



Realism and the Logic of War in International Politics: Nigeria in the Contemporary International System

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Abstract

Despite the expansion of international institutions and cooperative norms, war remains a persistent feature of international politics. This study examines realism and the logic of war in international relations, using Nigeria's engagement in the contemporary international system as a case study. Anchored in realist theory and supported by Hegemonic Stability Theory, the paper argues that the anarchic structure of the international system, the primacy of national interest, and the continuous struggle for power make war a rational and recurrent outcome of global politics rather than an anomaly. Adopting a qualitative content analysis approach, the study relies on secondary sources such as scholarly literature, policy documents, and historical records to interrogate the relevance of classical and structural realist assumptions. The findings reveal that Nigeria's foreign and security policies particularly its involvement in peacekeeping, regional security initiatives, and counterterrorism operations largely conform to realist expectations shaped by power considerations and strategic necessity. The study further demonstrates that hegemonic power distribution significantly influences patterns of conflict and stability, reinforcing the realist claim that power transitions heighten the likelihood of war. While acknowledging the limitations of realism, especially its state-centric bias, the paper concludes that realism remains a powerful explanatory framework for understanding the persistence of war and Nigeria's strategic behavior within the contemporary international system.

Keywords: Realism, War, International Politics, National Interest.

1. Introduction

Realism remains one of the most enduring and influential perspectives in the study of international politics, particularly in explaining the persistence of conflict and war within the international system. Broadly conceived, realism encompasses a set of related theories that emphasize the centrality of the state, the pursuit of national interest, and the primacy of power especially military power in world politics (Duncan, 2018). Similarly, Sandrina and Isabel (2016) describe realism as a school of thought that foregrounds the competitive and conflictual nature of international relations. Despite its prominence, realism resists a single, universally accepted definition. As Jack (2000) observes, realism is less a rigid theory defined by explicit assumptions and propositions than a general orientation toward understanding international political life.

Historically, realist thought has dominated analyses of international politics for centuries, shaping how scholars and policymakers interpret global interactions. Realist writers claim to view the international system as it is, rather than as it ought to be, stressing the constraints imposed by power

politics and strategic rivalry. Within this framework, both state and non-state actors pursue their interests in an environment marked by competition and uncertainty. The quest for power, influence, and survival particularly among powerful states has attracted sustained attention from realist scholars, as such pursuits frequently generate conflicts that may escalate into war. Consequently, realists emphasize the struggle for power and influence among states, empires, and political entities as a defining feature of international relations (Oluwole & Babatunde, 2021).

A fundamental assumption shared by realist scholars is the absence of a supranational authority capable of enforcing rules or guaranteeing peace among sovereign states. The international system is therefore characterized by anarchy, understood not as chaos but as the lack of a central governing authority. In this condition, states reject subordination to any higher political unit, creating dynamics that encourage rivalry, competition, and, at times, violence (Viotti & Kauppi, 2009). Under such circumstances, political leaders prioritize national security, which minimally entails protecting the territorial integrity and political sovereignty of the state.



Within realist thought, the competitive and often war-prone nature of international politics is attributed to a combination of factors, including human nature, the internal characteristics of states, and the structure of the international system itself (Lamborn, 2013; Viotti & Kauppi, 2009). Structural realists, or neorealists, place particular emphasis on the distribution of power among states, distinguishing between unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar systems. Historical examples include bipolarity during the Cold War, dominated by the United States and the former Soviet Union (1945–1991), and multipolar systems such as nineteenth-century Europe and the interwar period (1919–1939).

Power occupies a central place in realist analysis because it shapes states' ability to achieve their objectives and safeguard their interests. International organizations, alliances, and coalitions are viewed primarily as instruments through which states pursue power rather than as independent actors capable of transcending state interests. For some realists, power is merely a means to achieve security and other national goals; for others, it becomes an end in itself. Regardless of this distinction, the pursuit and distribution of power tend to generate patterns of balance of power, either through deliberate state action or as an unintended outcome of competitive interactions among states (Oluwole & Babatunde, 2021).

