



# Competing visions of international politics: Realism

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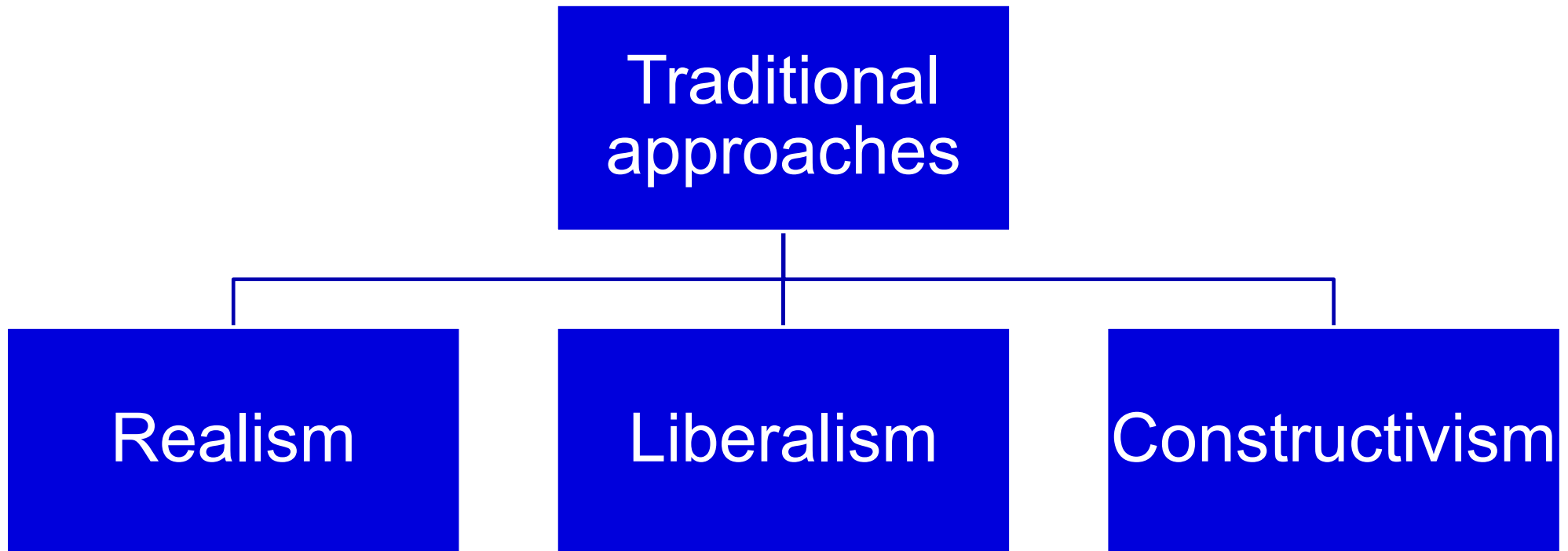
# Outline

- Theories of international relations
- What is realism in the theory of IR?
  - Classical realism
  - Neorealism
  - Structural realism
  - Rise and fall realism
  - Neorealism
- Real-world examples (discussion)

# Theories in international relations

- theories in IR reflect different worldviews
- **Why do we need theories of international relations?**
  - make assumptions visible - How is human nature? How can states provide for their security? By what means?...
  - help to understand and predict state behaviour
  - help to understand causes of armed conflicts and wars (and prevent wars)
- theories are simplifications of reality (models) x real world as more complex!

