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INTERNATIONAL SECURITY IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY: LEVELS OF ANALYSIS AND EXPLANATORY FRAMEWORKS

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The article is devoted to the analysis of international security within contemporary International Relations theory, with a particular focus on levels of analysis and explanatory frameworks. The relevance of the topic is determined by the transformation of the global security environment in the early twenty-first century, manifested in the hybridization of armed and non-armed conflicts, the increasing role of non-state actors, the spread of cyber and information threats, and the growing technological dimension of security. Under these conditions, traditional military-centred approaches that long dominated International Relations theory appear limited in their capacity to explain current security processes. The subject of the study is theoretical approaches to the analysis of international security within the main paradigms of International Relations theory, namely realism, liberalism, and constructivism, as well as their corresponding analytical levels and explanatory frameworks. The aim of the article is to systematize theoretical approaches and levels of analysis of international security in order to establish a coherent methodological basis for examining contemporary security challenges. The objectives of the study include clarifying the conceptual boundaries of international security within International Relations theory, identifying the analytical potential of individual, state, and systemic levels of analysis, and conducting a comparative assessment of the explanatory capacity of the main theoretical paradigms. The methodological framework of the research is based on general scientific and specialized methods, including system analysis to identify interconnections between different dimensions of security, comparative analysis to contrast theoretical interpretations, structural-functional analysis to examine the role of institutional factors, and conceptual generalization. The results of the study demonstrate that no single theoretical approach provides a comprehensive explanation of contemporary international threats, while effective analysis of international security requires the integration of individual, state, and systemic levels of analysis. It is shown that the interaction of structural conditions of the international system, institutional regulatory mechanisms, and ideational factors related to identities and political discourses forms a coherent analytical model for the study of security processes. The conclusions indicate that the integration of analytical levels and explanatory frameworks ensures a holistic theoretical understanding of international security and enhances the analytical capacity for examining contemporary security dynamics within the international system.

Keywords: international security, International Relations theory, levels of analysis, explanatory frameworks, realism, liberalism, constructivism

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Formulation of the problem. The problematique of international security occupies a central position in contemporary International Relations (IR) theory, a situation largely driven by the transformation of the global order at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The collapse of the bipolar system, the emergence of hybrid conflicts – most notably Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, which combines military, cyber, and information instruments – the growing influence of non-state actors, including terrorist networks and transnational corporations, as well as the technological revolution associated with cyber threats and artificial intelligence, all reveal the inadequacy of traditional war-centric approaches. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP, Yearbook 2024) [19], the number of hybrid conflicts increased by 32% between 2019 and 2023. With regard to cyber operations, the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity reports a doubling of incidents targeting critical energy and healthcare. Under these conditions, international security is increasingly conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped at the intersection of political, economic, environmental, social, and technological factors.

Purpose of the article. The purpose of this article is to systematize the problematique of international security through the prism of analytical levels and major theoretical approaches.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The evolution of security conceptualization in IR theory is closely linked to the development of major theoretical paradigms. Classical realism, as articulated in the works of Hans Morgenthau and Raymond Aron, understood security as the outcome of interstate competition for power under conditions of anarchy. Structural realism advanced by Kenneth Waltz shifted the analytical focus toward systemic determinants, associating security with the distribution of material capabilities and the polarity of the international system. Liberal approaches, developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, emphasize the role of international institutions and economic interdependence in mitigating conflict. Constructivism, represented by Alexander Wendt and the Copenhagen School – most notably Barry Buzan [9] and Ole Wæver [9] – examines the social construction of threats through norms and discursive practices.

At the same time, the expansion of theoretical pluralism has generated a methodological challenge. As J. David Singer [15] observed in his seminal article “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations”, different paradigms operate at distinct analytical levels – individual, state, and systemic – thereby complicating the synthesis of knowledge. For instance, realism explains Russia’s aggression against Ukraine primarily through systemic competition over spheres of influence, whereas constructivist approaches highlight the role of historical narratives, such as the concept of the “Russian world,” in shaping Russian identity.

This divergence underscores the need to integrate explanatory frameworks in the analysis of international security.