Classical realist thinkers such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Thucydides laid the philosophical foundations of this perspective. Machiavelli's insistence on focusing on political realities rather than moral ideals underscored the realist belief that the primary purpose of politics is the preservation of state security (Anifowose & Enemou, 2015). He warned against the illusion of perpetual peace, arguing that leaders who ignore power realities risk losing their state's sovereignty. Similarly, Hobbes' conception of the state of nature marked by insecurity and the absence of central authority has profoundly influenced realist interpretations of the international system as a realm of anarchy (Oluwole & Babatunde, 2021). Although Hobbes did not claim that such a condition ever literally existed, his analogy remains central to understanding the logic of conflict and war in global politics.

Underlying these classical and contemporary realist arguments is the shared assumption that human nature contains persistent egoistic tendencies that shape political behavior. These tendencies, according to realists, define the core problem of politics and compel statesmen to focus on managing insecurity and power rivalry (Jack, 2000). In this context, war is not an aberration but a recurrent instrument of statecraft arising from the pursuit of interest under conditions of anarchy.

Against this theoretical background, this study examines realism and the logic of war in international politics, using Nigeria's engagement in the contemporary international system as a case study. Cognizant of *Realpolitik*, the politics of power and interest that stands in contrast to idealist assumptions this research analyzes how realist assumptions

shape patterns and typologies of war. It explores the core features of realism, its relevance to global politics, and the meaning and forms of war, while situating Nigeria's foreign and security engagements within the broader dynamics of power, interest, and systemic constraints.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the evolution of international institutions, norms, and cooperative frameworks aimed at mitigating conflict, war remains a persistent feature of international politics. Realist scholars argue that this persistence is rooted in the anarchic structure of the international system, the primacy of state interests, and the continuous struggle for power among states (Duncan, 2018; Viotti & Kauppi, 2009). While realism provides a compelling framework for explaining war at the systemic level, much of the existing literature has focused disproportionately on great powers, often overlooking how medium and regional powers navigate the same structural constraints and power dynamics.

Nigeria's position within the contemporary international system presents a critical yet underexplored case for examining the logic of war through a realist lens. As Africa's most populous country and one of its leading regional actors, Nigeria has been actively involved in peacekeeping operations, regional security initiatives, counterterrorism efforts, and diplomatic engagements shaped by national interest and power considerations. However, scholarly debates have not sufficiently interrogated whether Nigeria's external behavior and security engagements conform to the assumptions of realist theory, particularly regarding war as an instrument of statecraft in an anarchic international system (Oluwole & Babatunde, 2021).

Furthermore, existing studies often treat war as a phenomenon driven primarily by internal instability, weak state capacity, or postcolonial legacies in developing states, thereby underestimating the role of systemic pressures and power politics emphasized by realism. This approach obscures how Nigeria's foreign and security policies are influenced by broader international power structures, alliance politics, and balance-of-power calculations. Consequently, there is a conceptual gap in linking realist theory directly to Nigeria's experiences and strategic choices within international politics.

Another critical problem lies in the limited integration of classical and structural realist perspectives in explaining contemporary conflicts involving Nigeria. While classical realists emphasize human nature and leadership decisions (Jack, 2000), and structural realists focus on the distribution of power within the international system (Lamborn, 2013; Viotti & Kauppi, 2009), few studies systematically combine these perspectives to explain how war and conflict emerge in Nigeria's international engagements. This gap weakens the explanatory power of realism when applied to non-Western and regional actors.

Against this backdrop, the central problem this study addresses is the insufficient theoretical and empirical application of realist theory to understanding the logic of war

in Nigeria's engagement with the contemporary international system. By situating Nigeria within realist assumptions of anarchy, power competition, and national interest, this study seeks to clarify how war—whether actual, threatened, or avoided remains a rational outcome of international politics rather than an anomaly. Addressing this problem is essential for advancing realist scholarship and deepening understanding of conflict dynamics involving regional powers in the global system.

