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Q4(b)

What do you mean by offensive and defensive realism?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · 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

- Distinguish between offensive realism and defensive realism
- Write at 15-mark length

Revision summary

Both theories are structural realisms under anarchy.

Defensive realism, with Waltz, treats moderate power and balancing as rational.

Offensive realism, with Mearsheimer, treats the search for **regional hegemony** as rational for great powers.

The **security dilemma** is shared; the predicted amount of expansion is not.

Institutions are secondary in both, unlike in Keohane.

Introduction

Offensive and defensive realism are both structural realist theories. They start from anarchy, self-help, and relative power. They disagree on how much power a State should seek and on whether expansion is the rational path to security.

Body**Shared ground**

- **Both follow Kenneth Waltz's third-image start:** the international system is anarchic. There is no world government.
- Survival is the first goal. Intentions of others are uncertain. Capabilities matter more than speeches.
- **The security dilemma, developed by John Herz and Robert Jervis, is the shared mechanism:** steps that one State takes to be safe can look like threats to another.

Defensive realism

- Waltz's Theory of International Politics is the main defensive text. States seek enough power to be secure, not maximum power.
- Excess power triggers balancing. Conquest is often self-defeating because of nationalism, nuclear weapons, and the costs of occupation.
- **Stephen Walt's balance-of-threat and Jervis's offence-defence balance sit in this family:** moderation can be rational.
- Stability is more likely when defence is easy and when great powers accept a balance.

Offensive realism

- **John Mearsheimer's** The Tragedy of Great Power Politics holds that great powers seek **regional hegemony** and as much power as they can get, because only hegemony ends the survival problem.
- The structure creates revisionist behaviour even among status-quo-minded leaders. Buck-passing and war are expected tools.
- Offshore balancers, in this view, try to stop a peer hegemon in another region, which is how Mearsheimer reads United States policy toward potential Asian hegemons.

Distinction that matters

- Defensive realism predicts more restraint and more balancing against expansion. Offensive realism predicts more expansion and more tragedy.
- Neither is Keohane's institutionalism. Institutions, for both realisms, are thin. For Keohane they can still shape cheating and information.
- **India's nuclear and Quad choices can be read in both frames:** minimum deterrence looks defensive; concern to prevent Chinese **regional hegemony** looks closer to Mearsheimer's problem.

Flow diagram

Anarchy uncertainty -> Waltz defensive enough power
 Anarchy uncertainty -> Mearsheimer offensive hegemony
 Waltz defensive enough power -> Balancing restraint
 Mearsheimer offensive hegemony -> Expansion tragedy

Conclusion

Defensive realism says States should seek security, not domination, because the system punishes greedy expansion. Offensive realism says the same system forces great powers to seek hegemony. The distinction is about rational strategy under anarchy, not about whether power politics exists.

Facts & figures

Kenneth Waltz

Theory of International Politics (1979): anarchy, capability distribution, and security-seeking States.

John Mearsheimer

The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (2001): great powers maximise power toward regional hegemony.

Security dilemma

Defensive steps that appear offensive to others, producing spirals.

Robert Jervis

Offence-defence balance and misperception as variables that can ease or worsen the dilemma.

Regional hegemony

Mearsheimer's goal-condition in which a great power dominates its own region and blocks peers elsewhere.

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