

Realpolitik Explained: Pragmatic Power Politics in IR | Easy Wisdom

 poliLegal.com/post/realpolitik-explained-pragmatic-power-politics-in-ir-easy-wisdom

By Mohit Manderna

July 6, 2024

What is Realpolitik?

Realpolitik is a political approach that prioritizes practical considerations and power dynamics over moral or ideological principles. It's like playing chess on the global stage, where each move is calculated based on potential gains rather than what's morally right.

Key Principles

- 1. Power is central:** In Realpolitik, national power is the currency of international relations. It's similar to how money dictates options in the business world.
- 2. Pragmatism over idealism:** Realpolitik favors achievable outcomes over lofty ideals. It's akin to choosing a reliable used car over an unaffordable luxury vehicle.
- 3. National interest first:** Countries act primarily to protect and advance their own interests, much like individuals prioritize personal or family needs.

Historical Context

Realpolitik emerged in the 19th century, with Otto von Bismarck as a notable practitioner. Bismarck's unification of Germany exemplifies Realpolitik in action:

- He formed and broke alliances based on immediate needs rather than long-term loyalty.
- He provoked wars when it served Prussia's interests, then showed restraint to avoid alarming other powers.

During the Cold War, both the US and USSR often employed Realpolitik:

- The US supported authoritarian regimes to prevent the spread of communism, prioritizing strategic interests over democratic ideals.
- The USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to maintain its sphere of influence, disregarding international norms.

Modern Applications

Today, Realpolitik continues to shape international relations:

- China's Belt and Road Initiative: While presented as mutually beneficial, it's largely seen as a way for China to expand its global influence.
- US-Saudi relations: Despite human rights concerns, the US maintains close ties with Saudi Arabia due to strategic and economic interests.

[See also Utilitarianism Explained: Should I pull the lever? | Easy Wisdom](#)

Criticisms

Critics argue that Realpolitik can lead to:

1. Disregard for human rights: Like ignoring worker welfare for corporate profits.
2. Short-term thinking: Similar to overfishing for immediate gain, ignoring long-term sustainability.
3. Increased tensions: Pursuit of national interests without regard for others can escalate conflicts, like neighbours fighting over property lines.

In essence, Realpolitik is about navigating the complex world of international relations with a focus on tangible results rather than abstract ideals. It's a pragmatic approach that, while often effective, can sometimes come at the cost of ethical considerations.

Comparison

| Concept | Main Focus | Ethical Stance | Key Characteristics | Example |
|------------------|---|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| Realpolitik | Practical outcomes and national interests | Pragmatic, often amoral | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Power-centric – Focused on achievable goals – Adaptable to changing circumstances | US-China relations balancing economic ties with strategic competition |
| Idealism | Moral principles and universal values | Strongly ethical | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Emphasis on international cooperation – Pursuit of long-term global harmony – Often viewed as idealistic or impractical | Wilson's Fourteen Points after WWI, aiming for lasting peace |
| Realism | State survival and security | Amoral, focuses on security | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Assumes international anarchy – Views states as primary actors – Emphasizes balance of power | Cold War policies of containment and deterrence |
| Liberalism | Cooperation and interdependence | Ethical, promotes individual rights | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Believes in potential for progress – Emphasizes role of international institutions – Supports free trade and democracy | Formation of the European Union, promoting economic integration |
| Machiavellianism | Maintaining power and authority | Amoral, ends justify means | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Focused on ruler's perspective – Advocates manipulation and deception – More extreme than Realpolitik | Stalin's purges to consolidate power |