2. Conceptual Clarifications

- **Realism**

Realism refers to a dominant school of thought in international politics that explains state behavior primarily in terms of power, national interest, and survival within an anarchic international system. Realists argue that states are the principal actors in global politics and that their actions are shaped by the absence of a central authority capable of enforcing rules among them (Duncan, 2018; Jack, 2000). In this study, realism provides the theoretical lens for analyzing Nigeria's external relations and security behavior within the global system.

- **International Politics**

International politics denotes the interactions, relations, and power struggles among sovereign states and other relevant actors operating within the international system. It encompasses issues of diplomacy, conflict, cooperation, war, and security, largely shaped by the distribution of power and national interests of states (Viotti & Kauppi, 2009). In this research, international politics is understood as a competitive arena in which Nigeria pursues its strategic interests under systemic constraints.

- **International System**

The international system refers to the structured pattern of interactions among states operating in an environment characterized by anarchy, meaning the absence of a central governing authority above states. This system shapes state behavior by compelling states to rely on self-help for survival and security (Lamborn, 2013). Within this system, Nigeria operates as a regional power whose foreign policy choices are influenced by global and regional power configurations.

- **Anarchy**

Anarchy, in realist terms, does not imply chaos or disorder but signifies the lack of a supranational authority capable of enforcing laws and maintaining order among states. This condition compels states to prioritize self-preservation and security, often leading to rivalry and conflict (Viotti & Kauppi, 2009). For this study, anarchy explains why war remains a persistent feature of international politics, including Nigeria's security engagements.

- **Power**

Power refers to a state's capacity to influence the behavior of other states and to achieve desired outcomes in international relations. It may take military, economic, political, or diplomatic forms, though realists emphasize military capability as central to state power (Oluwole & Babatunde, 2021). In the Nigerian context, power is examined in relation to regional leadership, peacekeeping roles, and strategic security interests.

- **National Interest**

National interest represents the set of goals and objectives a state seeks to protect and advance in the international system, particularly survival, territorial integrity, and political sovereignty. Realists regard national interest as the primary motivation guiding state behavior, often overriding moral or ideological considerations (Duncan, 2018). This study interprets Nigeria's foreign and security policies as rational efforts to safeguard national interest within a competitive global environment.

- **War**

War is understood as organized, large-scale violence between political entities, particularly states, pursued as an instrument of policy to achieve strategic objectives. From a realist perspective, war arises from power struggles, insecurity, and conflicting national interests within an anarchic international system (Jack, 2000). In this study, war is examined not as an anomaly but as a recurring outcome of realist dynamics in international politics.

- **Balance of Power**

Balance of power refers to a condition in the international system where no single state or group of states dominates others, as states seek to counterbalance threats to their security. This balance may emerge deliberately through alliances or unintentionally through shifts in power capabilities (Oluwole & Babatunde, 2021). The concept is relevant to understanding Nigeria's strategic alignments and regional security roles within West Africa and the broader international system.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a **qualitative content analysis** approach. Data for the research were obtained from **secondary sources**, including scholarly journals, textbooks, policy documents, and relevant press materials. These sources were systematically reviewed and analyzed to extract relevant information and provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues examined in the paper.

3.1 Theoretical Underpinning

- **Hegemonic Stability Theory**

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) provides a critical explanatory framework for understanding order, conflict, and war within the international system, particularly from a realist perspective. The concept of hegemony is etymologically derived from the Greek term *hegemonia*, meaning leadership or dominance. In international politics, hegemony refers to the predominance of a single state that possesses overwhelming political, economic, and military capabilities relative to other states and is able to shape the rules, norms, and structures governing the international system or a specific region (Timothy, 2019). Such dominance is not exercised solely through coercion but also through diplomacy, persuasion, and institutional influence.

