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Q1(d)

Explain the various facets of the idealist approach to the study of international relations. Comment on its contemporary relevance.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 2 · 10 marks · Approaches to the Study of International Relations

Approaches to the Study of International Relations: Idealist, Realist, Marxist, Functionalist and Systems theory.

Core demand of the question

- **Define idealism in IR:** morality, law, organisations, progress
- Name **Kant**, Wilson and the League/UN lineage
- Separate it from naive pacifism
- Comment on contemporary relevance against realism

Revision summary

Idealism in IR treats law, morality, public opinion and organisations as real forces, not only military power.

Kant's perpetual peace and Wilson's League/UN lineage are the core facets, with collective security and disarmament as programmes.

It is not naive pacifism; it seeks to change incentives through institutions.

- **Morgenthau and Waltz remain the main critique:** interest, anarchy and self-help.

Contemporary relevance is institutional and normative - UN, NPT, courts - not a claim that power politics has ended.

Introduction

The **idealist approach** to international relations holds that world politics can be steered by **law, morality, public opinion and institutions**, not only by relative military power. It is older than the word 'idealism'. **Immanuel Kant** and **Woodrow Wilson** remain the syllabus names. Its facets still organise the United Nations, arms control and human rights. Realists say those facets are decoration. The comment must judge **contemporary relevance**, not nostalgia.

Body

Facets of the approach

First, **human nature and progress**. Classical idealism, unlike **Morgenthau's** account of interest defined as power, treats education, commerce and republican government as forces that can reduce war. **Kant's** Toward Perpetual Peace linked republican constitutions, a federation of free states, and cosmopolitan hospitality. Second, **international law as a real constraint, not a slogan: treaties, arbitration, and later the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court**. Third, **international organisation**: the

League of Nations after Wilson's Fourteen Points, then the United Nations Charter's ban on aggressive force. Fourth, **collective security** rather than shifting alliances. Fifth, **disarmament and open diplomacy** as moral-political programmes. Sixth, in later liberal form, **economic interdependence** and democratic peace as empirical cousins of the older moral claim.

Idealism is not the claim that states are already good. It is the claim that **institutions and norms can change incentives** and that foreign policy should be judged by justice as well as by survival. **Wilson** tried to replace the old diplomacy of spheres with national self-determination and a league. The 1930s punished that hope. The 1945 Charter tried again with a Security Council that admitted power through the veto.

Realist objection

Morgenthau argued that politics among nations is a struggle for power and that moral crusades produce hypocrisy. **Waltz** argued that anarchy forces self-help regardless of the goodness of leaders. The League failed in Manchuria and Abyssinia. The United Nations fails when a permanent member is the aggressor, as in Ukraine. Those facts are the realist brief.

Contemporary relevance

Idealism remains relevant as **the working language of order**. Climate agreements, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, refugee law, and the everyday work of the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization are unintelligible if one counts only tanks. **NATO** itself claims a community of democracies, which is an idealist wrapping on a realist alliance. The International Criminal Court's warrants, however uneven, show that atrocity is still named as crime.

Relevance is **partial**. Great-power war, tariff nationalism, and the stalling of disarmament (question 1(e)) show that Kantian peace is not the structure of 2024. Idealism is relevant as a **standard and as a set of institutions**, not as a prediction that power politics has ended. A PSIR answer that discards it cannot explain why states still sign charters. An answer that treats it as sufficient cannot explain Ukraine, Gaza, or nuclear modernisation.

Flow diagram

Idealist approach -> Kant perpetual peace

Idealist approach -> Wilson League UN

Idealist approach -> Law organisations disarmament

Morgenthau Waltz -> Power and anarchy

Law organisations disarmament -.constrains but does not abolish. -> Power and anarchy

Conclusion

The idealist approach joins Kantian peace, Wilsonian organisation, international law and the hope of progress. It is still the grammar of the UN and of much arms-control talk. It is not a complete theory of the 2020s. Its contemporary relevance is as constraint and aspiration inside a still-anarchic system.

Facts & figures

Kant, Perpetual Peace

Republican constitutions, a pacific federation and cosmopolitan right as conditions for reducing war.

Wilson, Fourteen Points

Open diplomacy, self-determination and a general association of nations - the political origin of the League.

UN Charter Article 2(4)

The legal core of post-1945 idealism: a ban on the threat or use of force against territorial integrity.

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