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State Power and the Role of International Organizations: A Comparative Analysis of Realism and Liberalism

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Abstract

The discourse of international relations has long been characterized by debates on the dominant role of the state and the significance of international organizations within the global system. This article aims to provide a comparative analysis of realism and liberalism in their perspectives on state power and the role of international organizations. The study employs a literature review method with a qualitative comparative approach, drawing upon both classical and contemporary works in international relations theory. The findings indicate that realism positions the state as the primary actor, emphasizing the anarchic nature of the international system, national interests, and the distribution of power, while international organizations are perceived merely as instruments of powerful states. Conversely, liberalism highlights the importance of interdependence, international institutions, as well as norms and international law as mechanisms to reduce conflict and promote cooperation. This analysis demonstrates that both perspectives remain relevant in understanding the dynamics of contemporary global politics, though each has its limitations in explaining the complexity of international interactions. The study contributes theoretically to the development of international relations scholarship and offers practical implications for the formulation of foreign policy and multilateral diplomacy strategies.

Keywords: State Power; International Organizations; Realism; Liberalism; International Relations.

INTRODUCTION

Modern international relations face fundamental questions regarding the primary actors in the global system and the extent to which international organizations shape state power

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dynamics. Although states remain the dominant units of analysis in international relations theory, contemporary developments such as multilateral cooperation challenge the monopoly of state power and call for a more balanced analysis between the roles of states and international organizations. Within the theoretical landscape, two major paradigms, realism and liberalism, offer distinct, and at times opposing, perspectives on the capacities and functions of states versus international organizations.

Realism emphasizes the anarchic nature of the international system, where states act as the principal actors seeking to maximize their power and ensure their security through military, economic, or political means. From this perspective, international organizations are viewed merely as arenas or instruments for powerful states rather than independent actors with autonomous influence. In contrast, institutional liberalism assumes that international organizations, such as the UNHCR, supported by international legal norms and mechanisms for inter-state cooperation, possess tangible capacities to mitigate national interest conflicts, regulate state behavior, and foster effective cooperation to achieve common goals such as refugee protection and the promotion of human rights (Habadza, 2025).

The case of Timor-Leste demonstrates the continued relevance of realism and liberalism in explaining how small and developing states position themselves within the international system. Since gaining independence in 2002, Timor-Leste has faced significant challenges in consolidating sovereignty, building national institutions, and seeking international recognition and support. Its active participation in organizations such as the United Nations, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) illustrates a diplomatic strategy that combines national interests with the pursuit of global legitimacy. Studies indicate that Timor-Leste's diplomatic efforts to join ASEAN represent a key strategy to broaden international recognition and enhance its bargaining position in the region (Swastia, 2016; Auliyani & Putri, 2024). Moreover, its diplomacy in border dispute resolution and contributions to peacekeeping missions reflect the strategic use of multilateral channels to balance domestic constraints with international opportunities (Fitriani, 2023). These dynamics highlight that Timor-Leste's engagement with international organizations is not merely symbolic but serves as a strategic instrument to support economic development and domestic political stability.

This study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do realism and liberalism conceptualize state power within the international system? (2) How do both paradigms assess the role and effectiveness of international organizations? (3) Under what contemporary conditions is

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realism more relevant than liberalism, and vice versa? (4) How does the interaction between state power and international organizations shape contemporary international relations practice?

The primary objective of this research is to provide a comparative theoretical analysis between realism and liberalism concerning state power and international organizations, to identify the strengths and limitations of each paradigm, and to examine their practical implications for foreign policy, particularly for small states such as Timor-Leste that are actively building their strategic positions regionally and globally.

