# Realism, Liberalism and War

https://www.e-ir.info/2023/11/22/realism-liberalism-and-war/

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**This case study is an excerpt from McGlinchey, Stephen. 2022. *Foundations of International Relations* (London: Bloomsbury).**

Realists and liberals are divided when it comes to understanding why war exists, and what can be done about it. Realists believe it is an ever-present 'feature' of our system as international anarchy drives conflict because security is scarce. As a result, states look to acquire territory, resources or to eradicate/absorb a competitor to enable them to feel more secure. Mearsheimer called this *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) as the very nature of the global system appears to make this cycle perpetual. Mearsheimer's 'offensive realism' is one of the most pessimistic quadrants within the theory family, yet even its less pessimistic bedfellow, 'defensive realism', still includes war as a feature – albeit not occurring as often. Defensive realists, like Jervis (1978), posit that states are incentivised to act moderately as they understand that aggression will lead to war, which reduces security and is therefore best avoided except when absolutely necessary.

On the other hand, liberals see war as more of a recurring 'bug' that can be addressed by the growing preponderance of democracy and the spread of institutions such as the United Nations. When goods, services, culture, laws and people are seen to be moving freely back and forth between and among states, liberals feel confident that the incentives for war are shrinking. Like a bug is reported and worked on by a developer when it does enough damage to draw the ire of users, liberals see evidence that people, and states, want to enjoy the fruits of a more peaceful global system. Liberals do not deny that the bug exists, or that it is pervasive and seems to pop up in unexpected times and places – but they believe that we have the tools to gradually reduce its damaging effects and perhaps, one day, to fully eliminate it with the right skill and effort.

To illustrate this, for realists, when conflict begins to materialise that poses a risk to national security (or 'survival' to recall one of realism's three S's), states typically have only two choices: to 'balance' or 'bandwagon'. Balancing involves making alliances with other states to offset the growing power of a competitor. This allows for a better chance of success if war ensues (as you add the military power and resources of one's allies to your own). It also provides greater deterrence as states grouped together are a more formidable foe and their competitor(s) may decline to make an aggressive move fearing defeat if doing so. On the other hand, states can bandwagon with their competitor, by coming into line with their wishes (give in, in other words), and thereby removing the threat of war. Liberals view stark choices such as this as remnants of a past world, now replaced by a world of 'complex interdependence' (Keohane and Nye 1977). This is a more optimistic world where states, and their fortunes, are bound together through a complex web of trade and the ever-growing rules and regulations developed by international organisations that act to constrain war and give us incentives to get along.

For liberals, there are tools available other than war to produce acceptable outcomes. Here, we can use the example of diplomacy between Iran and the US, as part of a larger multilateral process between 2003–2015. When evidence leaked in 2002 that Iran was allegedly developing nuclear weapons, it came at the height of the US-led War on Terror, which was partly focused on so-called 'rogue states' who sought Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). The US had already invaded two of Iran's neighbours (Iraq and Afghanistan) and it seemed based on US rhetoric that Iran would also face invasion. Yet, war was avoided because diplomacy was pursued – ultimately culminating in a landmark 2015 agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Even though the United

States and Iran later resumed a path of confrontation, watermarked by the arrival in office of the Trump administration in 2017, it does not take away from illustrating the power of diplomacy in this case to de-escalate a critical episode.

Liberals lamented the War on Terror as it saw the United States taking a unilateral posture. A war with Iran, and/or Iran developing a nuclear weapon, would have thrown the world order into chaos for at least two reasons. Firstly, the United Nations' system of collective security – a pillar of the liberal account – would have been irreparably damaged as the United States had already ignored the will of the UN Security Council who had given prior approval for its invasion of Iraq in 2003. A second unilateral action by the world's only superpower would have swept the rug out from underneath any image of a world ruled by international law and left in its place a unipolar image that more resembled the 2004 parody movie *Team America*. Secondly, Iran's neighbours and competitors, such as Saudi Arabia, would have likely sought nuclear weapons to balance Iran's rising power. This would have set off a regional nuclear arms race and also damaged the Non-Proliferation Treaty – itself another hallmark of diplomacy.

Where realists would look at this case and see two competitors facing off against each other with Iran having the stark choice to balance or bandwagon, from a liberal vantage point the case shows how personal relationships were built during multiple years of negotiations and these helped transcend state rivalries. Wendy Sherman, the US lead negotiator, recalled how she and her Iranian counterpart, Abbas Araghchi, both became grandparents during their negotiations and shared videos of their grandchildren with each other. Personal relationships like this do not dissolve or change pre-set national interests on either side, but they were instrumental in both sides developing the resolve to work diplomatically. Similar relations were developed between officials at the highest level when they spent 17 days locked in intense discussions in Vienna during the concluding phase –the longest continuous negotiations in history featuring all foreign ministers of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Following the announcement of the deal in front of the media, Sherman described the scene on the final day, when all the diplomatic personnel involved gathered together, as US Secretary of State John Kerry addressed the parties:

Secretary Kerry was the last person to speak. He recounted that when he was 21 he went off to war in Vietnam. He made a commitment that he would do whatever he could in his life to make sure that there was never war, ever again. The room was absolutely still. There was quiet. And then everyone, including the Iranians, applauded. Because, I think for all of us we understood that what we had done was to try to ensure peace, not war (Sherman 2016).

The diplomats laboured in the areas where agreement was possible and found a way to make it acceptable for both sides. For Iran this involved the removal of economic sanctions that had been sponsored by the United States and the removal of any direct military threat. For the Americans, the deal placed Iran under a strict regime of verification to ensure that it could not develop nuclear weapons, and if they appeared to be doing so there would be time to react before those weapons became a material threat. This result was a testament to the very principles that liberals espouse and brings us back to the analogy of how liberals see war as a bug in the system that can be bypassed with the right tools and understandings. The JCPOA and those aforementioned personal relationships, while damaged during the Trump years, offer a basis for future progress by proving that diplomacy can be a positive sum for both sides despite their ongoing enmity.

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