

**PEARSON EDEXCEL** A LEVEL

# GLOBAL POLITICS

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A summary of the learning objectives for each chapter.

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Concise definitions of key terms where they first appear.

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Links between different topics on the specification.

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The two sides of a controversial question set out to hone evaluation skills.

### Further reading

Websites, books and articles that are relevant to the chapter.

### Synoptic link

Synoptic links with core political ideas are highlighted. This is a requirement in Section B exam questions.

### Activity

Activities to cement your learning.

### Distinguish between

A clarification of the difference between two commonly confused concepts or institutions.

### What you should know

A summary at the end of the chapter against which you can check your knowledge.

### Practice questions

Revision questions at the end of each chapter.

### Case study

Topical examples to use in essays.



# Contents

<b>Chapter 1 Theories of global politics</b>	<b>1</b>
Getting you started	1
What is global politics?	3
Realism and liberalism	5
<b>Chapter 2 The state and globalisation</b>	<b>33</b>
Getting you started	33
The state: nation-state and national sovereignty	34
The process of globalisation	36
To what extent does globalisation address and resolve contemporary issues?	41
The implications of globalisation for the nation-state and national sovereignty	67
<b>Chapter 3 Global governance: political</b>	<b>78</b>
Getting you started	78
What is global governance?	80
The United Nations	83
Key UN organs	87
How effective is the UN?	105
Treaties	111
The North Atlantic Treaty Organization	114
<b>Chapter 4 Global governance: economic</b>	<b>120</b>
Getting you started	120
What is economic global governance and why is it needed?	121
International trade	131
Poverty and development	145
Role of global civil society and non-state actors	152
<b>Chapter 5 Global governance: human rights</b>	<b>157</b>
Getting you started	157
Human rights and international law	158
Human rights and state sovereignty	173
Why did humanitarian intervention increase during the 1990s?	178
Why have some humanitarian interventions been more successful than others?	183
Why has humanitarian intervention been selective?	192
Does Western hypocrisy undermine the principle of humanitarian intervention?	197



<b>Chapter 6 Global governance: environmental</b>	<b>203</b>
Getting you started	203
Why is there a need for environmental global governance?	204
What is climate change?	208
What can be done to reduce climate change?	209
Global governance efforts	220
Paris Summit (COP 21, 2015)	233
<b>Chapter 7 Power and developments</b>	<b>243</b>
Getting you started	243
Different types of global power	245
The changing balance of global power	251
Polarity	254
Systems of government: characteristics	271
How has the global balance of power changed since the end of the Cold War?	276
In what ways has the changing balance of global power impacted on contemporary global issues?	279
<b>Chapter 8 Regionalism and the European Union</b>	<b>288</b>
Getting you started	288
Why a European Union?	292
Regionalism	297
Economic regionalism	298
The development of regional organisations (excluding the EU)	305
European integration: major factors and developments	312
Regionalism and global issues	328
<b>Index</b>	<b>333</b>

Answers to practice questions can be found at:  
[www.hoddereducation.co.uk/GlobalPolitics2022](http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/GlobalPolitics2022)

# 1

# Theories of global politics

## Learning outcomes

By the end of the chapter you should understand:

- what global politics is
- what the challenges of modern global politics are
- what realism is and whether states behave in a realist way
- what liberalism is and whether there is a liberal world order
- the main ideas of the anarchical society and society of states theory
- how realism and liberalism explain recent developments in global politics

## Getting you started

This chapter introduces the key theories of global politics. In doing so, it also covers many themes and debates that are covered in depth in later chapters.

### A world order or world in disorder?

In the twenty-first century's second decade, global politics faces significant challenges. Increasingly, the world order feels disorderly. The world is grappling with a climate emergency, with collective action needed and time running out. There is an increasingly multipolar distribution of power, with the US, China and Russia all competing for influence and becoming bolder in their actions. Since 2020, states face a difficult global recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic which devastated economies worldwide and brought our globalised, interconnected world to a standstill.