Hegemonic Stability Theory advances the central proposition that the presence of a dominant power or hegemon promotes stability, order, and predictability in international relations. Conversely, the absence or decline of a hegemonic power often leads to systemic instability, heightened competition, and increased likelihood of conflict and war. From a realist standpoint, hegemonic order is sustained not by moral consensus but by the hegemon's capacity and willingness to enforce rules that align with its national interests and preserve the existing balance of power. This logic underscores why periods of hegemonic ascendancy are frequently associated with relative peace, while transitions in hegemonic power tend to generate insecurity and war.

The relevance of Hegemonic Stability Theory to this study lies in its capacity to explain the structural conditions under which war emerges in international politics. As realism emphasizes power, anarchy, and state survival, HST complements realist theory by demonstrating how disparities in power distribution shape patterns of conflict and cooperation. Historically, hegemonic stability has been evident during periods such as Britain's dominance of the international system in the nineteenth century (1815–1942) and the post-World War II order dominated by the United States (from 1945 to the present). In both cases, the hegemon played a decisive role in regulating international economic and security arrangements to sustain systemic order in line with its interests (Timothy, 2019).

The major proponents of Hegemonic Stability Theory include **Charles Kindleberger, Robert Gilpin, Robert Keohane, and Stephen Krasner**. Kindleberger is widely regarded as the intellectual pioneer of the theory. In his analysis of the Great Depression, he argued that the global economic collapse of 1929–1939 resulted from the absence of a hegemonic power capable of stabilizing the international economy following Britain's decline and the United States' initial reluctance to assume leadership (Kindleberger, 1973). He maintained that international stability requires a hegemon willing to provide public goods such as market access, monetary stability, and crisis management.

Building on Kindleberger's work, Gilpin emphasized the relationship between hegemonic power, international order, and war, arguing that hegemonic decline often triggers systemic crises and violent conflicts as rising powers

challenge the existing order. Keohane and Krasner further extended the theory by examining how hegemonic powers institutionalize their dominance through regimes and norms that reinforce their strategic and economic advantages.

The application of Hegemonic Stability Theory to this study reinforces the realist argument that power determines outcomes in international politics. Within an anarchic international system, states aspire to maximize power to guarantee survival and influence. As captured in the realist aphorism "might is right," powerful states deploy their economic strength, political leverage, and military capabilities to attain and sustain hegemonic status. These ambitions often generate rivalry, resistance, and war, particularly during periods of hegemonic transition.

Keohane (1977, as cited in Timothy, 2019) contends that a hegemonic state must possess a strong and stable currency, control over capital and markets, access to abundant resources, technological superiority, and formidable military power. Beyond material capabilities, hegemony also requires soft power diplomatic influence, cultural appeal, and institutional leadership. These attributes collectively reflect the fusion of hard and soft power that realism identifies as essential to dominance in international politics.

In relation to this study, Hegemonic Stability Theory provides a structural lens for understanding how Nigeria operates within a global system shaped by hegemonic power, particularly under U.S. dominance. Nigeria's foreign policy choices, security engagements, and responses to international conflicts are influenced by the prevailing hegemonic order and the realist logic that governs it. Thus, HST not only complements realist theory but also deepens the analysis of war as a systemic outcome of power competition in the contemporary international system.

• **Basic Features of Realism**

Realism is a theory that came into existence as a result of the failure of liberalism to prevent another outbreak of war because it did not pay close attention to the realities of power politics. Also, the emergence of the realist school of thought influenced international relations by first refuting the content of the liberal school of thought and then focusing on its aim which is power politics or power of states rather than international institutions of the liberal school of thoughts (Oluwole & Babatunde, 2021).

Put differently, the focus here was basically on security and power politics which come into limelight after the failure of liberalism to prevent another World War. The realist opinion believes that the most important actor in international relation is the "state". This is because relations from states to states across the globe help to dictate what global politics will look like. In the same vein, states are self-interested and mistrustful of other states by so doing, it creates room for suspicion and makes cooperation difficult in world politics. Ultimately, this school of thought believes that foreign policy making is been influenced heavily by issues that concerns security that affect states cutting across boundaries.

