



## GREAT POWER RIVALRY FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF REALISM AND LIBERALISM

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**Annotation:** This article analyzes the phenomenon of great power rivalry through the lenses of two dominant theories in international relations: realism and liberalism. It compares how each theory explains the causes, dynamics, and consequences of competition among powerful states. While realism emphasizes power politics, national interests, and the inevitability of conflict in an anarchic international system, liberalism highlights the role of international institutions, economic interdependence, and democratic values in mitigating rivalry. By applying both theoretical frameworks to contemporary examples—such as U.S.–China relations and NATO–Russia tensions—the paper aims to provide a balanced understanding of how theoretical paradigms shape the interpretation of global strategic competition.

**Keywords:** Great power rivalry, realism, liberalism, international relations theory, U.S.–China competition, NATO–Russia relations, global politics, balance of power, international cooperation.

The rivalry among great powers has been a central feature of international relations throughout history. In the post-Cold War world, the emergence of new powers and the reassertion of older ones have renewed concerns about global stability, strategic competition, and potential conflict. The rise of China, the assertiveness of Russia, and the evolving role of the United States and its allies highlight the complexity of 21st-century power politics.

To understand this evolving landscape, international relations scholars often rely on theoretical frameworks that offer different explanations and predictions. Two of the most influential paradigms—**realism** and **liberalism**—provide contrasting views on the nature of state behavior, conflict, and cooperation. Realism views great power rivalry as an inevitable consequence of the anarchic international system, where security dilemmas and competition for power dominate. In contrast, liberalism argues that institutions, norms, and interdependence can reduce tensions and promote peaceful coexistence.

This article explores the main assumptions of both theories, analyzes their relevance to current geopolitical rivalries, and evaluates their explanatory power through real-world case studies. Understanding these perspectives is crucial for both policymakers and academics as they navigate the shifting dynamics of international order.



Great power rivalry is a persistent feature of the international system, and both **realism** and **liberalism** offer competing but insightful explanations for its nature and evolution.

Realism views international relations as a struggle for power among self-interested states operating in an anarchic system, where no overarching authority can enforce rules or ensure security. According to classical realists like Hans Morgenthau and structural realists such as Kenneth Waltz, states are primarily concerned with survival, and they act rationally to maximize their power relative to others.

From this perspective, great power rivalry is both natural and inevitable. Realists argue that even if a state does not seek conflict, the need to maintain or enhance its position in the global hierarchy compels it to compete with others. For example, the United States' response to China's economic and military rise is interpreted by realists as a rational attempt to preserve its hegemony and prevent a shift in the balance of power. Similarly, Russia's actions in Ukraine and its opposition to NATO expansion are seen as efforts to secure its sphere of influence in a changing strategic environment.

Realists emphasize that international institutions have limited ability to restrain power politics. Alliances, treaties, and economic partnerships are viewed as temporary arrangements shaped by changing national interests. In this view, peace is achieved through deterrence and balance of power, rather than mutual trust or cooperation.

In contrast, liberalism provides a more optimistic view of international relations, highlighting the potential for cooperation even among great powers. Liberal theorists argue that states are not solely driven by power; they also pursue economic growth, institutional stability, and adherence to international norms. Scholars like Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye have shown how international institutions can facilitate cooperation by reducing transaction costs, enhancing transparency, and creating expectations of reciprocity.

From the liberal viewpoint, great power competition can be mitigated by economic interdependence, democratic governance, and the role of multilateral institutions. For example, the extensive trade ties between the U.S. and China are cited by liberals as a deterrent to full-scale conflict, since both sides have a vested interest in economic stability. Likewise, NATO and the European Union are considered successful examples of liberal institutionalism, having fostered peace and integration among former rivals.

Liberalism also highlights the power of norms and soft power in shaping state behavior. The post-World War II liberal order, based on the United Nations, Bretton Woods institutions, and the spread of liberal democratic values, is credited with reducing great power wars. In this context, China's integration into institutions like the WTO and its participation in UN peacekeeping missions are interpreted as signs of potential convergence rather than inevitable confrontation.



While realism and liberalism diverge in their assumptions and predictions, both offer useful tools for analyzing contemporary rivalries. Realism captures the strategic anxieties and hard power calculations that underlie military build-ups, alliances, and deterrence postures. Liberalism, on the other hand, explains how globalization, diplomacy, and shared interests can constrain conflict and create pathways for cooperation.

The U.S.–China relationship illustrates this tension: while military competition in the Indo-Pacific reflects realist dynamics, deep trade and technological interdependence suggest liberal incentives for restraint. Likewise, NATO’s deterrence of Russia is grounded in realist principles, but the alliance’s institutional framework and shared democratic norms represent liberal values.

Ultimately, understanding great power rivalry requires a synthesis of both perspectives. States operate in a complex environment where security, identity, and economic goals intersect. While power politics cannot be ignored, neither can the transformative potential of cooperation and institutional engagement.

The rivalry among great powers remains one of the most enduring and defining features of international relations. Realism and liberalism, as the two dominant theoretical paradigms, provide different yet complementary lenses through which to understand this phenomenon. Realism underscores the structural constraints of the international system—emphasizing power politics, national interests, and the inevitability of competition. It explains why even peaceful states often behave aggressively to secure their survival in an anarchic world.

Liberalism, on the other hand, highlights the agency of states to cooperate through institutions, shared norms, and economic interdependence. It presents a more optimistic vision, one where the recurrence of conflict can be reduced through integration, transparency, and mutual benefit.

In today’s multipolar world, great power rivalry—exemplified by U.S.–China strategic competition and NATO–Russia tensions—cannot be understood through a single theoretical framework. Both realist and liberal insights are necessary to grasp the motivations and constraints that guide state behavior. Realism helps explain the logic behind military build-ups and strategic alliances, while liberalism offers tools to identify opportunities for cooperation and peace.

For policymakers and scholars alike, integrating both perspectives provides a more comprehensive understanding of how to manage great power rivalries in a way that avoids escalation and promotes stability in the international system.

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