While often seen as pessimistic, realism provides a powerful framework for understanding...").

Task 5

Write a paragraph defending liberalism as an approach to global politics.

Core Content to Include:

- Clear definition of **liberalism** (e.g. an approach that sees international cooperation as possible and desirable through shared norms and institutions).
- Reference to **interdependence**, **democracy**, and **international institutions** (e.g. UN, WTO).
- Belief that **human beings are rational and capable of cooperation**.
- Real-world example (e.g. Paris Climate Agreement, EU cooperation, role of the UN).

Skills to Demonstrate:

- Use of appropriate terminology (e.g. "interdependence", "liberal international order", "collective security", "global governance").
- Clear structure with an argument, explanation, and evidence.
- Justification of liberalism as a credible and optimistic framework for global politics.
- Reference to at least two liberal thinkers (e.g. **Immanuel Kant**, **John Locke**, **Robert Keohane**).

Extension / Stretch Elements:

- Acknowledgement of complexity (e.g. liberalism works best where democratic values are shared).
- Use of evaluative phrases (e.g. "Liberalism offers a more hopeful vision of global politics by...")

6.4 The Anarchical Society & Society of States Theory (Hedley Bull)

Bull's theory offers a **middle ground** between realism and liberalism.

Anarchy in the Global System

Hedley Bull argues that the international system is **inherently anarchic**—there is no global government or higher authority to regulate how states behave. This idea is similar to what **realists** believe: that anarchy defines international relations and that each **sovereign state** acts in its own interests.

However, Bull's theory **differs from realism** in an important way. While realists often assume that anarchy leads to endless conflict, Bull believes that anarchy **does not have to result in chaos**. Instead, he argues that states are **rational actors** that recognise the need for a degree of **order** to survive and thrive.

A Society of States

Bull introduces the idea of a **Society of States**—a group of sovereign countries that, even without a global ruler, follow shared **norms, rules, and institutions**. These shared expectations guide how states interact with one another, making their behaviour more **predictable** and reducing the risk of conflict.

Some key shared norms in the Society of States include:

- **Sovereignty** – Respecting each other's borders and independence.
- **Diplomacy** – Using dialogue to resolve disputes peacefully.
- **Non-intervention** – Not interfering in the internal affairs of other states.
- **Rules of war** – Following basic standards, such as protecting civilians during conflict.

Even though these rules are not legally binding, states tend to **follow them voluntarily** because they benefit from a more stable and cooperative system.

Order Through Cooperation

Bull argues that the desire for order has led to the creation of **institutions**—formal and informal ways for states to work together. These include:

- **International organisations**, such as the United Nations, which help states communicate and settle disputes.
- **International law**, which sets clear rules for how states should behave.
- **Balance of power systems**, which help prevent any one state from becoming too powerful.

Bull's theory includes elements of **liberalism**, such as the belief that norms and institutions can help foster cooperation. However, Bull remains realistic—he recognises that **conflict is still possible**, and that cooperation depends on states choosing to uphold shared rules.

A Middle Ground Between Two Theories

Hedley Bull's theory of *The Anarchical Society* offers a **middle ground** between the theories of **realism** and **liberalism**, giving a more balanced view of how international relations work. While Bull

accepts some of the core ideas of realism, he also shares important features with liberalism—especially around the potential for cooperation.

Relationship to Realism

Bull agrees with realists on several key points:

- The international system is **anarchic**—there is no global authority to enforce rules.
- **States are the most important actors** in global politics and must act to protect their survival.
- **Conflict is common** because states operate in a “self-help” system where they must rely on themselves.

However, Bull disagrees with **realists like Kenneth Waltz**, who believe that anarchy always leads to rivalry and power struggles. Instead, Bull argues that **states can create and follow shared rules** (such as respect for sovereignty or diplomacy) that help bring **order** to the international system—even without a central global authority.

While realists may see Bull’s theory as **too optimistic**, Bull still recognises that cooperation is **fragile** and that **power politics** remains important. He doesn’t ignore the reality of conflict but shows that limited order is still possible.

Relationship to Liberalism

Bull also shares several beliefs with liberals:

- **Norms, rules, and institutions** can help states cooperate and maintain order.
- **International law and diplomacy** play an important role in reducing misunderstandings and preventing conflict.
- States are **rational actors** that can recognise the benefits of working together.

However, Bull is **less optimistic** than liberals like **Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye**, who believe international organisations and interdependence can significantly reduce conflict. Bull thinks that while institutions can help, the system is still **anarchic and fragile**, and cooperation depends on **states continuing to follow shared norms**.

Some liberals also **criticise Bull** for focusing too much on **states**, and not enough on the role of **non-state actors** like multinational companies or NGOs in shaping global politics.

Task 6

Answer the following questions.

What does Hedley Bull mean when he says the international system is “anarchic”?	
Name two norms that are part of Bull’s concept of the <i>Society of States</i> .	
In what way does Bull’s view of anarchy differ from that of realists like Kenneth Waltz?	
How does Bull’s theory show similarities with both realism and liberalism?	

Give an example of how a real-world international organisation (e.g. the United Nations) might help maintain order in an anarchic international system.

Why do some liberals criticise Bull's theory for being too state-centric?

A-A* - Do you think Bull's middle-ground approach offers a more realistic view of international relations than either realism or liberalism alone? Give reasons for your answer.

Exam Questions

Exam Tips – Comparative Theories (Paper 3)

- This is **always the second question** on **Paper 3**.
- It is **worth 12 marks** and you **must answer the question given** – there's no choice, so **revise everything!**
- It is marked on **AO1 (6 marks)** and **AO2 (6 marks)** only.
 - ✓ AO1 = Knowledge and understanding
 - ✓ AO2 = Application and examples
 - ✗ No AO3 = You **don't need to make a judgement or conclusion** – just explain the differences/similarities **with evidence**.

