

Is 'realism' the best way to explain international relations?

Aarav Ghosh

Evaluating whether realism is the "best" IR theory requires rigorous epistemological criteria: explanatory range, parsimony, Lakatosian progressiveness. While competing theories challenge realism by introducing domestic or institutional variables, they compromise theoretical economy for localised descriptive depth. This essay argues that realism remains the superior general theory of IR, whereby anchoring its framework in a stable, parsimonious core, systemic anarchy & the distribution of capabilities, realism explains the widest range of interstate phenomena, utilising its positive heuristic to progressively absorb anomalies without sacrificing its structural utility.

Methodology

Most researchers, Waltz observes, treat theory-building as the accumulation of verified, interconnected hypotheses¹ where a theory is true because the conjecture holds, not because it explains why it holds. Confirmation describes a regularity without disclosing why it obtains. Avoiding the inductivist illusion, the belief that truth accrues automatically with more data, posited by Lévi-Strauss², Waltz argues that theory is a deliberate simplification of reality, isolating select variables to explain why a pattern occurs & recurs³, not merely to confirm that it does quantitatively. Theories explain laws rather than amalgamate them, & are qualitatively different from laws, since they answer "how," not "what" or "how much." How, then, do we evaluate such theories?

¹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

³ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

The central measure remains explanatory power, the very end towards which a theory is built. This capacity is the ability to account for the widest range of international outcomes through a single coherent causal mechanism. Range does not mean admitting more variables, rather a mechanism stripped to its causally significant variables that precisely allows it to travel across dissimilar cases without alteration, escaping the localised constraints via the sum of their particulars of case-by-case frameworks. A theory must specify how a variable produces an outcome rather than merely noting correlation, separating genuine explanation from inductivist accumulation, which asserts association without disclosing causation.

A second measure is parsimony, whose foundation follows from how theories relate to the world they explain. Many equate a theory to a model airplane, assuming its resemblance to reality determines its utility, or that analytical flaws require hyper-realistic modeling. However, were a theory to incorporate every variable, actor, & contingency, it would cease to function as theory, becoming a mere duplication of reality itself that explains nothing. To be successful in explanation, a theory needs abstraction by isolating causally significant variables from incidental ones. Its value stems from its ability to isolate the mechanisms that generate recurring patterns, rendering them intelligible. Parsimony, in this view, is a condition of explanatory power itself between competing theories, where a superior theory will have fewer laws or postulate fewer entities or causal mechanisms that are less complex.

Progressiveness is the third measure that answers whether a theory continues to explain well as anomalies accumulate against it. A theory may possess coherent mechanisms of wide range & still face cases that resist it with evidence outside what the logic shows. The

question is not whether such anomalies exist; on a Lakatosian view⁴, they arise against every theory eventually, but how the theory responds to them. Beyond comparison against competing theories over time, they can be judged as a single research programme, by which its own development can be judged progressive or degenerative. Every theory rests on a hard core of irrefutable commitments, surrounded by a protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses that absorb & develop against anomalies with the core intact⁵. A degenerative programme may respond with a hypothesis to neutralise counters, but a progressive one responds with the positive heuristic absorbing anomalies, generating independently corroborated, novel content.

Why is prediction excluded despite being the most intuitive test of scientific claims?

Prediction presupposes a closed system where relevant variables are isolated and held constant for precise forecasting. International politics is not such a system: strategic interaction, contingency, and human agency ensure that the same structural pressure can be answered by more than one rational response. A theory explains tendencies, not events; on a Lakatosian view⁶, it is judged by whether it remains progressive relative to rivals, not whether each prediction was borne out⁷. The question is whether it explains, more powerfully than rivals, the patterns those cases form.

EXPLANATORY POWER	PARSIMONY	PROGRESSIVENESS
Does the framework explain overarching regularities (war,	Does the theory cleanly isolate key variables instead	Does each subsequent theoretical modification

⁴ Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, ed. John Worrall and Gregory Currie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

⁵ Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*.

⁶ Lakatos deliberately separates explanation from forecasting. Newtonian mechanics remained progressive despite anomalies such as Mercury's perihelion because it continued generating corroborated theoretical developments before eventual replacement by general relativity.

⁷ Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*.

alliances, polarity) rather than isolated, localized episodes?	of creating a detailed, useless duplication?	generate novel, independently verified predictive content?
Can the single causal mechanism travel across vastly dissimilar historical eras without requiring ad hoc alterations?	Does the framework reach its conclusions using fewer assumptions and simpler mechanisms than its rivals?	Does the programme use its positive heuristic to absorb anomalies into a protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses?
Does the mechanism specify exactly how a variable produces an outcome rather than merely noting a correlation?	Are the core commitments stable enough to maintain strict theoretical unity across all internal variants?	Does the framework neutralize external empirical challenges while keeping its foundational hard core completely intact?

