
POLS 215:

IR THEORY



WHEN WE LAST MET...

- Key characteristic of the International State System:
ANARCHY
- Problem: How can we understand how states act?
 - No well established expectations based on institutionalized roles and structures (e.g. R from red district in a red state)
 - Need to find a way to narrow expectations by analyzing actors' abilities and desires

WHAT IS GAME THEORY?

Game theory: The scientific study of strategic interdependence

- Based on the concept of *rational choice*, which assumes that individuals weigh the costs and benefits and make choices to maximize their benefits
- Developed in the 1950s to study economic interactions (Coke vs. Pepsi) but applies just as well to state-level behavior (US vs. USSR)

IR THEORY – REALISM

Prisoner's Dilemma		Prisoner I	
Prisoner 2	Cooperate ("Don't tell")	Cooperate ("Don't tell")	Defect ("Rat out")
	Defect ("Rat out")	PI gets 1 month P2 gets 1 month	PI gets NO TIME P2 gets 5 years
	Cooperate ("Don't tell")	PI gets 5 years P2 gets NO TIME	PI gets 2 years P2 gets 2 years

Player I

		Player I	
		Cooperate	Defect
Player 2	Cooperate	3 , 3	5 , 0
	Defect	0 , 5	1 , 1

IR THEORY – REALISM

Real world example: WWI

- Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by Serbian nationalists on June 28, 1914
- But why are states preemptively declaring war on each other?
- Military and political leaders at the time **believed** the offense had an enormous advantage
 - New military technology: machine guns, chemical gas, railroads

IR THEORY – REALISM

Consider a world with two states...

- Two strategies: preempt or defend
- Ranking the outcomes:
 1. I preempt, you defend (Surprise!)
 2. We both defend (Peace)
 3. We both preempt (War)
 4. I defend, you preempt (I'm a sucker...)

The Cult of the Offensive

France

Germany

Defend Preempt

	Defend	2, 2	0, 3
Preempt		3, 0	1, 1

IR THEORY – REALISM

Why do states act the way they do?

- Primary objective is self-preservation
 - States act out of self-interests
 - Since they exist in an anarchic system, they can't trust others to be true to their word (there is nothing binding them), so they must rely on self-help (and assume others will do the same)
- What is the most important resource?
 - How is it measured?
 - Do you only care about *your* power?
 - Fundamental difference in how states act is their relative power
 - So you seek to maximize your power *relative* to everyone else's

IR THEORY – REALISM

The strong do what they can while the weak suffer what they must

IR THEORY – REALISM

Do states want to go to war??