It is a reasonable question to ask whether the current global world order is able to respond to these challenges. Are states willing to cooperate and make necessary sacrifices to advance global progress? Or are states becoming increasingly willing to distance themselves from the institutions of globalisation and defend their national interest?

There is some evidence that in recent years the world's most significant powers – the US, Russia and China – became increasingly willing to challenge that liberal world order of cooperation. Under President Trump, the US withdrew from several key international agreements and openly challenged the world order of globalism supported by the United Nations. The project of re-engaging the US in a more cooperative approach was an immediate challenge for President Biden. Russia has become increasingly willing to use its military power using conventional and unconventional methods, from Ukraine to Syria to Salisbury. And China has been busily building a global infrastructure network costing trillions of dollars, continuing its economic rise and modernising its military power.

States tend to prioritise their own national interests. Has this made the world safer and helped to resolve the many pressing collective action problems? There has been some progress on tackling climate change, but it is still far from keeping pace with the scale of the problem. Major abuses of human rights are still too often outside the control of global governance, with those responsible not held accountable or facing justice. Global efforts to reduce poverty have had some success, but there is growing inequality within and between states and still too many areas where poverty has yet to be significantly reduced. Some regional organisations have grown in membership and influence and attempt to advance shared interests at a regional level that struggle to be advanced at the global level.



**A wildfire in Manavgat, Turkey, July 2021. The world is grappling with a climate emergency**

National politics is about the ability to resolve disputes, share resources and take decisions legitimately within agreed structures, laws and institutions. However, unlike in national politics, such as that in the UK or the US, global politics has no central world government or authority. Global politics has a far more complex and multilayered range of structures, laws and institutions at regional and international level. Getting things done requires leadership, negotiation, compromise and imagination.

Ultimately, this responsibility for getting things done and meeting the challenges of the moment rests with states, as they are the most legitimate and powerful actors in global politics. Agreements are made and achievements realised because states have negotiated them and stick to their commitments. Progress can be made when states' interests and the international interests are similar or aligned. But, ultimately, states are in the driving seat of global politics and the actions of some states matter more than others.

This chapter examines the different lenses through which states view global politics and how these viewpoints translate into policies and actions. Ultimately, whether the world is orderly or disorderly depends on the actions and behaviours of states.

# What is global politics?

To begin to understand global politics, it is useful to compare global with national politics. Both relate to:

- taking decisions legitimately
- accountability and holding those in power to account
- solving shared problems, such as a global threat of terrorism
- resolving disputes, such as disagreements over ownership of territory
- sharing resources fairly and peacefully.

## The differences between national and global politics

There are important differences between national and global politics in terms of power, legitimacy and authority.

Power in global politics is the ability to achieve desired outcomes and to influence others. In national politics, a national or sub-national government, such as Her Majesty's Government in the UK, exercises power. It is legitimately elected by the people with a mandate to implement the manifesto promises that a political party made during an election campaign. In global politics, there is no form of world government nor any single authority to govern a world composed of multiple nation-states. Institutions such as the United Nations (UN) carry some authority, but only as much as individual member states allow. Therefore, states can choose to ignore or defy these attempts at **global governance**.

Legitimacy is the ability to do things fairly and lawfully. This can be achieved through complying with or creating a form of legislation or law. For example, one way of undertaking military action lawfully is through a UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution, which in itself is a statement of international law. In national politics there is usually a legislature, which holds the legitimacy and powers to create laws, and a judiciary and police force, which apply and enforce the law (see Table 1.1). In global politics, there is rarely such clear authority. Laws are created only when states agree to them. Laws often apply only to those states that have signed up to them. And laws are often enforced only when states permit it.