This study is expected to contribute in several ways. Theoretically, it aims to clarify the balance point between state dominance and the role of international organizations through the lenses of the two major paradigms in international relations theory. Practically, the findings may assist Timor-Leste's foreign policymakers in formulating diplomatic strategies that not only address short-term national interests but also foster long-term multilateral cooperation through deeper engagement with international institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of State Power

In international relations, state power encompasses a country's ability to employ both hard power and soft power to pursue its national interests. Hard power refers to the material instruments of state capability, including military strength, economic resources, and geographical advantages that enable a state to coerce or defend its interests. In contrast, soft power emphasizes the capacity to attract and persuade without direct coercion, through cultural appeal, diplomacy, foreign policy, and values perceived as legitimate and attractive by the international community.

In the case of Timor-Leste, the country's limited hard power has prompted a strategic emphasis on strengthening soft power as a means to enhance global legitimacy. Berutti & Yuan (2025) highlight that peacebuilding practices in Timor-Leste involve not only domestic actors but are also shaped by the approaches of partner states such as Japan and China. This underscores the importance of diplomatic strategies that combine normative appeal with external support to build long-term political stability.

Moreover, Mendes (2025) emphasizes the crucial role of norms and leadership in driving normative change in Timor-Leste. National leadership grounded in democratic values, reconciliation, and peace has emerged as an effective source of soft power for enhancing international recognition. Thus, despite its limited military and economic capacity, Timor-Leste

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has managed to compensate through moral legitimacy and normative appeal projected to the outside world.

State power is also closely tied to the institutional effectiveness of governance. Maia (2025) explains that anti-corruption efforts through integrity-oriented public policies constitute a key component of state capacity building. Transparency and anti-corruption measures not only help maintain internal stability but also bolster Timor-Leste's image as a democratic state committed to good governance. These aspects serve as a fundamental basis for building international trust and expanding the reach of the country's soft power.

Taken together, these studies indicate that Timor-Leste's state power relies predominantly on a combination of value- and norm-based soft power, legitimacy-oriented leadership, and transparent governance practices. While hard power remains relevant for safeguarding sovereignty, soft power serves as the primary instrument enabling small states like Timor-Leste to sustain their position within the competitive international system.

The Role of International Organizations

The role of international organizations in the context of Timor-Leste cannot be separated from the country's long history of international intervention, from its struggle for independence to the development of a modern state. International organizations have acted as facilitators of peace, institution builders, and partners in strengthening state capacity. Daimon-Sato (2021) emphasizes that Timor-Leste continues to face institutional vulnerabilities rooted in its dependence on international aid and external resources. This situation creates an ambivalent role for international organizations: on one hand, they contribute to stabilization; on the other, they risk perpetuating the country's structural dependence on external actors.

In the dynamics of peacebuilding, Berutti & Yuan (2025) highlight that peacebuilding practices in Timor-Leste are shaped by the approaches of major donor countries such as Japan and China, which introduce paradigms that differ from the liberal peace model. These differing approaches generate tensions between international interests and local needs, making the effectiveness of interventions highly dependent on the ability of international organizations to adapt their strategies to the Timorese context. This view is supported by Guterres & Maschietto (2025), who explain that Timor-Leste's journey toward peace and democracy is not merely the product of UN and international partners' interventions but also the result of complex interactions with domestic political and social structures.

Furthermore, Tanaka-Sakabe (2021) underscores the critical role of non-governmental

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organizations (NGOs) in bridging the state–society relationship. Both local and international NGOs function as watchdogs of social accountability, strengthen communication between citizens and the state, and promote transparency in public policymaking. Supported and facilitated by international organizations, NGOs operate not only at the state institutional level but also within the social sphere, engaging directly with communities.

From a security perspective, Uesugi (2021) assesses security sector reform in Timor-Leste as an example of complex hybridity. International organizations, particularly through UN missions, played a central role in building the capacity of the military, police, and legal institutions. However, these reform processes often face challenges in integrating with local norms, resulting in outcomes that do not always align with international expectations. Uesugi's assessment underscores that the success of international organizations in the security sector hinges on their ability to manage the interaction between international approaches and domestic sociopolitical realities.

