



ISSN Print: 2664-8679
ISSN Online: 2664-8687
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.33
IJSH 2025; 7(2): 341-343
www.sociologyjournal.net
Received: 15-08-2025
Accepted: 19-09-2025

Vidhi Gohar
Pandit Deendayal Energy
University, Knowledge
Corridor, Raisan Village,
PDPU Rd, Gandhinagar,
Raysan, Gujarat, India

Morality and Survival in Realist Thought: Comparing Hans Morgenthau and John Mearsheimer

Vidhi Gohar

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26648679.2025.v7.i2e.220>

Abstract

In International Relations, Realism emphasises power, security, and survival of the state in an anarchic international system. However, there is a difference among realist scholars about the role of morality in leading state behaviour or actions. The father of classical realism is Hans Morgenthau. He also knows that, as the founder of Classical realism, he believes that ethical responsibility and carefulness should guide power politics and keep a balance between national interest and moral consideration. In contrast, John Mearsheimer is known for offensive realism. He focused on survival and power maximisation. Also, he gives less importance to morality. Where Morgenthau gives more focus on morality, and Mearsheimer emphasises survival. So, this paper shows a theoretical approach of Morgenthau and Mearsheimer, applying them to the ongoing conflict of Russia-Ukraine (2022-present) as a specific case study. This analysis shows how morality and survival shape a state's behaviour and what are the relevance of these theories in today's international relations.

Keywords: Realism, Classical Realism, Offensive Realism, Morgenthau, Mearsheimer, Morality, Survival, Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Introduction

Realism is the most prominent theory in international relations (IR), focusing on power, security, and the pursuit of national interest within the autonomy of the international system. At its core, Realism is rooted in the belief that it is primarily based on self-interest, often emphasizing survival over moral concerns. However, views on the role of morality within realism vary among philosophers. Hans Morgenthau's Classical realism considers human nature, ethics, and moral considerations, advocating that advice, caution, and moral judgments are necessary to prevent harmful consequences. In contrast, John Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism emphasizes the drive for survival, with structural competition suggesting that states focus on power maximization and see moral concerns as unimportant or insignificant. This paper examines the conflict between survival and morality in international politics by comparing Morgenthau and Mearsheimer's viewpoints. The study applies this theoretical framework to a specific example: the Russia-Ukraine conflict (2022-present). The central Research question is: How do survival and morality lead state behaviour according to Morgenthau and Mearsheimer and how does this theory apply to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict?

Literature Review

Morgenthau's classical Realism posits that politics is largely influenced by objective laws that are completely rooted in human nature. Also, he believes that state and human nature are similar, and humans are inherently self-interested and power seekers. Similarly, states also act in their self-interest to survive and gain power. There is also a thinker named pointing out that moral caution enables states to follow their national interest while minimising needless harm, explaining how Morgenthau's concept shaped the diplomacy of the Cold War, which helped to avoid nuclear conflict through negotiations and ethical restraint. Also, Morgenthau's book "Politics among Nations" (1948). His idea shows a clear, practical framework for dealing with the Soviet Union and managing global tensions. He argued that the international system is anarchic, and at that time, there was no concept of world government. States led to protect their national interest and are defined as having power.

Corresponding Author:
Vidhi Gohar
Pandit Deendayal Energy
University, Knowledge
Corridor, Raisan Village,
PDPU Rd, Gandhinagar,
Raysan, Gujarat, India

In contrast, John Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism disregard morality in survival-focused state behaviour. He suggests that states should focus on security by maximising power, as an anarchic international system provides no guarantee of survival perceives that Mearsheimer's framework describes aggressive policies like territorial expansion preventative military activity as sensible responses to inherent structural commination.

Recent studies have to reconcile these views. assert that even though structural factors explain great power compassion, moral and ethical diplomacy are important to escape escalation. It emphasises that in conflicts revolving around survival, strategic interests often overshadow ethical considerations. This continuous discussion underscores the persistent conflict between moral values and survival tactics in realist theory.

Theoretical Framework: Classical Realism and Offensive Realism

Morgenthau's Classical Realism posits that politics is shaped by inherent laws stemming from human nature. While power plays a significant role in state behaviour, it must be tempered by ethical considerations and prudence. Upholding morality is essential in preventing adverse outcomes resulting from the pursuit of national interests. Effective statecraft is characterised by diplomatic negotiations, self-restraint, and moral discernment to prevent impulsive actions.

Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism focuses on structural factors rather than human nature. In an environment lacking a central authority and certainty about survival, states are motivated to increase their power and compete for influence at regional or global levels. This approach suggests that ethical considerations have less impact, as prioritising them could affect security outcomes. Mearsheimer contends that the structure of the international system better accounts for aggressive and competitive behaviours than moral reasoning.

Comparative Analysis: Morality and Survival

In international relations, the major concern of the realist is to understand the action of the state in the international arena, particularly in the situation of conflict, competition and insecurity. Hans Morgenthau, John Miersheimer, both scholars, belong to the realist tradition of international relations, but their approaches towards the basis of conflict, role of morality and motivation of the state are very different from each other. Their approach to policy making and the dynamics and actions in international politics also vary from one another. By understanding these differences between the two thinkers, we can easily understand how ethical considerations and survival imperatives shape state behaviour in any historical and geopolitical context.