Authority comes from the possession of both power and legitimacy. The UK Parliament has authority because it is democratically elected and so possesses legitimacy. For example, in 2018, when the UK Parliament persistently refused to vote in support of Theresa May's European Union withdrawal agreement, the prime minister certainly felt the effects of Parliament's authority and was unable to get her Brexit plan approved. The same applied to Parliament's rejection of David Cameron's proposals for military action against the Assad regime in Syria in 2013.

In global politics, there is no comparable structure of world government with such clearly defined powers and scope. There is certainly no government structure that has comprehensive power over every state and region of the world. This is often referred to as a state of global anarchy, in the literal sense of there being no single authority that can bring order to a world of multiple nation-states. There are institutions that have some authority over certain states or regions, but this authority is not absolute, because states can decide to ignore or withdraw from these institutions. Some states are not even members of these institutions to begin with.

### Key term

#### Global governance

Attempts to bring government structures and authority to world politics in order to deal with common interests and challenges, such as climate change or global terrorism.

**Table 1.1** Examples of sources of power and authority in UK and US national politics

Source	UK authority	US authority
Legislature: amends and votes on laws	The UK Parliament has the power and authority to make and unmake laws.	The US Congress has the power and authority to approve presidential appointments and budgets, pass laws and impeach or try federal officers (including presidents).
Executive: proposes laws	Her Majesty's Government in the UK is made up of the prime minister and his/her cabinet, supported by the civil service. It can propose laws and policies for Parliament to vote on.	The US president is head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, has powers to negotiate treaties with other states and executes the laws created by Congress.
Judiciary: interprets and upholds the law	A key role is ensuring the executive does not exceed its powers. For example, the UK's Supreme Court in 2017 declared that the UK Parliament, rather than the executive, must trigger Article 50 to begin the process for leaving the EU. In 2019, the Supreme Court ruled that Prime Minister Boris Johnson's prorogation of Parliament had been unlawful.	The Supreme Court is the US's highest court and takes decisions on issues of major constitutional significance. For example, the 1973 <i>Roe vs Wade</i> decision ruled that women had the right to decide whether or not to terminate their pregnancy.

### Activity

- Looking at Table 1.1 and the separation of powers it summarises, are there institutions in global politics that have similar powers and responsibilities to:
  - an executive?
  - a legislature?
  - a judiciary?
- What differences do you see between the powers of these branches of government in national politics compared with global politics?

## Distinguish between

### National and global politics

#### Global politics

- There is no single world government with a clear mandate or authority. States are the most powerful and authoritative actors and, ultimately, a higher authority cannot force states to do anything against their will.
- International law may be written down and codified but often it applies only to states that have formally agreed to these laws (normally by signing and ratifying treaties).
- International law is hard to enforce, particularly if powerful states refuse to comply. Enforcement is possible only through sanctions or military action, and is inconsistent.
- There are many institutions capable of making decisions, but none can do so without the consent of member states. Summits and intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) offer states a means of resolving disputes and opportunities to work together (for example, in the UN, the EU, the Group of Seven (G7) and at the Paris Climate Change Conference 2015). They have varying legitimacy and authority, and states can ultimately choose whether or not to join and remain part of these institutions. States can also ignore their decisions or opt out of joint action.

#### National politics

- There is a government with a clear mandate and authority. Political parties usually compete in elections, are legitimately elected by a defined electorate within the state and then govern with clear authority.
- National laws are usually clearly written down, codified and set out in law, and apply to all citizens without exception.
- Courts and police enforce national laws and have clear and legitimate authority to do so.
- There are usually clear and authoritative institutions for taking decisions, such as voting on laws and resolving disputes fairly and legitimately, for example national parliaments or assemblies, such as the UK Parliament or the US Congress. A vote in one of these institutions carries clear authority and results in laws being debated, amended and, ultimately, approved or not.



## Who is involved in global politics?

By the nature of its much larger geographical scope, there are more actors involved in global than national politics. The powers, impact and limitations of each of these actors are covered in greater depth in later chapters.

