

Realpolitik

Book or Report Section

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16 [Main Text]
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18 *Realpolitik* is an approach to foreign policy in which preservation of the state and promotion of the
19 national interest are the ultimate goals and power is the primary tool for achieving those ends.

20 Associated historically with leaders such as Richelieu, Bismarck, Stresemann and Kissinger, it may
21 be understood as the practical counterpart to the realist school of International Relations theory.
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26 The term *Realpolitik* emerged in mid-nineteenth century Germany (see Haslam 2002: 183-4) and
27 was introduced into academic political science by Friedrich Meinecke. However, it harks back to a
28 longer tradition of thought about reasons of state that is associated pre-eminently with Niccolò
29 Machiavelli. His work, *The Prince* (Machiavelli 1995), in which he advises the Medicis on how to
30 restore the fortunes of Florence, is often regarded as the bible of *Realpolitik*.
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36 Proponents of *Realpolitik* regard the sovereign state as a unitary actor whose interests can be
37 reasonably straightforwardly identified. These interests are defined in terms of power and revolve
38 around maintaining and enhancing the state's international position. For example, Bismarck
39 developed a system of interlocking alliances designed to keep France isolated and hence forestall the
40 creation of a Franco-Russian alliance which could force the new German Empire to fight on two
41 fronts. A century later, Kissinger's triangular diplomacy involved pursuing a rapprochement with
42 China in order to incentivize the Soviet Union to cooperate with his policy of détente, thereby
43 relieving pressure on a US state that was exhausted by entanglement in Indochina. These examples
44 reveal the essential feature of a foreign policy of *Realpolitik*, viz. a willingness to be flexible in one's
45 choice of alliance partners, setting ideological considerations to one side in order to manipulate the
46 balance of power for national advantage.
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56 *Realpolitik*, like realist theory, involves a categorical distinction between international and domestic
57 politics. Machiavelli, however, recognized that domestic goodwill is a precondition of foreign policy
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3 success. This was also understood by leaders such as Bismarck and Stresemann, for whom foreign
4 policy success and domestic stability (in Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic respectively)
5 went hand in hand. In contrast, neglect of domestic politics was a signal feature of Kissinger's brand
6 of *Realpolitik*. Whilst he appeared to believe that the wise statesman should simply be left alone to
7 carry out the business of foreign policy in an enlightened fashion, the collapse of *détente* between the
8 US and USSR in the late-1970s was due in no small part to the activism of Kissinger's domestic
9 critics, most notably in their efforts to impose greater conditionality on US trade relations with the
10 USSR than Kissinger deemed desirable.
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18 *Realpolitik* demands that the national interest be prioritized over all other ends and values. This is
19 sometimes held to be amoral, or even immoral. Yet *Realpolitik* is not strictly divorced from ethical
20 considerations. Machiavelli insists that the kinds of moral constraints that apply to relations between
21 individuals within well-constituted states do not apply to those states in their relations with one
22 another. Foreign policy is, nevertheless, always conducted in a context provided by the established
23 conventions of the age. These rules and understandings shape how others will respond and hence
24 how the national interest may most productively be advanced. Indeed, shaping such conventions is
25 an important tool by which the powerful may seek to advance their interests. What proponents of
26 *Realpolitik* deny is the existence of rules which transcend time and space: they insist that leaders
27 must adjust to their circumstances.
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36 Whereas exponents of *Realpolitik* regard themselves as realists, adopting a pragmatic attitude
37 unencumbered by sentiment, they may be regarded by others as scheming and even untrustworthy.
38 These two faces of *Realpolitik* may be traced back to Machiavelli (1995: 48), who advises leaders to
39 'never take things easy in times of peace, but rather use the latter assiduously, in order to be able to
40 reap the profit in times of adversity'. Few would find fault with the notion that those responsible for
41 the national defense should remain alert to future threats and be willing to make difficult decisions.
42 The notion that opportunities for national advantage should always be exploited and that the ends
43 always justify the means is, however, more controversial. The pejorative connotations which often
44 attach to *Realpolitik* stem from the fact that it may be difficult to disentangle what is required for
45 national defense from what may be desired by unscrupulous leaders, not least because of the secrecy
46 with which figures such as Bismarck and Kissinger have carried out their foreign policies.
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56 In contemporary international politics, *Realpolitik's* pejorative connotations have become more
57 prominent, such that the term is often used to disparage a foreign policy as cynically self-interested.
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3 The more neutral notion of power politics, however, continues to be central to the realist and
4 neorealist schools of International Relations theory: scholars such as Kenneth Waltz and John
5 Mearsheimer view power politics as the essential characteristic of an anarchic international system,
6 though they largely avoid the term *Realpolitik*.
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11 Perhaps the most significant criticism of *Realpolitik* is that it conflates description and prescription.
12 Machiavelli's analysis of the challenges facing Florentine leaders was not only rooted in particular
13 historical circumstances, but was also designed to promote a particular outcome, viz. to save
14 renaissance Italy from disunity and foreign domination. It is therefore important to establish where
15 analysis ends and advice begins. Like their realist counterparts in International Relations,
16 proponents of *Realpolitik* argue that their approach reflects the necessities of competition between
17 sovereign states in an anarchic setting. Yet if international politics is shaped by how leaders think
18 and act, then our descriptions matter: to the extent that authors such as Machiavelli advise leaders to
19 act in a power-political fashion, they may help to bring into existence precisely the kind of world
20 which they represent as a fact of international life.
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30 [Cross References]

31 SEE ALSO: International Relations theory; Machiavelli; Realism/Neorealism; Reasons of State
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