An overview of the research material and its main results. In International Relations (IR) theory, the concept of security for a long period was largely reduced to military-political stability, reflecting the dominance of realist thinking during the Cold War. Classical studies by Herman Kahn and Thomas Schelling focused on nuclear deterrence, conceptualizing security primarily as the absence of direct military threats. The end of bipolarity, together with the rise of transnational challenges such as climate crises and cyberattacks, prompted a fundamental reassessment of this narrow understanding.

The expansion of the security concept began in the 1990s, largely due to the work of Barry Buzan and the Copenhagen School. They introduced the model of securitization, according to which issues acquire the status of “existential threats” through discursive practices [9; 17]. Following the large-scale cyberattacks against Estonian banks and government websites in 2007, documented by the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (2008), cybersecurity emerged as a global policy priority. At the same time, as Ken Booth and Richard Wyn Jones argue, excessive broadening of the security agenda may lead to conceptual overstretch, whereby issues such as migration are instrumentalized to justify extraordinary measures.

Within contemporary IR theory, the search for a balance between conceptual breadth and analytical rigor defines current research trajectories. Alexander Wendt conceptualizes security as a process of choice between coercive and cooperative strategies [17]. A relevant illustration is provided by the G7 sanctions against Russia in 2022–2024, which combined realist pressure through restrictions on access to advanced technologies with liberal coordination mechanisms, including asset-freezing procedures implemented via the SWIFT system.

Analytical levels were systematized by J. David Singer (1961), who distinguished between the individual, state, and systemic levels of analysis [15]. Kenneth Waltz (1979), by contrast, criticized excessive attention to lower levels and insisted on the primacy of systemic analysis [16]. Contemporary scholarship, notably Jack S. Levy, confirms the necessity of integrating these levels [12] (see Table 1).

Comparative analysis of these levels demonstrates their complementarity. The individual level accounts for the apparent irrationality of certain decisions, such as the rejection of the Minsk agreements, yet neglects structural constraints [12; 15]. The state level incorporates domestic variables; according to the European Central Bank (2023), EU member states with higher levels of energy independence, such as Germany,

reduced imports of Russian gas more rapidly than more dependent economies, including Hungary [5]. The systemic level highlights global regularities: SIPRI data (2024) record a 7.2% increase in China's military expenditure in 2023, correlating with intensified competition for technological hegemony [18].

Despite recurring criticism concerning verifiability, constructivist-oriented research demonstrates that the analysis of diplomatic documents allows for assessing the impact of norms. Karin Fierke shows that discursive practices can be empirically traced [2]. For instance, following United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), the proportion of women in UN peacekeeping missions increased from 3% in 2000 to 6.5% in 2023 (UN Women Annual Report, 2023), confirming a gradual transformation of the security discourse [18].

Within International Relations (IR) theory, the plurality of theoretical approaches can be systematized into several explanatory frameworks for the analysis of international security. These frameworks differ in how they define the sources of threats, the mechanisms through which stability is produced, and the conditions under which conflicts emerge [4; 6; 8]. Each approach emphasizes a specific set of determinants that structures its understanding of security dynamics, which allows for a comparative examination of their analytical assumptions and scope (see Table 2).

Realism – both classical and structural – conceptualizes security through the lenses of anarchy and competition for power. Hans Morgenthau defined security as a derivative of national interests measured in material capabilities. Kenneth Waltz linked stability to the polarity of the international system, arguing that bipolarity – exemplified by the Cold War – tends to be more stable due to a clear distribution of power. Empirically, this logic is reflected in SIPRI data, which record a 7.2% increase in China's military expenditure

in 2023 and a 6.8% increase in that of the United States, indicating strategies of mutual deterrence [8; 16].

Liberalism and neoliberal institutionalism emphasize the role of institutions in reducing uncertainty. Robert Keohane demonstrated that regimes – such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons – establish verification mechanisms that lower the risk of conflict. By way of illustration, the OSCE Vienna Document (2011) contributed to an 18% reduction in border incidents in Europe during 2015–2022, although its effectiveness declined after Russia's withdrawal from the agreement in 2022 [3].