States are the primary actors in global politics, as they have the most authority and legitimacy to take decisions. States differ widely in terms of their power, which impacts on the amount of authority they have on the world stage and their ability to achieve their desired outcomes and influence other states. Powerful states, such as China, Russia and the US, are more likely to achieve their own goals and also to dominate and limit the choices available to less powerful states.

In addition to states, there are a number of non-state actors that contribute towards global decision making. These include:

- IGOs such as the UN and the Bretton Woods Institutions (the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Bank)
- regional organisations such as the EU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)
- non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Oxfam and Human Rights Watch.

## Realism and liberalism

Two of the key theories in global politics are **realism** and **liberalism**. They represent different ways of approaching international problems.

### Realism and an anarchical world order

Realism is governed principally by the belief that nation-states are the most legitimate and powerful actors in global politics. The realist viewpoint includes the following:

- Global politics takes place in an anarchical society, with no world government that can impose authority and order, since nation-states retain the exclusive right to act in whatever way they wish. Although nation-states may decide to work through and with other non-state actors, they do not abandon their sovereign right to advance their own self-interest and the authority of IGOs, such as the EU and the UN, should be limited. (Anarchy, in this context, should be understood in its literal sense as the 'absence of authority or government' rather than necessarily a state of chaos and disorder.)
- Realism starts from a conservative, pessimistic view of human nature as fundamentally selfish. Since nation-states exist in a state of global anarchy, states live in a self-help system in which they must build up their own security apparatus through military power and alliances and must always be watchful and suspicious of others. This creates a **security dilemma**, because they can only rely upon themselves for their own protection. Security comes before any other considerations, such as human rights.
- All states are ultimately trying to find ways of increasing their power and influence within the global political order. They can be thought of as power maximisers, where no power is enough to meet the challenges of a disorderly, selfish global political system.
- The natural state of the world order is for states to compete with each other, making the most of their power. Therefore, states are often in conflict with each other.

### Activity

Consider the difference between national politics and global politics.

- 1 Why might it be more difficult to reach agreement in global politics than in national politics?
- 2 In global politics, which actors are:  
(a) the most powerful?  
(b) the most legitimate?

### Key terms

**Realism** States are the most important and authoritative actors in global politics, and their primary goal is to protect their own national interests. The world is anarchical and selfish, with no single authority above states that is able to impose order.

**Liberalism** States' interests in global politics are linked and interdependent, and best advanced through states cooperating with each other and with intergovernmental organisations in order to achieve common political objectives. Democracy and human rights are seen as essential.

**Security dilemma** The idea that as one state builds up its defences, others will respond by building up theirs, thereby increasing tensions between the two states or even provoking conflict. This risks becoming a competitive cycle of events.

See Box 1.1 for more information on the theories of key realist thinkers.

### Key terms

**Anarchical society** The term used by Hedley Bull in his 1977 book of the same name. It is the idea that global politics is in a state of disorder because there is no higher authority than nation-states with the power to control global politics.

## Box 1.1

### Important realist thinkers

The titles of the following texts from key realist thinkers all question some of the assumptions of liberalism, and emphasise the inevitable competition for power that exists between states and the idea of an **anarchical society** where there is no higher authority in global politics above nation-state level.

#### Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (1979)

Waltz was a defensive realist thinker. Bipolarity, where two major powers are competing for power, is more stable than multipolarity, where many rival powers are competing with each other (see page 269). Two major powers can negotiate their way to stability more easily than many competing powers. The international system is in a state of anarchy, with no central authority above nation-state level.

#### Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (1987)

Walt put forward the idea of a 'balance of threats' whereby states develop friendly relations with other states in order to counter a threat that they see from a rival state. Walt also defended the 2021 US withdrawal from Afghanistan arguing that it allowed the US to focus on more relevant and significant security threats.

#### Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (1948)

Morgenthau is a classical realist thinker. Political man is a naturally selfish creature and will always try to dominate and have power over others. Moral considerations in global politics are less important than the national interest.

