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Q2(b)

**Discuss the emergence of neo-realism and its basic tenets**

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 2 · 15 marks · Comparative Politics

Comparative Politics: Nature and major approaches; political economy and political sociology perspectives; limitations of the comparative method.

**Core demand of the question**

- Discuss the emergence and tenets of neo-realism
- Write at 15-mark length

**Revision summary**

Waltz built neo-realism to make realism a systemic theory.

Anarchy, like functions, and unlike capabilities are the core tenets.

Bipolarity was his favoured stability case.

Keohane and Nye's interdependence is the liberal-institutionalist foil.

Domestic politics is deliberately outside the 1979 model.

**Introduction**

Neo-realism, or structural realism, emerged as Kenneth Waltz's reply to classical realism and to the behavioural search for a theory of International Politics. Its tenets are anarchy, structure, and polarity, not human nature.

**Body****Emergence**

- Hans Morgenthau's classical realism rested on interest as power and on a tragic human nature. Critics called it unfalsifiable philosophy.
- The 1970s debate with interdependence and with integration theory asked why war persisted among like units.
- Waltz's Theory of International Politics (1979) shifted the cause from men and States to the system's structure.
- **The Cold War bipolar map was the empirical home of the argument:** two poles, clear balancing, long peace at the centre.

**Tenets**

- **Ordering principle is anarchy:** no world government. Units are like in function; they differ in capability.
- Structure is the distribution of capabilities. Polarity - bipolar or multipolar - is the main variable.
- Self-help and security dilemma follow. Balancing is more typical than bandwagoning among great powers.

- Relative gains and survival constrain cooperation even when Robert Keohane's regimes look useful.
- Theory is systemic. Domestic regime type is omitted by design, which later neoclassical realists put back.

### What it displaced and what it left

- It disciplined IR into a parsimonious theory. It underplayed transnational actors that Keohane and Joseph Nye stressed.
- Offensive realists such as John Mearsheimer kept the structure and raised the appetite for power.

### Flow diagram

Classical realism -> Waltz 1979  
Waltz 1979 -> Anarchy like units  
Waltz 1979 -> Polarity capabilities  
Anarchy like units -> Self-help balancing  
Polarity capabilities -> Self-help balancing

### Conclusion

Neo-realism emerged when Waltz moved realism from human nature to anarchy and **polarity**. Its tenets are like units, self-help, and capability distribution as structure. It remains the spare map of great-power politics. It is not a full sociology of world politics.

### Facts & figures

#### Waltz 1979

Theory of International Politics: structure as anarchy plus distribution of capabilities.

#### Morgenthau

Classical predecessor: interest defined as power and a nature of politics, not a system theory.

#### Polarity

Number of great powers as the structural variable that shapes war and alliance patterns.

#### Keohane and Nye

Power and Interdependence: the rival claim that multiple channels and issue areas loosen military hierarchy.