How to Maximise Your Marks

- Use **key thinkers** to reach at least **7 out of 9** – remember, these are ideologies!
- To aim for **full marks (12/12)**, add a **synoptic link** to **Liberalism, Socialism, or Conservatism** (from Paper 1).
Make this clear: e.g. *“Synoptically, this links to...”*

Ideal Structure (3 Paragraphs in 15 Minutes)

1. **State the difference or similarity**
2. **Give a real-world example** (this can be the trickiest part)
3. **Include a thinker**
4. **Synoptic link**

Task 7

Look at the example responses on the next page and colour code them against the criteria:

1. **State the difference or similarity**
2. **Give a real-world example**
3. **Include a thinker**
4. **Synoptic link**

Example Responses:

The first response provides two paragraphs on realism and one contrasting paragraph on liberalism.

The second response provides three paragraphs, each with contrasts between realism and liberalism.

Both approaches are acceptable; you will likely choose on the day depending on the topic of the question.

Analyse how realists and liberals understand the likelihood of conflict and war. [12 marks]

Realists argue that conflict is inevitable because of the selfish and power-hungry nature of human beings. Hans Morgenthau, a classical realist, claimed that states reflect human nature – they pursue their own interests, even at the expense of others. This selfish behaviour means states are constantly in competition, which leads to frequent tension and ultimately war. Realists also highlight the **anarchical** structure of the international system, where there is no higher authority to regulate state behaviour. In this system, states cannot trust others and must rely on themselves for survival.

Another key realist explanation for war is the **security dilemma**. This occurs when one state increases its military strength to feel safer, prompting others to do the same. This creates a vicious cycle of arms build-ups, increasing suspicion and the risk of war. This was seen during the Cold War, when the USA and USSR continually escalated their nuclear capabilities. John Mearsheimer, an offensive realist, argued that states will always seek to maximise their power to achieve security, even if it leads to conflict. Synoptically, this links to Hobbes' conservative view of human nature as naturally aggressive and competitive, requiring strong states to prevent disorder.

In contrast, **liberals are far more optimistic**. They believe that war is not inevitable and that cooperation is possible, especially between democratic states. The **democratic peace thesis** suggests democracies are less likely to go to war with one another, as they are more accountable to their citizens. Liberals like Robert Keohane argue that through **complex interdependence**, states become economically and politically linked through trade and international institutions like the UN and EU. These connections reduce incentives for conflict, as war would be mutually harmful. Synoptically, this aligns with Locke's liberal view that cooperation is rational and beneficial, and with Marx's socialist idea that humans are naturally inclined to work together for the common good.

Analyse the divisions that exist between realists and liberals over the impact of both international organisations and the significance of states. [12 marks]

Realists and liberals hold opposing views on the effectiveness of international organisations (IGOs). Realists are sceptical, arguing that states are fundamentally self-interested and that IGOs are weak and ineffective. They believe that IGOs can only function if powerful states allow them to, and often exist to serve the interests of dominant states, or global hegemons. For example, realists would argue the UN is often manipulated by the USA to advance its own national interest. In contrast, liberals are more optimistic. They believe in **complex interdependence** – that IGOs like the UN or EU foster cooperation, peace, and shared norms. This links to Keohane's view that cooperation is rational and achievable in a rules-based global system.

A second key difference lies in how each theory views the motivations of states. Realists follow **zero-sum theory**, which means they see global politics as a competition – if one state gains, another must lose. This leads them to view IGOs as arenas for rivalry rather than collaboration. Liberals reject this idea and argue that states can make **absolute gains** through cooperation. For example, membership of the WTO benefits all states through trade rules and economic stability. Realists see the state system as anarchic and driven by fear and competition, while liberals argue that shared institutions can reduce tension. Synoptically, this reflects Locke's liberal belief in mutual benefit and limited government, and Marx's socialist idea of human cooperation for the common good.

Finally, realists view states as the only meaningful actors in global politics. Sovereignty, for them, is absolute and non-negotiable. They argue that IGOs, NGOs, or multinational corporations are only influential when states allow them to be. Liberals disagree, pointing out the **growing role of non-state actors** due to globalisation. They argue that sovereignty can be pooled, for example through EU membership, to increase collective strength. Liberals also highlight that democratic states are more peaceful, as seen in the **democratic peace thesis**, whereas realists argue that the type of government is irrelevant – all states pursue survival. Synoptically this links to Hobbes' conservative view that strong states are necessary in a dangerous world, while liberals see democracy as a path to peace.

Task 8

Choose two of the past paper questions below and, using your textbook to help you, write a response in the same style as the examples above. When complete, colour code it against the criteria as you did for the examples.

Remember:

1. **State the difference or similarity**
2. **Give a real-world example** (this can be the trickiest part)
3. **Include a thinker**
4. **Synoptic link**

Past Paper Questions:

2019 - Analyse how realists and liberals understand the likelihood of conflict and war (completed for you)

2020 - Analyse the differences between the realist concept of the security dilemma and the liberal concept of complex interdependence.

2021 - Analyse the divisions that exist between realists and liberals over the impact of both international organisations and the significance of states (completed for you)

2022 - Analyse the differences that exist between realists and liberals in the ways they view human nature and power.

2023 - Analyse the different explanations which realism and liberalism provide for recent developments in global politics since 2000.

2024 - Analyse how realism and liberalism differ over the main ideas of the analytical society and society of states theory.