

Realism And Complex Interdependence

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Introduction

Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's chapter "Realism and Complex Interdependence" compares two ideal types for understanding international politics. The original review correctly identifies the role of international organizations and the authors' criticism of oversimplified realism, but complex interdependence is not a claim that military power or states have become irrelevant. It is an analytical model describing relationships in which societies are connected through multiple channels, issues lack a fixed hierarchy, and military force plays a limited role among the states concerned. This expanded review explains the chapter's research question, assumptions, political processes, strengths, and limits while showing why realism and complex interdependence are better treated as contrasting lenses than mutually exclusive descriptions of the world. (Keohane, 2012)

The Chapter's Research Problem

The central problem is how to analyze world politics when interstate security competition exists alongside trade, finance, institutions, environmental problems, corporations, and cross-border social networks. Realism offers a powerful account of states operating under anarchy and protecting survival through power. Keohane and Nye ask what happens when the realist assumptions do not fit a relationship closely. They construct complex interdependence as a contrasting ideal type so that researchers can identify different mechanisms. The question is not whether realism is "false" in every case. It is whether changes in communication, economic exchange, institutions, and domestic connections create political processes that cannot be understood adequately through military rivalry and unitary state action alone.

Realism as an Ideal Type

In the chapter's realist model, states are the dominant actors, security concerns organize the international agenda, and military force remains an available and effective instrument. Governments are often treated as coherent units pursuing national interests in a self-help system. Linkages among issues may allow strong states to use security power in bargaining over economic or diplomatic questions. International organizations have limited independent effect because they reflect the distribution of state power. This model captures important situations, especially wars, territorial disputes, alliance competition, and coercive diplomacy. Keohane and Nye do not need to deny these realities. Their argument gains force by showing that the same assumptions can mislead when force is costly, agendas are diverse, and transnational actors influence outcomes.

Complex Interdependence as a Contrasting Model

Complex interdependence is also an ideal type rather than a complete portrait of every international relationship. It describes conditions under which actors are connected through many forms of contact, no permanent issue hierarchy subordinates economics and society to military security, and the use of force among participating states is absent or less useful. Under these conditions, power remains important but takes different forms. Control over finance, standards, technology, information, markets, institutions, or networks can shape outcomes. Dependence also creates vulnerability: cutting a relationship may impose unequal costs. The model therefore does not equate interdependence with harmony. States and nonstate actors can cooperate, bargain, manipulate, and exploit asymmetry within dense connections.

Multiple Channels of Contact

The first characteristic is the existence of multiple channels connecting societies. These include formal interstate diplomacy, informal relationships among government agencies, and transnational connections among corporations, banks, professional groups, social movements, experts, and individuals. The state no longer appears as one sealed actor speaking through a foreign ministry. Regulators may coordinate with foreign counterparts, firms may negotiate across borders, and domestic groups may influence international agendas. Multiple channels complicate control because governments can receive conflicting information and pressure from different sources. They also create opportunities for smaller actors to form coalitions or bypass traditional diplomatic routes. The analytical consequence is that researchers must trace networks and bureaucratic relationships rather than infer all behavior from a single national preference.

Absence of a Fixed Hierarchy among Issues

The second characteristic is not that all issues are equally important. It is that military security does not automatically dominate every agenda. Trade, monetary stability, energy, health, migration, climate, technology, and domestic regulation may become politically central at different moments. This creates specialized bargaining arenas and makes “national interest” internally contested. A finance ministry, defense ministry, environmental agency, and exporting industry may rank priorities differently. Agenda setting becomes a source of power because actors can elevate one issue, delay another, or define which institution has jurisdiction. The absence of fixed hierarchy also weakens simple linkage strategies: military superiority may provide little leverage in a technical negotiation when using force would be disproportionate, illegal, or self-defeating.

The Limited Role of Military Force

The third characteristic concerns relationships in which military force is not used by governments against one another over the issues under discussion. Keohane and Nye do not argue that force disappears globally. It may remain relevant in relations with other states or in a different issue area. Within a highly interdependent relationship, however, military coercion can be too destructive or poorly suited to disputes about tariffs, monetary policy, environmental standards, or corporate regulation. Force may protect the broader system without resolving its everyday bargaining. This distinction is crucial because critics sometimes treat complex interdependence as naïve pacifism. The model instead asks where force has low utility and what other resources determine influence in those settings.

Asymmetrical Interdependence and Power

Interdependence is rarely equal. Keohane and Nye distinguish sensitivity—the degree to which changes elsewhere impose costs before policy adjustment—from vulnerability, the costs that remain after alternatives are considered. A state highly sensitive to an oil-price increase may reduce exposure through new suppliers, conservation, or domestic production. If realistic alternatives are unavailable, vulnerability remains high. The less vulnerable actor can possess bargaining power even without military superiority. This framework improves on claims that economic connection automatically produces mutual benefit or peace. A network can create leverage through chokepoints, standards, currency, platforms, or supply concentration. Power under interdependence is therefore relational and issue-specific, requiring analysis of substitutes, adjustment capacity, and the distribution of exit costs.