Figure 1: Matrix for Evaluation of IR Theoretical Programme/Framework

Evaluation of Realism

On account of explanation, the comparative is not whether realism explains every important phenomenon in IR, no general theory can, but whether any rival theory explains a broader range of recurring outcomes through an equally coherent causal mechanism. As general IR theories, realism, liberalism, institutionalism, and constructivism must be evaluated against the macro-phenomena organizing interstate politics rather than isolated episodes. These include the origins of war, peace, balance, alliances, deterrence, security dilemmas, and polarity between major powers. Under this condition, competing theories only surpass realism if the additional causal mechanisms expand the overall range of outcomes explained, not merely by providing superior explanations of limited phenomena.

The principal empirical challenge to realism concerns cooperation under anarchy.

Institutionalism argues that cooperation is more durable than realism predicts because institutions reduce transaction costs, facilitate monitoring, & establish reciprocity⁸. These

⁸ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

mechanisms explain the persistence of regimes like the WTO more convincingly than structural realism alone, yet this does not enlarge overall explanatory range. As Glaser argues, institutions are 'the product of the same factors, states' interests and the constraints imposed by the system.'⁹ They explain how cooperation is maintained once sought, not why states possess strategic interests initially. Consequently, institutionalism deepens the account of a single phenomenon without replacing realism's core. Liberal theory challenges realism by rejecting the assumption that state preferences can be treated as given. Moravcsik instead locates foreign policy origins in domestic societal preferences and institutional constraints, arguing that domestic resource redistribution (due to bargaining) reshapes state preferences¹⁰; explaining why states facing similar environments pursue different foreign policies and accounts more convincingly for phenomena such as European integration¹¹. However, its explanatory gains principally concern variation in state behaviour rather than the recurring patterns. Liberalism explains why states respond differently to the same environment; realism continues to explain why those environments repeatedly generate balancing, security dilemmas and strategic competition regardless of domestic constitutional arrangements.

Collectively, these rival theories reveal explanatory limitations within realism. While these frameworks offer superior localised accounts, they fail to expand the explanatory range of international theory itself through similar coherent mechanisms. Each of these competing theories presents phenomena that realism either treats as exogenous or abstracts away from,

⁹ Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994-95): 85

¹⁰ Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997).

¹¹ Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

but converges upon a narrower class of recurring outcomes. No rival framework captures both the structural regularities realism explains (anarchy, self-help) and the broader systemic outcomes it accounts for. Their contribution offers depth over breadth¹², failing the criteria for an adequate general theory.

On account of parsimony, the central question remains: assuming broadly comparable explanatory power (which does not manifest in this case), does realism reach those explanations with fewer theoretical commitments? A superior general theory, here, reaches comparable explanatory conclusions with fewer irreducible assumptions and causal mechanisms, as echoed by the Waltzian critique of hyperrealistic modelling¹³. Theory succeeds precisely because it abstracts, isolating only those elements necessary to account for recurring patterns. Parsimony is therefore not synonymous with oversimplification but with explanatory economy: stripping a theory to its causally indispensable commitments while excluding variables whose contribution is contextual rather than general.

Measured against this setting, realism has an unusually economically explanatory architecture. Though realism encompasses an entire research programme across classical, structural, offensive and neoclassical variants, their modifications concern the locus or operation of causation rather than altering foundational assumptions. Across these traditions, the irreducible commitments remain stable wherein states operate under anarchy, survival and

¹² This reflects a familiar trade-off in the philosophy of science between explanatory unification and descriptive adequacy. A theory may increase fidelity to particular cases by incorporating additional variables, yet in doing so sacrifice the abstraction and generality required of a successful explanatory framework. Under the evaluative criteria adopted in this essay, greater descriptive richness therefore does not necessarily constitute theoretical superiority.

¹³ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

conditions their policy behaviour and recurrent outcomes emerge from consequences of power and self-help.