#### John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001)

Mearsheimer is an offensive realist thinker. He explained that conflict and competition for power between the great world powers will continue. States are trying to secure hegemony, meaning they want to dominate all other states within a region.

### Synoptic link

In your study of Political Ideas in Component 1, you learn about **conservatism** in which **Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)** who put forward his view of the 'state of nature' in his most important work *Leviathan* (1651) as inherently selfish, motivated by greed and suspicion of others. In the absence of a powerful higher authority to tame human nature, a 'leviathan' as Hobbes termed it, there would be anarchy. In the international system there cannot be an authority above the nation state. We can see this conservative viewpoint linking closely with realists' views of human nature leading to an anarchical world order in which states cannot trust others and maximise their power.

### Synoptic link

In your study of Political Ideas in Component 1, you learn about the conservative thinker **Edmund Burke (1729–97)** – one particularly important idea that links conservatism and realism is of society operating in 'little platoons', seeing a benefit to society from hierarchical structures. Burke continued the conservative (and realist) analysis of human nature as flawed and imperfect.

## Anarchical world order in action

### The Iraq War, 2003

Believing that Iraq still owned, and was prepared to use, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the US and a limited number of allies, including the UK, invaded the country in March 2003. The stated objective was to disarm Iraq and its leader, Saddam Hussein, of these weapons.

However, the US launched military action without a clear UNSC Resolution authorising the use of force. In fact, the last resolution before the invasion (UNSC Resolution 1441) offered Iraq 'a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations', and Russia and France did not support US invasion plans and urged UN weapons inspectors (who reported that Iraq was partially cooperating with inspections) to be given more time for assessments.

In March 2003, a combination of a ground assault and air strikes brought Saddam Hussein's regime to an end within days. Saddam Hussein fled, but was later captured and tried by an Iraqi Special Tribunal. He was executed on 30 September 2006. After the invasion, UN weapons inspectors concluded that there were no WMDs in Iraq.



In March 2003, US soldiers invaded Iraq during the War on Terror

The 2003 Iraq War is an example of realism in US and UK foreign policy because of the following.

- **The US was prepared to 'go it alone', without international support:** military action was launched without clear UNSC approval or wider international agreement and support. The coalition consisted of the US as the lead player and military forces from Australia, Poland and the UK.
- **The war's legality was highly questionable:** the UK's Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War concluded in 2016 that the case for war was 'unjustified' and that Saddam's regime posed 'no imminent threat'. The UN secretary-general at the time, Kofi Annan, said in 2004 that the invasion did not conform to the laws of the UN's founding Charter and was, 'from our point of view, illegal'.

- **The US and its allies were acting in what they perceived, and argued, was their national interest:** the US saw the UN Security Council as an obstacle to successfully carrying out action it believed to be in its national interest. Prime Minister Tony Blair said that Iraq represented ‘a current and serious threat to the UK national interest’ because the UK government believed that WMDs were a threat to the middle east region.

However, many realist thinkers opposed the Iraq War. For example, US political scientist John Mearsheimer believed that it was not in the US’s national interest to invade.

### China’s Belt and Road Initiative since 2013

A key element of China’s rising power since 2013 has been its ‘One Belt, One Road’ project, also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The project, spanning over 70 countries and costing as much as \$4 trillion in direct investments and other projects, aims to improve and secure infrastructure connectivity, energy supplies and key maritime shipping routes. The network stretches from China’s borders as far as western Europe and East Africa (see Figure 1.1).

