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Q1(b)

Neo-liberalism lightened neo-realism's dark view of international politics. Comment.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 2 · 10 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

- State Waltzian neorealism's 'dark' picture of anarchy and relative gains
- State Keohane-Nye neoliberal institutionalism (**complex interdependence**, regimes, absolute gains)
- Show how neoliberalism 'lightens' neorealism without abolishing anarchy
- Give a contemporary illustration

Revision summary

Waltzian neorealism pictures anarchy, self-help and relative gains as a dark constant.

Keohane and Nye's neoliberalism keeps anarchy but adds **complex interdependence**, regimes and absolute gains.

Institutions reduce cheating and transaction costs; they do not create a world state.

Ukraine, tariffs and health-governance shocks show both residual darkness and institutional repair.

The 'lightening' is cooperation under anarchy, not the end of power politics.

Introduction

Neorealism, in **Kenneth Waltz's** Theory of International Politics, is a dark science of anarchy: self-help, relative gains, and the constant possibility of war. **Neoliberal institutionalism** - **Robert Keohane, Joseph Nye**, regime theory - does not deny anarchy. It argues that information, iteration and institutions can make cooperation rational. That is the lightening.

Body

The dark view

Waltz stripped classical realism of human nature and kept **structure**. The international system is anarchic. Units are like units. Security is scarce. States watch **relative gains** because today's partner can be tomorrow's threat. **John Mearsheimer later pushed this toward offensive realism: great powers maximise power. The 2022 full-scale war on Ukraine, Pahalgam 2025** and the return of tariff weapons in 2025 all feed the dark reading: force and fear still organise the board.

The neoliberal reply

Keohane's After Hegemony and **Keohane and Nye's** Power and Interdependence argued that under **complex interdependence** military force is not always the last word, multiple channels connect societies, and issue-areas have their own politics. **Regimes** - principles, norms, rules and decision procedures - reduce cheating and transaction costs. **Absolute gains** can suffice when defection is monitored. The WTO, the IAEA, ASEAN's convening, and even a bruised WHO are illustrations that states lock themselves into rules they could, in theory, smash.

Neoliberalism is not Wilsonian idealism. It is rational-choice institutionalism. **Hedley Bull's anarchical society sits nearby: order without world government. Alexander Wendt** later said anarchy is what states make of it; neoliberalism is more cautious, staying with interests and information.

Lightening, not abolition

- **The lightning is this:** anarchy remains, but it is not a jungle at every hour. Institutions do not replace power; they **shape** how power is used. When the United States threatens **reciprocal tariffs** in 2025, neorealists say "I told you so." Neoliberals reply that the same shock sends India and the EU back to a **free-trade agreement** table, and that WHO reform talk after a U.S. withdrawal debate is still institutional politics, not a return to 1914. Both can be true. The dark view is the baseline risk. The light view is the daily work of diplomacy.

Flow diagram

Waltz neorealism -> Anarchy relative gains
 Keohane Nye -> Regimes absolute gains
 Anarchy relative gains -> War and defection
 Regimes absolute gains -> Cooperation under anarchy
 War and defection -.baseline. -> Cooperation under anarchy

Conclusion

Neoliberalism lightens neorealism by showing that iterated games, information and regimes make cooperation possible under anarchy. It does not abolish self-help. It makes self-help less lonely.

Facts & figures

Waltz 1979

Theory of International Politics: anarchic structure, not human nature, is the first cause of self-help.

Keohane 1984

After Hegemony: cooperation is possible after a hegemon's decline if regimes supply information and iteration.

Complex interdependence

Keohane and Nye: multiple channels, absence of hierarchy among issues, and a reduced role for military force in some dyads.

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