Morgenthau (1973) who belongs to the classical realism school of thought, posited that the nature of human tells heavily on why would politics is conflictual because human beings are naturally selfish, aggressive and conflictual to the extent that the thinking, actions and inactions are usually after interests which is influenced by power. In other words, all humans are after how he will achieve his personal interest by all means at every point in time. This in turn led to the belief that politics during the 19th and 20th centuries were struggles between the rich and powerful states versus the poor and weak states.

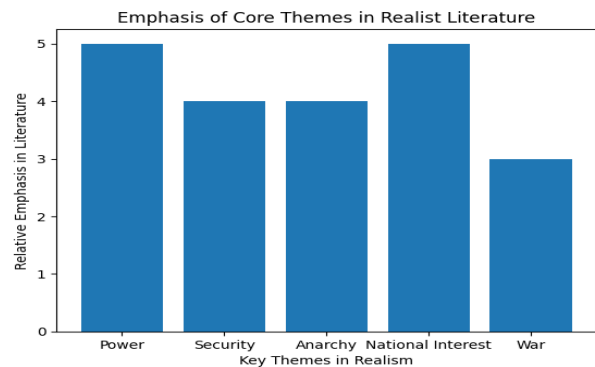
On the other hand, Neo-Realism posited by the likes of Waltz, Mearsheimer amongst others believed that the issue of war and security is the sole responsibility of individual states and cannot be assured by anybody especially in an anarchist context. In the neo-classical realism propounded by the likes of Machiavelli, Christensen etc are of the view that the centre stage of world politics is determined by the power of states together with the activities of their leaders in world politics.

In a nutshell, the realist contends that war and conflict among states on global stage is inevitable because no authority has the capacity to defend their interests as they must rely on the resources of their own states to help themselves as regards security most especially. Also, international institutions have no influence over world politics independent of states that support them because their state have their own sovereignty and therefore all that each of the states are always after is their interests. Should there be anything or directive for any states on the globe, the state can decide to accept or decline the directive from the international institution because the state is independent and sovereign (Enemuo, 2015). Therefore, it transcends that political action is solely determined by power or morality because there is no universal morality to guide the states. States interests are simply defined in terms of power usage and applications.

• **International Politics and Realism**

According to Viotti and Kauppi (2009), Golstein and Pevehouse (2013), D’Anieri (2014), a useful imagination hat captures the approach to the study of international relations and world politics is like a chess board and a game in an open field. Just as a chess consists of different actors, king, queen, rooks, bishops, punsi, so too does international relations and world politics. To them, the realm of international relations and world politics is in three dash level game of chess, with at least three games in process at once; security, economy, and identity. Within and between each game, various levels of inter-dependency exist. But to make the game even more of an analytical challenge, the actual size and boundaries of the chess board are unclear. The constituent elements and complex multi-dimensional nature of contemporary world politics are continuing evolving. They believe that most observers would agree that the state continues to be the pre-eminent actors in world politics, but because of globalization and crisis of authority in world politics, this may or may not be the case at the end of the 21st century.

Table 1



Again, Viotti and Kauppi (2009), Lamborn and Legold (2013) reflected three other concepts in world politics which are security, economy and identity. Security, to them, often built in terms of the basic survival, welfare and protection of the state existing in an international system characterized by self-help. Because most states are not in position to carry such a financial burden, hence some place much greater faith on the role of international organization, alliances and negotiated agreements ranging from trade and commerce to controlling armaments; as a means not to only reduce the financial cost of security but also to sustain and expand a sense that we live in a truly global society. To them, other argued that class interest dictates how security is defined. In effect, security is whatever the elites representing the dominant class say it is.

Discussions on international economy generally evolve around monetary issues, trade, finance and aid. Economic issues are particularly important as they influence a state’s overall power. As many observers believe that the international economy is a critical aspect of world politics and raises issues of global disparities and inequalities. Therefore, achieving maximum economy subsistence is the goal of the vast majority of humanity.