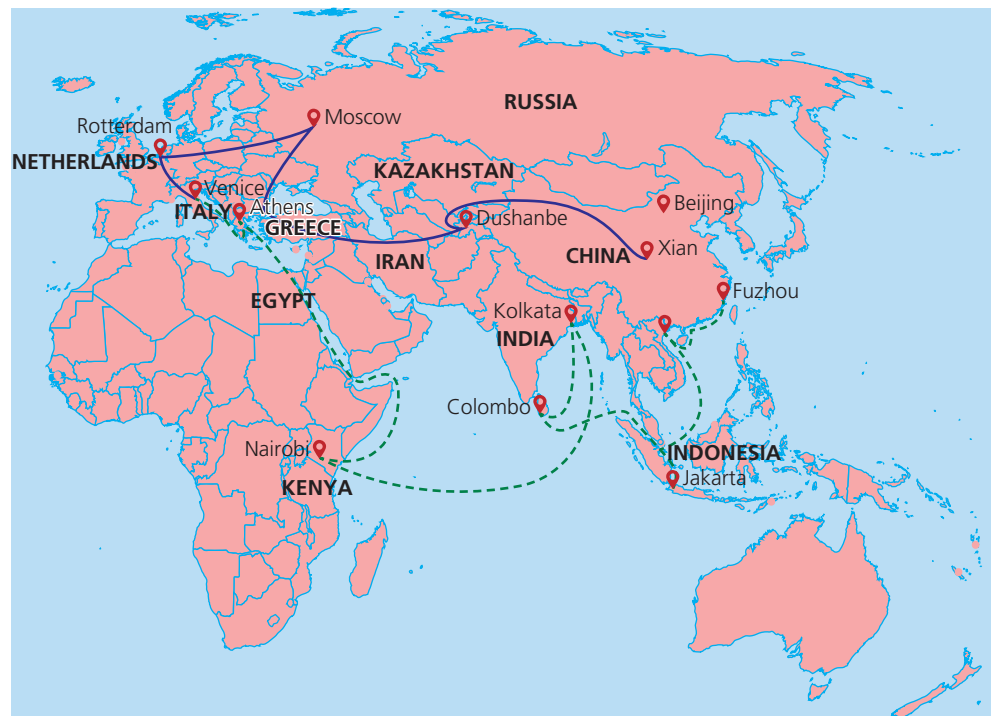


Figure 1.1 China’s Belt and Road initiative

Realists would interpret China’s actions as a means to seek to maximise power in its ambitions to cement China as a global superpower and exert influence far beyond its borders. A key benefit will be to enable China to project economic power across the region and to invest in a huge number of states. It will build new markets for Chinese goods, strengthening its domestic economy through higher incomes and consumer spending. The wider ambition is to build China’s global economic power in its race to overtake the US as the world’s largest economy, which some forecasts estimate might happen within this decade.

The project poses a challenge to US power, with both President Trump and President Obama struggling to respond effectively to China’s growing economic power.



Obama tried a ‘pivot to Asia’, essentially an attempt to reassert US investment and military power in the South Asia region, whereas under Trump economic relations escalated into a trade war. Ultimately, the US has been unable to propose tempting enough economic offers of its own to states participating in the BRI.

Critics also argue that weaker states end up in a debt trap with China, where infrastructure projects constructed using Chinese contractors create long-term financial liability for poorer states. Other analysts see the BRI as a potential network through which growing Chinese military power could eventually be deployed.

### The Russian annexation of Crimea, 2014

In 2014, Russian-backed militia entered the Crimea region in Ukraine and, within months, Crimea was declared independent and subsequently voted in a referendum to become part of Russia. Ukraine, formerly part of the Soviet Union, has long been torn between the West (potentially joining the EU and even NATO) and the East (Russia offered Ukraine very favourable gas prices and, since the break-up of the Soviet Union, an agreement with Ukraine allowed Russia to continue to operate from the Sevastopol port in Crimea’s Black Sea region, Russia’s only warm-water port).

Russia did not invade Ukraine with conventional military forces, but reports suggested the presence of special forces wearing uniforms without any identifying insignia (see page 251). Pro-Russian rebel groups then became active in the predominantly ethnically Russian eastern regions of Ukraine, some with Russian government backing.

Russia’s actions in Crimea are an example of realism for the following reasons.