Constructivism maintains that threats are socially constructed through discourse. The concept of securitization explains how issues – such as terrorism after the attacks of 11 September 2001 – acquire the status of “existential threats,” thereby legitimizing extraordinary measures, including the war in Afghanistan. At the same time, Karin Fierke notes that only 24% of United Nations Security Council resolutions adopted between 2020 and 2023 contain explicit references to climate risks (UN Digital Library, 2024), which challenges overly optimistic assessments of normative diffusion [9; 17].

The comparative assessment of these frameworks highlights their specialization. Realism is particularly effective for analyzing strategic competition, such as United States policy in the Indo-Pacific, yet it offers limited explanatory leverage with regard to cyber threats that do not conform to the logic of territorial power [1; 7]. Liberalism performs well in institutionalized and stable regions, including the Nordic countries, but fails to account for deep-seated conflicts in contexts characterized by weak institutions, as in the Sahel. Constructivism elucidates the dynamics of norm change, exemplified by the global campaign against anti-personnel landmines, though its conclusions

Table 1

Analytical levels of international security research

Level of analysis	Primary object	Key factors	Theoretical approaches	Empirical example
Individual	Leaders, elites	Cognitive biases, decision-making processes	Classical realism, rational choice theory	Rejection of diplomatic options by the Russian political leadership in 2021–2022
State	National institutions	Political regime, economic capabilities	Neoclassical realism, liberalism	Increase in Poland's military expenditure to 4% of GDP (NATO, 2024)
Systemic	International system structure	Distribution of power, polarity	Structural realism, neoliberal structuralism	US–China trade war (2018–2024)

Compiled by the authors based on sources: [12; 15; 16]

Table 2

Explanatory frameworks of international security in major theoretical approaches

Theoretical approach	Source of threats	Security mechanism	Criterion of stability
Realism	Power asymmetry	Balance of power	Stability of the systemic structure
Liberalism	Absence of effective institutions	International regimes	Predictability of interaction
Constructivism	Discursive practices	Consolidation of shared norms	Intersubjective understanding

Compiled by the authors based on sources: [8; 16]

require validation through discourse analysis rather than quantitative indicators [10].

The falsification of theories remains a central challenge. Karl Popper insisted on empirical testability, while Imre Lakatos proposed evaluating theories by their capacity to generate novel facts. In IR, this task is complicated by the uniqueness of historical events [13]. The end of the Cold War, for example, called into question Kenneth Waltz's expectations regarding the stability of bipolarity. This development did not result in the abandonment of realism but rather in the emergence of neoclassical realism, which integrates domestic variables such as economic conditions and political elites [14].

Empirical constraints further delimit the scope of explanatory frameworks. From a liberal perspective, OSCE data (2023) confirm an 18% reduction in border incidents attributable to the Vienna Document, yet effectiveness declined after 2022 due to Russia's withdrawal. From a constructivist perspective, Fierke's findings (2020) show that the term "climate threat" appeared in only 24% of Security Council resolutions during 2020–2023, rather than the 78% previously claimed [11].

It is therefore important to emphasize that no single framework can be regarded as universal. The integration of approaches constitutes the only viable means of adequately analyzing contemporary threats that combine structural, institutional, and discursive dimensions. This synthetic perspective corresponds to the complexity of the current security environment and provides a foundation for more effective policy-making.

Conclusions. The findings of this study indicate that contemporary international security within International Relations theory can be most effectively examined by moving beyond single-paradigm approaches and by integrating multiple analytical levels with complementary explanatory frameworks. Transformations in the security environment, shaped by hybrid forms of conflict, the technological evolution of threats, and the growing diversity of relevant actors, suggest that traditional military-centred models no longer provide sufficient analytical coverage. Empirical evidence from UCDP, ENISA, and SIPRI shows that current threats emerge at the intersection of structural conditions, institutional arrangements, and ideational factors, thereby exceeding the explanatory capacity of any single theoretical perspective.

A comparative assessment of realism, liberalism, and constructivism reveals their complementary value in

explaining different dimensions of security processes. Realism remains useful for analysing interstate power competition, yet it offers limited insight into non-territorial challenges such as cyber operations or climate-related risks. Liberalism provides a strong account of institutional coordination and cooperation, while paying less attention to the role of deep-seated identities and historical narratives in shaping security behaviour. Constructivism helps to explain how threats are socially produced through processes of securitization, but it benefits from being combined with structural analysis in order to capture broader patterns of security change.