Identity involves the answers the question of who am I and whit whom do I identify? In terms of international relations and world politics, identity is most often associated with the state and nation and the values, culture and the people who fall within the state borders. For realist, state power and the balance of power is a central organizing concept. For instance, nationalism as an identity with political ramifications can be a cause of war as well as a means to mobilize popular support in defence of the country.

The struggle over this three issues and the inter-relations particularly, the security dimensions and identity, define much of what is important and interesting today about international relations and world politics. All the three concepts relate not just to the desires of the individual but also to the collective aspirations of the peoples in state and societies throughout the world.

The term international or global politics is a more inclusive term because it captures much of today’s reality to include not only state and international organization, but a wild range of



transnational actors, the phenomenon of globalization, vast social and economic global inequalities, and emergent global norms (Oluwole & Babatunde, 2021).

• **War and Its Typologies**

The conflict of interest as a result of power politics driven by the realist political actors and non-state actors at the global political arena has generated a lot of friction among member states. Their actions and inactions have made nations go into war in their quest to create balance of power.

It is very expedient to note that war is not natural phenomenon but man-made. That is why J. F. Kenney (former U.S.A. President) said that “unless nations change attitudes towards war, or else war will put an end to mankind”. Also, “Nations do not form a single society, all real happiness is founded upon struggle for the existence, and the struggle for power prevailing... (Fried Rich Von Berhadi, n.d).

For the purpose of this study, we need to understand what war is and its typologies as related to the topic under review.

• **What is War?**

Clausewitz (1833) argued that “war is not merely a political act, but also a political instrument, a continuation of political relations, a carrying out of the same by other means. This implies that decision making is involved and by extension, several principles should be kept in mind by civilians and military decision makers. Clausewitz concluded by saying that war is a continuation of politics where there is failure in diplomacy.

Table 2: Typologies of War in Realist Literature

Type of War	Key Characteristics
Guerrilla Warfare	Hit-and-run tactics, surprise, deception.
Infantry and Cavalry War physical endurance. Long Range	Close combat, ground troops,
Combat Warfare	Use of long-range firepower and shelling.
Siege Warfare	Defensive fortification and encirclement.

Types of War

- (i) **Guerrilla Warfare:** The word “guerrilla” means little war, or limited war. Usually, it involves hide and seek warfare. Its main characteristics include the use of deception and surprise elements. Unlike conventional war, guerrilla war takes the tactics of hit and run. A guerrilla fights, runs away to live and fight again. In the ancient times, guerrilla warfare was common. It involved, occasionally, the use of hit and run fighters in a small scale and limited action, usually in conjunction with a larger politico-military strategy against the enemy (Aja, 2006).

- (ii) **Infantry and Cavalry War:** Infantry represents army or ground armed force. They engaged in trekking short and long distances, through thick and thin forests to confront the enemies. The bulk of warfare in the ancient era was that of infantry. Ground troops took the greater risk of close combat battle. They also suffered the environmental hazards due to adverse weather and limitations of hills, mountains, valleys, swampy areas and rain forest. Other limitation of ground troops was speed-forward and backward movements were rather too common. Retreat and reinforcement was strenuous (Sheffield, 2019).

- (iii) **Long Range Combat Warfare:** Long range combat warfare was primarily determined by the long range of fire power. With long range fire power, it became possible to use shelling to destroy or attack ambushes and trenches of the enemies. To some extent, long range weapons were no longer target specific. Suspected enemy locations were under shelling or extensive firepower attacks from all the flanks or wings. The possibility to kill unseen soldiers in thin and thick forests were always there. It is also a possibility to waste costly war weapons against unintended and zero result parallel target (Obasi, 2018).

- (iv) **Siege Warfare:** This is a warfare that its operation is carried out on land. Just as the infantry, it does not mean exactly the same thing as field warfare. Siege warfare or the use of high defence walls is to fortify a city against external intruders or invaders. The use of fortification is wholly defensive in nature and strategic conception. The higher the defence wall, the more the value in feeling of security by deterrence. Siege warfare dates back to Neolithic times, when mud walls and palisades developed into the lofty and complicated stone structures dotting the country side during the latter Middle Ages (Aja, 2006).