Under the theory of Morgenthau's classical realism, the scope of conflict is fundamentally rooted in humans, taking the idea from Hobbes, he explains that human nature from the start itself is selfish, brutal and poor, who always think of their interests at the cost of others. Morgenthau criticises human nature because, according to him, a human has an innate desire for power, and for that, they can do anything. Since states a led by humans only, this brutish tendency is also visible in the international arena. He also says that as pursuit of power is natural and can never be avoided, but it can be mediated by wisdom and ethical judgment. Human

nature can serve as a lens through which international relations can be interpreted. Mearsheimer, on the other hand, do not blame human nature but questions the international system and its anarchical setting. In his popular theory of offensive realism, he defined the international environment as an area where any central authority is absent, and no one is there to enforce rules and protect the state from the actions of self and others, which creates a self-help system in which security and survival are prime objectives. As he discussed that the international system is anarchy, i.e., there is no central authority to govern, hence states cannot rely on external institutions or any moral and ethical global norms to secure there security and sovereignty. Hence, these structural settings, rather than individual or collective settings, explain the actions and engagement of the state in the international arena. For Mearsheimer, the conflict is not the result of the poor and selfish nature of man or any ethical failure rather an anarchical system that dominates the international arena.

As per Morgenthau, although Human nature is the prime factor behind the state to go to war or engaging in conflict but morality is also considered an important factor in decision-making. He acknowledged that power is essential or a cornerstone in the international order, but at the same time, he also acknowledged that ethical principles also guide the state to take responsible decisions in the world. Whereas Mearsheimer considers morality as secondary over state survival, He acknowledges that due to the absence of a central authority in the international order, states take morality on the back foot and for them, their survival is more important than following moral principles. As per him, even if a state wants to become or follow the peaceful path, seeing the conditions in global politics, they hesitate to do so. For them, the prime objective is to first secure their sovereignty and security, no matter even if it happens at the cost of others. We can illustrate both ideas with the help of an example, for the first, we can take the example of India after the taj attack, although it was known to every one that the terrorist organisation which was operating during that time was backed by the Pakistani government and the killed hundreds of innocent civilian in India then also India choose the path of diplomacy rather than going for war with Pakistan and killing innocent civilians there. In the second case, Tibet can be the perfect example. Tibet, from the start, was a peace-loving country and did not engage in any type of conflict, but its neighbor, China, attacked Tibet offensively and completely annexed Tibet.

Case Study: Russia-Ukraine Conflict (2022-Present)

We can discuss the case study of the Russia-Ukraine conflict to understand the concept of Morgenthau and Mearsheimer in their theory of Realism. In February 2022, due to the continuous expansion of NATO towards Eastern Europe, Russia initiated a special military intervention into Ukraine to secure the strategic location and protect there sovereignty. The move by Russia was also viewed as they tried to secure their geopolitical setting in the European region.

As per the Morgenthau viewpoint of classical realism, Russia, by violating the international convention and hindering the sovereignty of other nation-states, violated the fundamental moral principles. As per the thinker's view, Russia, in place of annexation of the Ukrainian territory, must have gone for ethical restraint or diplomatic

negotiations and followed the international norms so that the peace could be maintained in the region. As per him, the global sanctions, diplomatic interventions, and international condemnation of Russia reflect the role of morality in strangulating the state's behaviour.

From Mearsheimer's point of view of his offensive realism, he considers Russia's actions to be right, as if Russia had not intervened in the situation; this might have resulted in the loss of national interest of Russia in its geopolitical setting. The continuous expansion of NATO towards Eastern Europe was challenging the authority and Sovereignty of Russia over the region, and just to maintain the territorial integrity and to secure its regional dominance and main stability in the region, Moscow went for an aggressive military strategy in place of moral condemnation. As per Mearsheimer's idea, state priorities survival and give primary importance to maximising power and national interest over ethical and moral responsibilities.

Discussion

The above example shows that for any country, morality and survival are the prime objectives, but there are times when conflict drives the state's behaviour. As per Morgenthau, the violation of international norms can trigger a conflicting situation in the international setting. To avoid that, he emphasises on implication of ethical and moral norms in the process of decision-making. Concluding the Morgenthau Idea we can say that he believes in a Normative approach. On the other hand, John Miersheimer emphasises on survival of the state and maximisation of power while giving less importance to morality. As per him, the Russia-Ukraine war highlights how ethical constraints are considered less important when it comes to survival and strategic dominance.

Conclusion

The war between morality and survival is a part of realist philosophy. Hans Morgenthau focuses on ethical restraint and prudence in the action of the state, while John Mearsheimer prioritise survival and the pursuit of power in a state, or we can say in an anarchic system. The Russia-Ukraine war shows the significance of both perspectives: like ethical standards influence global disapproval and diplomatic practices, while structural imperatives explain the aggressive quest for power. Understanding this relationship is important for modern international relations and predicting state behaviour during a crisis.

References

1. Toft P. John J. Mearsheimer: an offensive realist between geopolitics and power. *J Int Relat Dev*. 2005;8:381-408. doi:10.1057/palgrave.jird.1800065
2. Mearsheimer JJ. Realism and Restraint. *Horizons*. 2019;14:12-31. Available from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48573725>
3. Mearsheimer JJ. Reckless States and Realism. *Int Relat*. 2009;23(2):241-256. doi:10.1177/0047117809104637
4. Scheuerman WE. *Hans Morgenthau: Realism and Beyond*. Malden (MA): Polity Press; 2009.
5. Bell D. Political realism and international relations. *Philos Compass*. 2017;12(2):e12403.
6. Zhang B. Hans Morgenthau, realist theory of international leadership, and the future of global order.

Chin Polit Sci Rev. 2017;2:512-530. doi:10.1007/s41111-017-0080-0

7. Smith NR, Dawson G. Mearsheimer, realism, and the Ukraine war. *Analyse Kritik*. 2022;44(2):175-200. doi:10.1515/auk-2022-2023
8. Rösch F. Realism, the war in the Ukraine, and the limits of diplomacy. *Analyse Kritik*. 2022;44(2):201-218. doi:10.1515/auk-2022-2030