Political Processes under Complex Interdependence

The model predicts political processes different from classical realism. Goals vary by issue, instruments include economic policy and institutional bargaining, agenda formation becomes contested, and linkages are harder to impose consistently. Transgovernmental coalitions may connect agencies across borders, while transnational actors influence information and implementation. Domestic politics and international politics become entangled because an agreement can redistribute gains among groups inside each state. Negotiators may use international commitments to strengthen a domestic position, and domestic opposition can weaken external credibility. These processes explain why outcomes do not follow directly from overall military capability. A materially weaker state or nonstate coalition may prevail in a specialized arena when it controls expertise, rules, legitimacy, or indispensable participation.

The Role of International Organizations

International organizations matter because they help set agendas, convene coalitions, provide information, create procedures, and give smaller states opportunities to connect their issues with wider support. Institutions can reduce uncertainty and transaction costs, but they are not neutral governments above politics. Powerful states influence rules, staffing, finance, and enforcement. Even so, institutional procedures can constrain how power is exercised and create reputational costs for violation. Organizations also supply forums where technical officials build repeated relationships and where norms become embedded in routine. The original review correctly emphasizes their increased role under complex interdependence. The deeper point is that organizations can alter bargaining resources and coalition structures even when they do not possess independent military force.

What the Chapter Gets Right

The chapter's strongest contribution is conceptual differentiation. It explains why analysis based only on territorial security misses the politics of economic and social connection. The framework also avoids the mistake of defining power solely as coercive capability. By examining asymmetrical dependence, agenda control, institutions, and transnational channels, Keohane and Nye provide tools for studying outcomes that realism might treat as secondary. Their use of ideal types is methodologically useful because researchers can compare a real relationship with both models and identify where each assumption holds. The chapter remains influential because globalization did not eliminate states but multiplied the arenas through which state and nonstate actors pursue influence.

Limits of Complex Interdependence

The framework has important limits. It fits some relationships and periods better than others, and interdependence can be weaponized rather than pacifying. Governments may exploit financial networks, technology controls, sanctions, data infrastructure, or supply chains for strategic purposes. Military force can return rapidly when trust collapses, and security concerns may reorder issues that previously seemed separate. The model can also understate hierarchy within institutions and the unequal ability of poorer societies to absorb adjustment costs. Transnational actors are not automatically democratic or benevolent; corporations and platforms can exercise private power without public accountability. These limitations do not invalidate the model, but they require attention to coercion inside economic and institutional relationships. (Farrell, 2019)

Contemporary Relevance

Current politics often combines realism and complex interdependence. States compete over territory, alliances, and military capability while remaining connected through trade, climate obligations,

financial systems, digital networks, and health cooperation. Technology export controls and economic sanctions illustrate the overlap: strategic rivalry is pursued through interdependent networks rather than outside them. Climate negotiations show multiple channels and issue-specific coalitions, yet national power and security concerns still shape commitments. The appropriate question is therefore not which theory wins permanently. Analysts should ask which assumptions fit the actors, issue, and period and how movement toward conflict changes the usefulness of force, institutions, and economic linkage. Hybrid situations are the rule rather than an embarrassment to theory.

Evaluation of the Original Chapter Review

The original review accurately notes that the chapter is accessible and that it compares agenda formation, actor goals, issue linkage, international organizations, and instruments of policy. It should be more precise in describing the authors' position. Keohane and Nye challenge realist assumptions under specified conditions; they do not claim that realism is intellectually defective or that global alliances arise simply from growing dependence. The three characteristics of complex interdependence need explicit explanation because they organize the argument. A stronger review also distinguishes the authors' descriptive model from a moral endorsement of globalization. Interdependence can generate cooperation, conflict, inequality, and vulnerability, depending on who controls alternatives and institutions.

Conclusion

"Realism and Complex Interdependence" provides a disciplined way to compare two patterns of international politics. Realism emphasizes states, security hierarchy, and force, while complex interdependence emphasizes multiple channels, varied agendas, and the limited utility of force within particular relationships. Power persists in both models but operates through different resources. Asymmetrical vulnerability, agenda control, transnational networks, and international organizations become central under interdependence. The chapter is most persuasive when used diagnostically rather than as a prediction that realism will disappear. Contemporary world politics repeatedly shifts between cooperation and coercion, making the ability to recognize which assumptions apply more valuable than loyalty to one universal theory. (Waltz, 2010)

Works Cited

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