Table 3: Core Assumptions of Realism in International Politics

This table synthesizes recurring concepts across the realism literature you reviewed (Duncan; Viotti & Kauppi; Morgenthau; Oluwole & Babatunde).

Core Concept	Description
State as Primary Actor	States are the central actors in international politics.
Anarchy	Absence of a supranational authority above states.
National Interest security.	States act to preserve survival, sovereignty, and
Power capability.	Capacity to influence others, especially military



Balance of Power	States counter threats to prevent domination.
War	Instrument of policy arising from power rivalry.

• Critique of Realism and Findings

There are a lot of critics that have questioned the realist theory of international relations on various grounds. Johari (2009) noted that pure realism can offer nothing but a naked struggle for power which make any kind of international society impossible. It is good to note that propositions of the non-cooperative and egoistic nature of men, and of anarchy in the international system are nods given to leaders to act based on suspicions, power and amorality. Hence, some critics describe realism as self-fulfilling prophecy.

Realism is also being accused of being extremely pessimistic because it views the confrontational aspect of the global system as unavoidable. Realists have also argued that leaders can do little to overcome the reality of power politics since they are constantly faced with constraints and few chances for cooperation. So the realists replied to critics who accused them of being extremely pessimistic predicament is not pessimism - It is prudence.

Critics also point out that, the inability of the realists to explain or predict the end of the cold war in 1991, is a major shortcoming. With the end of the cold war came rapid transformation in the world politics which offered a new period of reduced competition between states and many opportunities for cooperation.

Again, realism is said to have focused too much on the state as a solid entity, and overlooking other actors and factors within the state as well as issues not directly connected to the preservation of the state. For instance, end of the cold war was a product of rebellion of the ordinary citizens of socialist-dominated nations in Eastern part of Europe against existing power structures. The act of ordinary citizens (or international organizations) has no principal place in the reckonings of realism. It is as a result of the state-centric thinking that realism is built upon. It sees states as concrete pool balls bouncing about table - never stopping “to look inside each pool ball to see what it comprises” and why it moves the way it does.

Realists acknowledge the vitality of this criticism but rather view incidents as the end of the cold war and ultimate collapse of the Soviet Union as expectations to usual patterns (Johari, 2009).

This paper also pointed out that one of the main realists’ strategies in the management of international politics, termed the balance of power which has also been questioned by several critics. “Balance of power” suggests a situation where states are always making choices to improve their own “capabilities while undermining the capabilities of others. This brings about some kinds of balancing though no state is allowed to become too powerful in the international system. If a state attempts to grow too much, like Nazi Germany in the

1930s, there will be an outbreak of war. This is because other powers within the system will form an alliance to defeat the presumed powerful state in order to restore balance in the system. Realists describe the balance of power as a wise tactic to regulate and secure the world. However, critics sees it as a way of legitimizing war and aggression (Usiemure, 2018).

Despite the shortcoming and weaknesses enumerated by critics of realism, it remains the central element in the study of international relations theory. Also, realism continues to offer insight about global policy-making as it offers tools of statecraft to poly makers (Usiemure et al, 2018).

4. Findings

This study demonstrates that **realism** continues to provide a robust and policy-relevant framework for explaining the persistence of war and conflict in contemporary international relations. Notwithstanding the expansion of multilateral institutions, international norms, and cooperative regimes, the anarchic nature of the global system still compels states to prioritize survival, security, and the protection of national interests. In line with global best practice in international relations scholarship, the findings confirm that conflict remains a structural feature of the system rather than an anomaly, thereby reinforcing realism’s enduring analytical relevance.

Empirical evidence drawn from Nigeria’s foreign and security engagements indicates a strong alignment with realist principles. Nigeria’s participation in regional peacekeeping missions, counterterrorism operations, and strategic partnerships reflects calculated, interest-driven decision-making consistent with rational actor models. These actions underscore Nigeria’s role as an emerging regional power that operates within systemic constraints, balancing domestic security imperatives with broader regional and international responsibilities. This aligns with global best practices that emphasize evidence-based, context-sensitive analysis of middle and regional powers in international politics.