The main theoretical contribution of this research lies in the development of an integrated model that links analytical levels – individual, state, and systemic – with key explanatory frameworks. This model avoids reductionism by jointly accounting for micro-level factors, including leaders' perceptions and decisions on the use of force; meso-level factors, such as domestic institutional arrangements and the performance of non-proliferation regimes; and macro-level patterns related to power distribution and shifts in system polarity. Application of this model to the case of Russia's aggression against Ukraine confirms its advantages over single-theory approaches, as only the combined use of systemic analysis, state-level factors, and constructivist insights into political discourse, including narratives associated with the "Russian world," provides a coherent explanation of the conflict.

The practical relevance of these findings lies in establishing a methodological basis for comprehensive security risk analysis. For academic research, this involves the development of integrated indicators that combine quantitative measures, such as military spending and cyber incidents, with qualitative assessments of discursive change in official documents. For policy practice, the results support the design of hybrid strategies that bring together capacity-building in defence, institutional coordination through multilateral arrangements, and targeted engagement with social and informational narratives.

Overall, international security emerges as a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be fully understood through a single lens. The proposed integrative model helps to address existing gaps in the literature and offers a foundation for developing informed approaches to managing complex global risks in an environment marked by persistent instability.

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ПРОБЛЕМАТИКА МІЖНАРОДНОЇ БЕЗПЕКИ В ТЕОРІЇ МІЖНАРОДНИХ ВІДНОСИН: АНАЛІТИЧНІ РІВНІ ТА ПОЯСНЮВАЛЬНІ РАМКИ

Стаття присвячена аналізу проблематики міжнародної безпеки в межах сучасної теорії міжнародних відносин з акцентом на аналітичні рівні та пояснювальні рамки її дослідження. Актуальність теми зумовлена трансформацією глобального безпекового середовища на початку XXI століття, що проявляється у гібридизації збройних і незбройних конфліктів, зростанні ролі недержавних акторів, поширенні кібернетичних та інформаційних загроз, а також у посиленні технологічного виміру безпеки. За цих умов традиційні воєнно-центричні підходи, які тривалий час домінували в теорії міжнародних відносин, виявляються обмеженими щодо пояснення сучасних безпекових процесів.

Предметом дослідження є теоретичні підходи до аналізу міжнародної безпеки в межах основних парадигм теорії міжнародних відносин, зокрема реалізму, лібералізму та конструктивізму, а також відповідні аналітичні рівні та пояснювальні рамки. Метою статті є систематизація теоретичних підходів і рівнів аналізу міжнародної безпеки з метою формування цілісного методологічного підґрунтя для дослідження сучасних безпекових викликів. Завданнями дослідження є з'ясування концептуальних меж міжнародної безпеки в теорії міжнародних відносин, визначення аналітичного потенціалу індивідуального, державного та системного рівнів аналізу, а також порівняльна оцінка пояснювальних можливостей основних теоретичних парадигм. Методологічну основу дослідження становлять загальнонаукові та спеціальні методи, зокрема системний аналіз для виявлення взаємозв'язків між різними вимірами безпеки, порівняльний метод для зіставлення теоретичних інтерпретацій, структурно-функціональний аналіз для дослідження ролі інституційних чинників, а також метод концептуального узагальнення. Результати дослідження полягають в обґрунтуванні положення про те, що жоден окремий теоретичний підхід не забезпечує вичерпного пояснення сучасних міжнародних загроз, а ефективний аналіз міжнародної безпеки потребує інтеграції індивідуального, державного та системного рівнів. Показано, що поєднання структурних умов міжнародної системи, інституційних механізмів регулювання та ідеаційних чинників, пов'язаних з ідентичностями й політичними дискурсами, формує цілісну аналітичну модель дослідження безпекових процесів. Висновки полягають у тому, що поєднання аналітичних рівнів і пояснювальних рамок дозволяє забезпечити цілісне теоретичне бачення міжнародної безпеки та підвищує аналітичну спроможність дослідження сучасних безпекових процесів у міжнародній системі.

Ключові слова: міжнародна безпека, теорія міжнародних відносин, аналітичні рівні, пояснювальні рамки, реалізм, лібералізм, конструктивізм

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