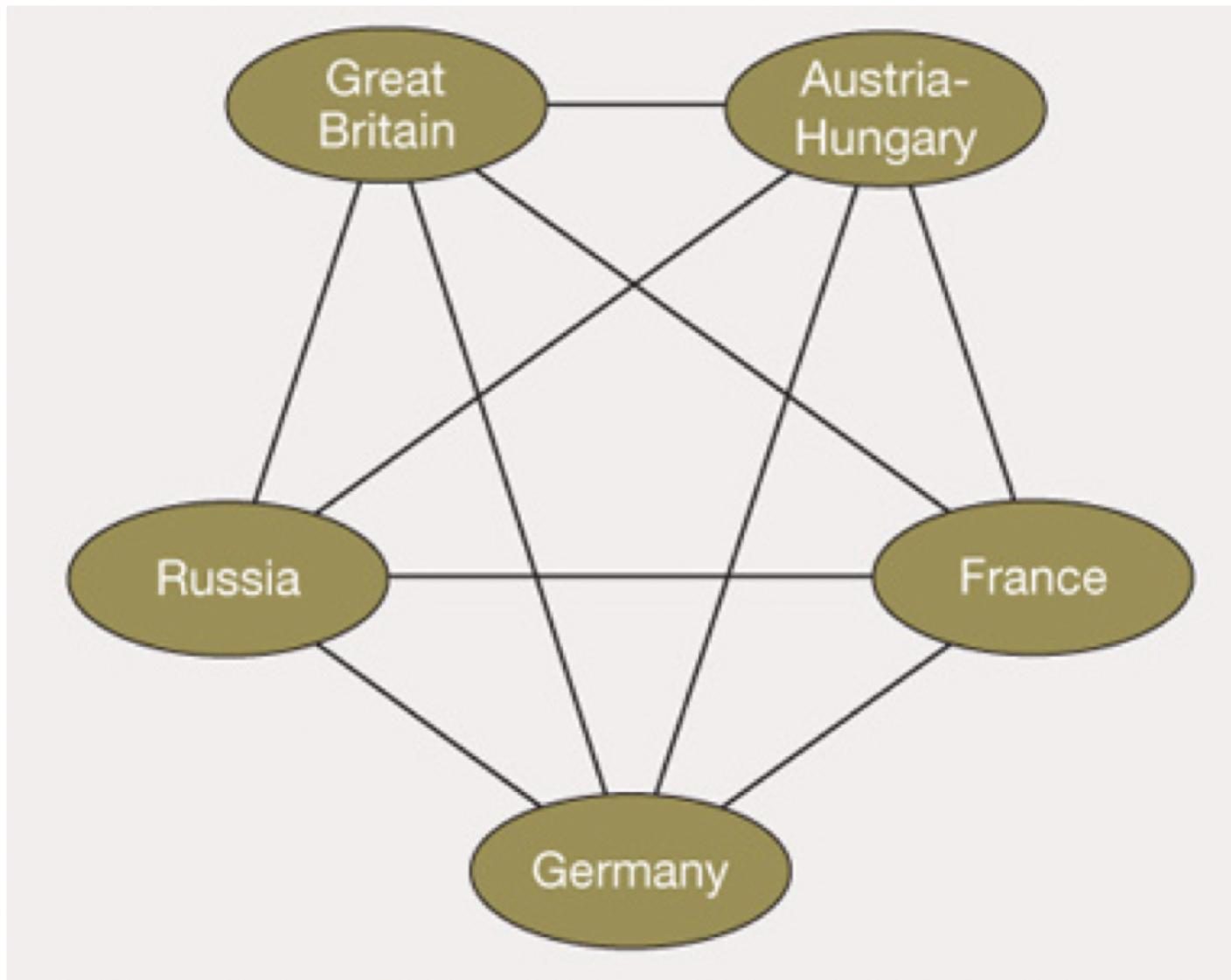
IR THEORY – REALISM

Circumstances that can lead to cooperation (or lack of conflict):

1) When it's better (i.e. in your interest) to defend than attack

- ***Balance of Power***
 - States want to avoid a ***hegemon*** from rising up
 - Could find (momentary) common cause to counterbalance the emergence of other great powers