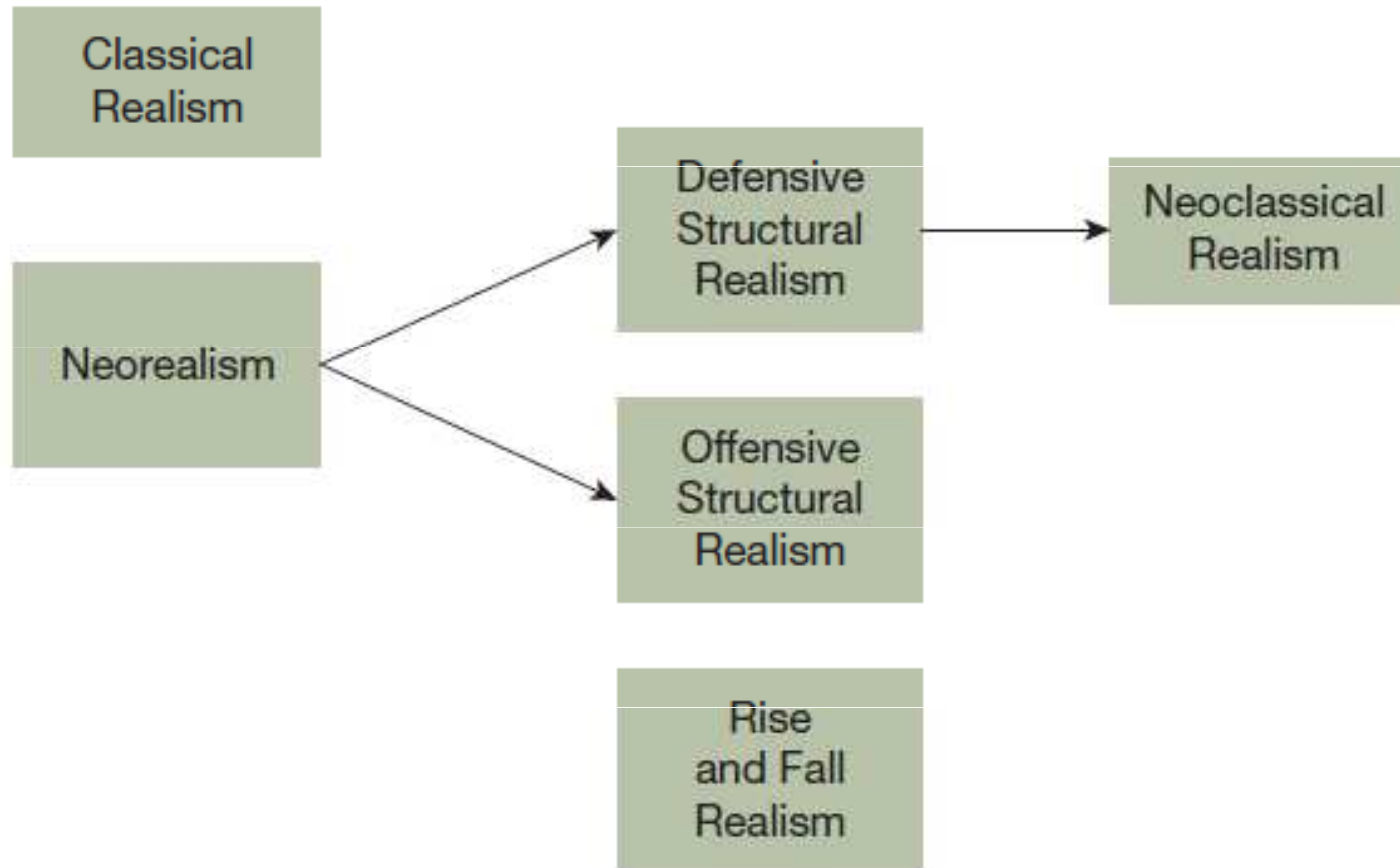
# Theories in international relations



# Realism: key propositions

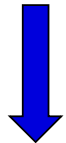
1. international politics composed of sovereign nation-states
  2. states are beholden to no higher power (no world government)
  - 3. international politics is anarchical**
    - anarchy - a lack of orderer (x order)
- 
- the overriding goal of states is to survive → by increasing their power
  - power - primarily understood military terms
  - mostly a pessimistic view of IR - 2 causes of conflicts: flawed human nature x structure (anarchy)

# Different strands of the realist thought



# Classical realism

- key publication: Hans Morgenthau - Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace
- **human nature is flawed** → desire for power
- anarchical conditions of the international system as a permissive condition



- states tend to accumulate power
- states behave rationally (costs x benefits)

# Neorealism

- key publication: Kenneth Waltz - *Theory of International Politics* (1979)
- systems = structure + interacting units (greater focus on the **system** x system units)
- international politics as tragic (unintended consequences)
  - **conflicts are caused by bad social organization** (x human nature)
- stability depends on the distribution of capabilities → multipolar x bipolar systems
- security dilemma - war is not inevitable → balancing
- 1990s - decline of neorealism, resurgence after 9/11 and with the war in Ukraine



# Defensive structural realism

- developed out of neorealism, but several differences:
  1. dominant emphasis on **rational choice**
  2. **offence-defence balance**
  3. => states should support the status quo - **balancing** as an appropriate response to concentrations of power
- S. Walt - the balance of threat theory: „*in anarchy, states form alliances to protect themselves*“
- seeking superior power is not a rational response to systemic pressures
- a possibility to avoid security dilemma

# Offensive structural realism

- uncertainty resulting from anarchical condition
- great powers inherently possess some offensive mil. capabilities → can damage each other
- states try to **maximize their relative power**
- power maximization - not necessarily self-defeating!
- global hegemony impossible, the second best option → **regional hegemony**
- bipolarity - most peaceful x multipolarity - most prone to wars