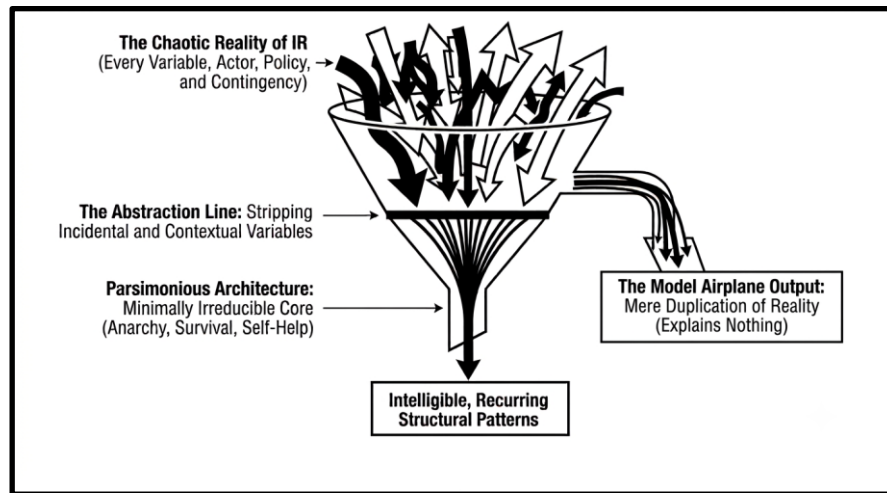


Figure 2: Theoretical Abstraction Funnel

In mapping from Morgenthau's biological realism¹⁴, structural realism deliberately discarded the psychologically contingent foundation of animus dominandi¹⁵, relocating the source of outcomes to the organisation of the system itself. The explanatory core was reduced to those assumptions Waltz regarded as indispensable for explaining the persistent regularities of IR¹⁶. Rival programmes expand ontology rather than replacing realism's architecture. Moravcsik's liberalism introduces domestic variables like agency slack and win-sets to explain policy variation¹⁷; constructivism replaces exogenous interests with socially constructed identities¹⁸;

¹⁴ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

¹⁵ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*.

¹⁶ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

¹⁷ Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously."

¹⁸ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992).

and neoliberal institutionalism supplements anarchy with institutional design¹⁹. Crucially, these advances multiply causal machinery instead of displacing structural baselines.

Parsimoniously, this distinction is decisive: realism achieves comparable breadth while preserving an exceptionally stable, economical set of irreducible assumptions.

Lakatos's sophisticated methodological falsificationism²⁰ evaluates scientific progress not at the level of isolated theories, but at the level of competing research programmes. A programme is progressive when it satisfies two conditions: first, each theoretical development (T') must generate excess empirical content over its predecessor (T); second, when confronted with anomalies, the programme must employ its positive heuristic to modify auxiliary hypotheses as elaborated in the methodology, while a degenerative one relies on ad hoc adjustments that fragment theoretical unity²¹. On both dimensions, realism demonstrates a more sustained progressive trajectory than rival theories.

The first criterion of progress, generation of excess empirical content, is shown by the transition from classical to structural realism. While classical realism's reliance on human nature lacks contextual stability as an auxiliary assumption, structural realism replaces it with systemic anarchy²² and the distribution of capabilities, thereby generating new expectations

¹⁹ Keohane, *After Hegemony*.

²⁰ Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*.

²¹ Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*. Lakatos distinguishes mere theoretical modification from progressive development. A successor theory (T') that only accommodates existing anomalies post hoc is degenerative; progress requires that T' anticipate novel facts which are subsequently corroborated. This requirement explains why Lakatos rejected both naïve falsificationism and conventionalist immunization strategies.

²² This transition can also be understood as a form of theoretical reduction rather than replacement. Waltz discarded the psychologically contingent assumption of animus dominandi while preserving realism's explanatory ambition, thereby reducing the number of foundational commitments without sacrificing explanatory scope.

regarding recurring phenomena. This shift is progressive, increasing the scope while maintaining its core assumptions: states as primary actors, survival as the central goal, and power as the key currency. By contrast, institutionalism generates empirical content regarding cooperation, but its theoretical expansion depends on shifting weight toward domestic preferences and institutional design, which does not yield equally generalisable system-level predictions under anarchy. Constructivism expands explanatory content by incorporating context-dependent identity and norms, making it more difficult to derive stable cross-case predictions. In Lakatosian terms, these programmes often increase descriptive richness rather than producing systematically novel predictive content across a unified theoretical core, whereas realism retains structural generality while expanding predictive reach.