Balance of Power in 19th century Europe

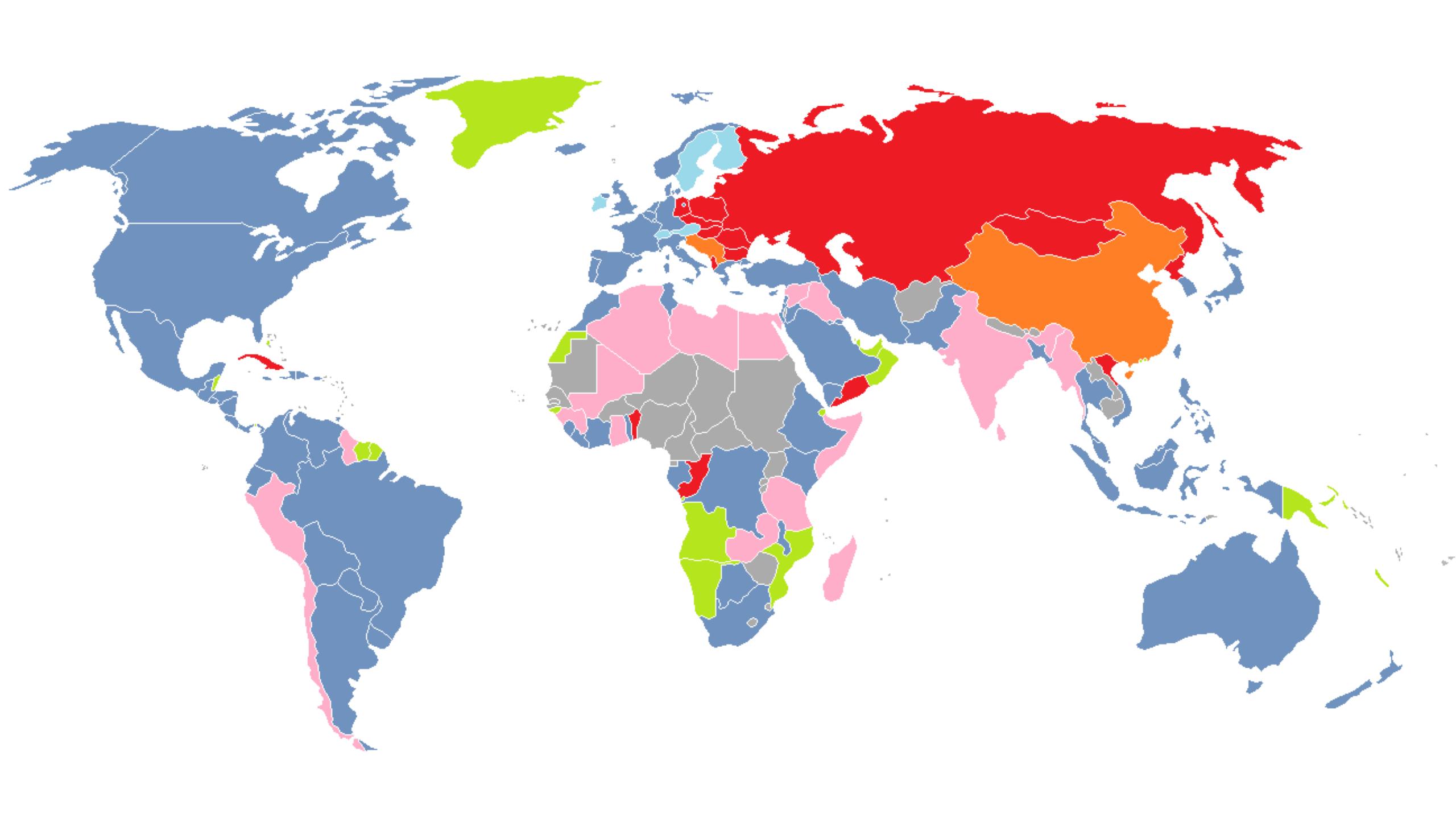




Truman-Stalin

Bas Rowden





IR THEORY – REALISM

Circumstances that can lead to cooperation (or lack of conflict):

- 2) When states can clearly discern other states' intentions
 - BUT...this is really difficult – why?

IR THEORY – REALISM

Circumstances that can lead to conflict:

1) Security Dilemma

- The actions one country takes ostensibly to bolster its defense are ***perceived*** by others as threatening causing a feedback loop of arms buildup that *may* eventually lead to war

IR THEORY – REALISM

Logic of a Security Dilemma:

- **State A** seeks to improve its security: it seeks power
- Once **State A** gains power, it inadvertently makes **State B** *insecure*
- **State B** then seeks more power, which it might not have otherwise done
- As **State B** gains power, **State A** again becomes insecure and seeks more power

Results: a vicious circle of power accumulation and a permanent condition of tension that **could** lead to war

State of Anarchy



Uncertainty & Fear



**Self-help through
Power Accumulation**



**Security Dilemma
(Spiral of Action/Reaction)**



War or Threat of War

More Power, Less Security

Player I

		Player I	
		Cooperate	Defect
Player 2	Cooperate	0 , 0	1 , -20
	Defect	-20 , 1	-1 , -1

Arms Race

Cooperate

Defect

Cooperate

0 , 0

1 , -20

Defect

-20 , 1

-1 , -1

Player 2

IR THEORY – REALISM

Circumstances that can lead to conflict:

2) Shift in Balance of Power

- When one state or coalition of states is much more powerful than its adversaries, war is relatively more likely
- Rise of Germany prior to WWI:
 - In 1870, the French and German populations and economies were of roughly similar size, and their economies were substantially smaller than Britain's
 - By 1900 Germany's population and economy were the largest in Europe, larger even than those of Britain (the continent's "balancer")
 - Germany noticed its might did not align with its influence and began taking a more aggressive posture in world politics

IR THEORY – REALISM

Takeaways:

- Gains are always relative (zero-sum)
- Not necessarily a state of constant war, but constant tension and distrust
 - States can never credibly commit to not stabbing you in the back
 - Because you don't want your survival to be in someone else's hands, cooperation is *rare* and *narrowly bounded*

WHEN NEXT WE MEET...

*Are there circumstances under which
cooperation is the rational choice?*