Furthermore, the study establishes that the distribution of power and hegemonic dynamics remain central determinants of global stability and conflict patterns. The continued predominance of United States in the international system has contributed to relative systemic order, while shifting power configurations and regional asymmetries have intensified instability, particularly across developing regions. These findings are consistent with the propositions of Hegemonic Stability Theory, which posits that the presence of a dominant power fosters order, whereas hegemonic decline or contestation increases the likelihood of systemic disruption and conflict.

In addition, the study finds that war persists as a legitimate instrument of statecraft, consistent with classical realist thought. Nigeria’s engagement in military operations against transnational threats, as well as its involvement in multinational security interventions, reflects the enduring relevance of Carl von Clausewitz’s proposition that war is a continuation of politics by other means. These engagements



are driven primarily by strategic imperatives and national security considerations, rather than purely normative or idealist commitments to global peace.

Finally, while realism demonstrates strong explanatory power, the findings highlight its limitations in fully capturing the growing influence of non-state actors, transnational networks, and internal socio-political dynamics on contemporary conflict. In line with global best practice, the study advocates for a more integrative analytical approach that complements realist insights with perspectives from other theoretical traditions. Nevertheless, realism remains indispensable for understanding the enduring nature of war in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world.

5. Conclusion

This study examined **realism and the logic of war in international politics**, using Nigeria's engagement in the contemporary international system as a case study. Anchored on realist theory and Hegemonic Stability Theory, the study demonstrates that war remains a rational and recurring outcome of international politics, driven by anarchy, power competition, and the pursuit of national interest.

The analysis confirms that Nigeria's foreign and security behavior aligns with realist expectations, as the state consistently prioritizes survival, sovereignty, and regional influence in its international engagements. Nigeria's actions reflect the broader logic of *Realpolitik*, where power considerations shape policy choices more decisively than moral or ideological commitments.

While realism has notable limitations particularly its insufficient attention to non-state actors and domestic variables it continues to offer a robust framework for understanding conflict and war in global politics. In an international system marked by hegemonic dominance, power transitions, and persistent insecurity, realism remains relevant for both scholarly analysis and policy formulation. The study therefore concludes that realism, complemented by Hegemonic Stability Theory, provides a compelling explanation for the persistence of war in international politics and Nigeria's strategic behavior within that system.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- 1. Strategic Realism in Foreign Policy Formulation**
Nigeria should continue to ground its foreign and security policies in **realistic assessments of power, interest, and systemic constraints**. Idealist expectations of permanent peace should be balanced with pragmatic strategies that prioritize national security and regional stability.
- 2. Strengthening Regional Power and Deterrence Capacity**
Given the realist logic of self-help, Nigeria should strengthen its **military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities** to enhance deterrence and credibility within West Africa. A stronger regional posture will

reduce vulnerability and improve Nigeria's bargaining power in international affairs.

3. Leveraging Multilateral Institutions for National Interest

While realism views international institutions as instruments of state power, Nigeria should strategically utilize **ECOWAS, the African Union, and the United Nations** to advance its security and foreign policy objectives, particularly in conflict management and peacekeeping.

4. Adaptive Engagement with Hegemonic Powers

Nigeria should pursue **selective and interest-driven engagement with dominant global powers**, especially within the existing hegemonic order, to secure economic, military, and technological benefits without compromising sovereignty.

5. Integrating Domestic Stability into External Security Strategy

Recognizing that internal instability weakens external power projection, Nigeria must address **domestic security challenges, governance deficits, and economic vulnerabilities**, as these factors directly affect its effectiveness within the international system.

6. Theoretical Pluralism in Policy Analysis

While realism remains central, policymakers and scholars should complement it with insights from other theories to better understand the growing influence of non-state actors, identity politics, and transnational threats in contemporary warfare.

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