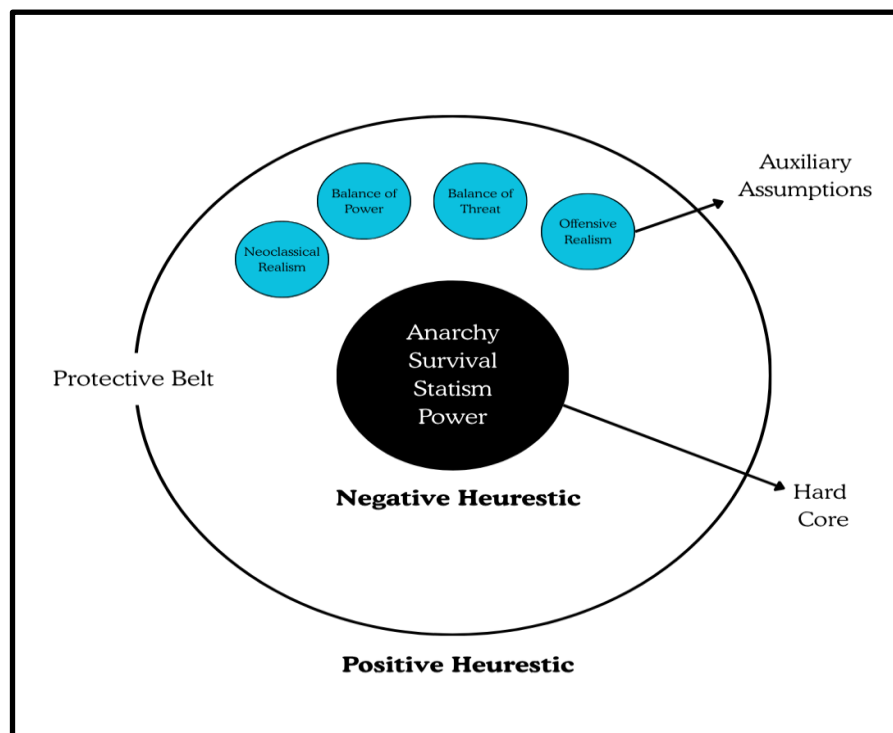


Figure 3: The Lakatosian Research Programme for Realism in IR Theory

The second Lakatosian criterion concerns the positive heuristic: how a programme responds to anomalies. Realism demonstrates a particularly strong heuristic capacity because it absorbs criticism into its protective belt rather than abandoning its hard core. Anomalies in alliance formation yielded balance-of-threat theory, while offensive realism modified survival assumptions to account for power maximisation under uncertainty, preserving the core while refining precision. These adjustments preserve systemic anarchy while increasing explanatory precision. This absorptive capacity becomes significant in realism's treatment of rival theories. Neoliberal institutionalism argues that institutions independently generate cooperation. Realism responds by incorporating institutions into its protective belt as endogenous instruments of state strategy. Institutions are understood as created, sustained, & constrained by underlying distributions of power and state interests, as emphasised by Charles Glaser²³. What rivals view as institutional autonomy, realism reclassifies as a structured outcome of bargaining under anarchy. Rather than rejecting institutional correlation with cooperation, realism conditions it on prior strategic incentives, absorbing neoliberal insights without conceding causal independence to institutions²⁴.

Constructivist critiques concerning identity and perception are similarly integrated. Neoclassical realism treats such factors not as independent causes but as transmission mechanisms through which systemic pressures are filtered by domestic structures, elite perceptions, and state capacity. This enables explanation of variation under identical structural conditions without abandoning systemic primacy. In Lakatosian terms, criticism is not fatal to the programme but becomes material for strengthening its auxiliary framework.

²³ Glaser, "Realists as Optimists."

²⁴ If institutionalism can only explain cooperation by presupposing strategic interests generated under anarchy, whereas realism can treat institutions as endogenous variables within its protective belt, then realism can be understood as subsuming rather than directly competing with institutional explanations.

While rivals multiply causal mechanisms or interpretive norms, risking theoretical fragmentation, realism maintains a progressive Lakatosian trajectory²⁵. By utilizing its positive heuristic to absorb institutional and ideational critiques into a unified protective belt, realism generates excess empirical content, exhibiting a more integrated pattern of progressive problem shifts than its competitors.

Conclusion

Realism's endurance lies not in predicting every discrete contingency, but in explaining persistent structural regularities through an economical causal architecture. While rival paradigms remedy realism's abstractions by multiplying theoretical commitments, they trade systemic breadth for localised depth. By endogenising these insights into a progressive protective belt without abandoning its hard structural core, realism remains the premier general theory of IR. Ultimately, its utility persists because the anarchic structure of global politics endures, and, echoing Waltz, as long as the virtues of law and government are narrow, men will desire rules, and states will seek systems.

²⁵ Lakatos emphasizes that competing research programmes (whether in the natural sciences, or by extension, in social sciences) should be evaluated comparatively rather than in isolation. A programme need not explain every anomaly, it needs to only demonstrate greater theoretical and empirical progress than its rivals over time.