- **Russia put military forces into Ukraine unilaterally:** it did not discuss the move with IGOs or gain justification through international law. The UNSC was unable to pass a resolution condemning Russia because, as a permanent member, Russia vetoed this (see page 10).
- **Russia argued that it was acting in its national interest:** from a Russian perspective, there were worrying signs that Ukraine might be tilting decisively towards closer ties with the West and, in particular, the EU and NATO. Since the end of the Cold War in 1991, ten former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact states, including Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, all of which share a direct border with Russia, had joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO, see page 117), the pro-Western military alliance founded as a means of countering the military might of the Soviet Union. Moscow judged this as a threat to its national interest and in 2008 declared the prospect of Ukraine and Georgia joining NATO as a ‘hostile act’.
- **The primary objective was to regain territorial control of Crimea** and, from a Russian perspective, to protect a majority ethnically Russian population. In particular, Russia wanted to secure the warm-water port of Sevastopol, a key strategic objective of the annexation. In terms of maintaining its maritime military power, Russia wanted to keep its main, and historically significant, Black Sea naval base.
- **In July 2014, an international passenger plane was shot down over Ukraine** with 298 lives lost. An EU joint investigation team concluded that the plane had been shot down by a missile which had been transported from Russia the same day. A UNSC Resolution aiming to establish an international tribunal into the incident was vetoed by Russia, highlighting the challenges of holding states accountable in an anarchical world order.

## Activity

Research other events in global politics and examine how they can be explained using the theories and ideas of realism. Did states act unilaterally? Were states acting in their national interest or the wider international interest? You could start with the following examples:

- the Syrian civil war (2011–)
- war in Afghanistan (2001–20)
- the UK's decision to leave the EU, known as 'Brexit' (2016)
- US–China relations under President Trump (2016–2021).

## Distinguish between

### Realism and liberalism: human nature

#### Realism

- Human nature is naturally selfish and egoist and therefore states are interested in their own (national) interests.
- Human nature is fixed and driven, and cannot be changed, so states too are motivated by a desire to dominate and have power over others.
- States are also motivated by a need to survive, especially in a global 'self-help' system where there is no guarantee that any other state or actor in global politics will help them.

#### Liberalism

- Liberals believe in a more optimistic vision of human nature than realists. Human nature is not fixed and states can therefore improve and develop.
- Humans, and therefore states, are committed to individual liberty and freedom (for example, human rights).
- Humans, and therefore states, prefer to work in partnership with others and look for opportunities to do so. International cooperation, through IGOs, is therefore possible and desirable.
- It is possible to impose order on humans and states from above, for example through a rules-based system of international law.

### International anarchy and its implications

The concept of a world that is in a state of anarchy is worth clarifying. The literal meaning of anarchy is that there is a lack of authority. Anarchy is frequently associated with the idea of conflict or chaotic social unrest, for example riots and lawlessness. In global politics, the realist viewpoint of anarchy may mean both:

- a simple lack of authority, and
- the potential for conflict between states in the absence of a higher authority above states.

## Key term

### International anarchy

The notion that states are self-contained units that frequently clash with each other, in a world system where there is no authority such as a 'world government' that is as legitimate, powerful or authoritative as nation-states.

An analogy frequently used to explain realism and the idea of **international anarchy** is the so-called 'billiard ball model'. The billiard balls in the game represent nation-states. The balls, like states, have a hard outer shell which represents the national sovereignty of individual states and is difficult to break through or penetrate. Realists want global politics to work this way, for example through clearly defined borders. Global politics, just like a game of billiards, is a competitive environment in which the states knock against each other and a collision between two states might have a knock-on effect on others. The billiard balls dominate the table, in the same way that realists would see states as the key actors in global politics.

It is important to note that the 'billiard ball model' is a way of explaining and visualising realism and is not a theory in its own right. Therefore, it is better to refer to the theory as 'realism' rather than the 'billiard ball model'.