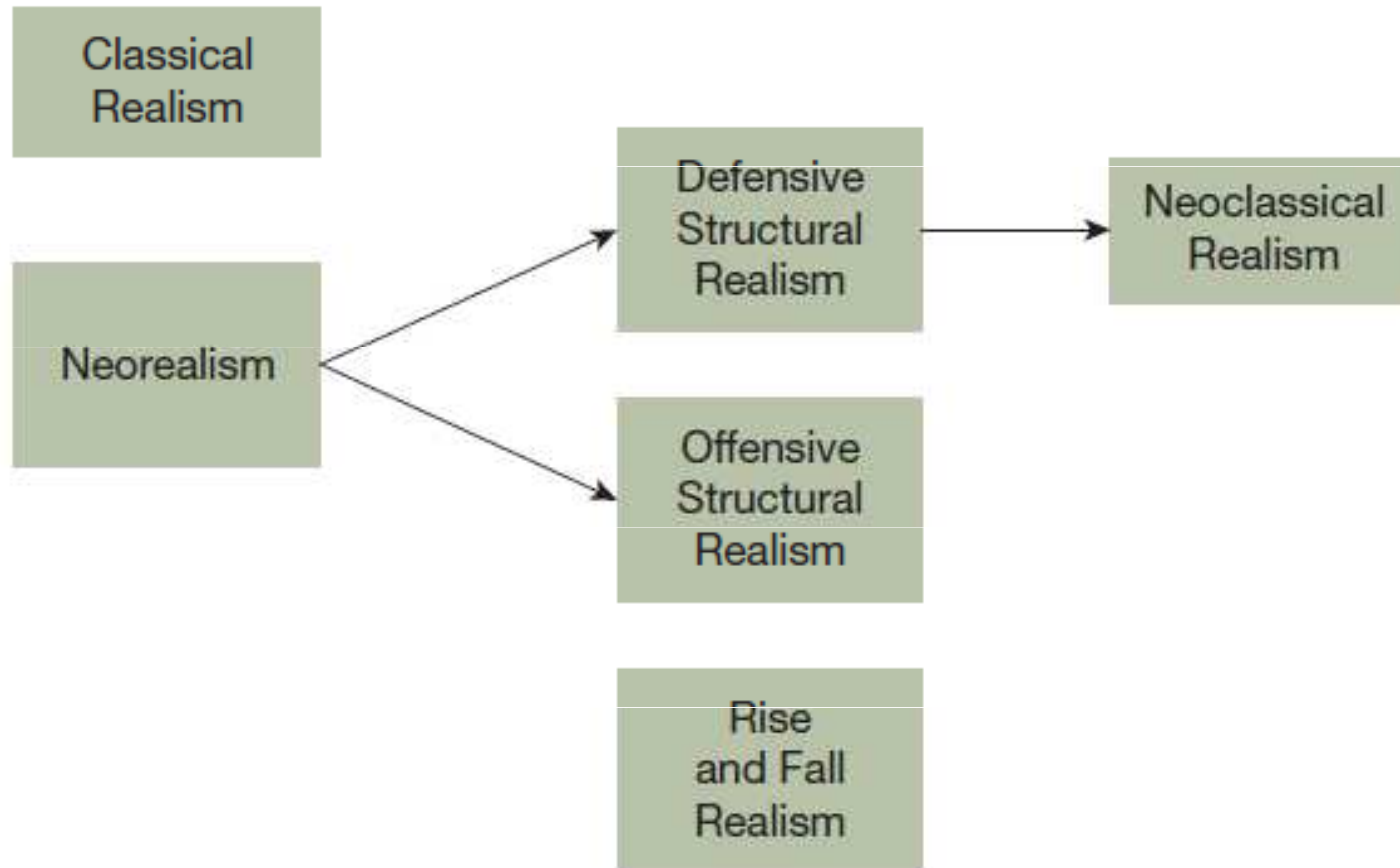
# Rise and fall realism

- emerged as an alternative to the balance of power theory
- Organski (*World Politics*, 1958) - **hegemony as the foundation for peace**, balance often associated with war
  - the dominant state capable of shaping rules and practices of the IS to satisfy its interest - stability = product of this order
  - with power becoming more evenly distributed - war is more probable
  - history as a successive rise and fall of great powers (caused by internal processes)

# Neoclassical realism

- focus on the domestic level of analysis
- systemic pressures filtered through **variables at the unit level** => specific foreign policy decisions (state behavior)
- different internal factors impact the state behaviour
- when states are united (elite and societal level) - easier to recognize threats and balance to counter them x fragmented states - indecisiveness, difficulties to mobilize resources

# Different strands of the realist thought



# Summary



# Realism and the world politics

## Intervention and War in Ukraine

- explained by realist thinkers Mearsheimer, Walt
- Western elites blamed for:
  - liberal policies (NATO enlargement, EU expansion, democracy promotion)
  - ignoring Russian security concerns and basic geopolitics
- reaffirmation of the realist perspective on IR
  - constant fear for own security → competition for power
  - security dilemma
  - alliance politics - balancing (when facing a common threat)

Mearsheimer (2014) “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault“, Foreign Affairs

S. Walt (2022) “An International Relations Theory Guide to the War in Ukraine“

# Group discussion

1. Do you agree with the realist perspective on the war in Ukraine?
2. In what aspects does realism help us to understand contemporary world politics and in what it does not? Can you think of some examples?