Based on this body of literature, it can be concluded that international organizations in Timor-Leste play crucial roles as peace facilitators, capacity builders, and promoters of good governance. However, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the extent to which interventions can balance donor interests, international norms, and local needs while minimizing the risk of sustained dependency.

Realism Theory

Realism in international relations is grounded in the assumption that the state is the primary actor in an anarchic global system. Consequently, foreign policy behavior is largely driven by the pursuit of power and security. For small states such as Timor-Leste, this perspective remains relevant: limited economic, military, and diplomatic capacity does not eliminate the imperative to safeguard sovereignty and strengthen strategic positioning amid regional dynamics. Liaw et al. (2019) demonstrate this through their analysis of Civil–Military Cooperation (CIMIC) programs in Timor-Leste. They find that military involvement in post-conflict development extends beyond humanitarian functions, serving as a strategic tool to reinforce state legitimacy, build stability, and enhance public security. This aligns with the realist view that security instruments are central to small states' survival in an uncertain international system.

Similarly, Soares (2021) highlights Timor-Leste's unique security dilemma as a small state in Southeast Asia. To offset geopolitical uncertainty, the country has strengthened alliances with external actors such as Australia and the United States through bilateral defense programs. This

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pattern clearly reflects neorealist logic, wherein small states use strategic alliances to compensate for limited internal capabilities. Timor-Leste's defense strategy illustrates that, despite its constrained military capacity, the state actively develops cooperative networks to enhance bargaining power and reduce vulnerability to potential external threats.

Berutti & Yuan (2025) further examine Timor-Leste's maritime diplomacy, particularly in the maritime boundary dispute with Australia over the Greater Sunrise gas field. They argue that the issue is not merely one of territorial delimitation, but also of control over strategic energy resources. For Timor-Leste, access to oil and gas reserves constitutes a crucial instrument for economic development and political autonomy. Its diplomatic strategy can thus be understood through a realist lens, in which natural resources function as negotiation tools to strengthen national power and protect vital interests amid interstate competition. Timor-Leste's assertive negotiation stance demonstrates that even small states can pursue realist strategies by employing calculated, confrontational diplomacy to secure strategic resources.

Meanwhile, Arvanti et al. (2023) analyze Timor-Leste's position in multilateral relations, particularly its efforts to join ASEAN and deepen engagement with the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP). From a realist perspective, these initiatives are best understood as means to broaden international legitimacy and enhance bargaining power in regional and global forums. However, Arvanti et al. (2023) emphasize that multilateral organizations do not automatically guarantee Timor-Leste's security. The state continues to rely on bilateral strategies and pragmatic actions when facing sovereignty issues or direct security threats. Thus, while multilateral diplomacy provides international recognition, more tangible instruments of power, such as defense cooperation, strategic alliances, and resource-based diplomacy, remain the state's primary tools to secure its vital interests.

Across these perspectives, realism provides a consistent analytical framework for understanding Timor-Leste's foreign policy dynamics. Whether through civil–military cooperation to bolster domestic legitimacy, defense alliances to navigate regional uncertainty, maritime diplomacy to control strategic resources, or participation in multilateral forums to expand international recognition, Timor-Leste demonstrates that even small states can employ realist strategies to safeguard sovereignty and protect national interests.

Liberalism Theory

Liberalism theory in international relations emphasizes that states are not the sole dominant actors; international norms, global institutions, economic interdependence, and

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multilateral cooperation also shape state behavior and contribute to the stability of the global system. Within institutional liberalism, regional or global organizations serve both as arenas and facilitators for cooperation on transboundary issues such as development, health, and peace.

In the context of Timor-Leste, the country utilizes regional institutions and international diplomacy as strategic tools to expand its influence and gain international legitimacy. For instance, the study "The Ambiguity of Timor-Leste's Relationship with ASEAN" (2024) demonstrates that Timor-Leste has sought to align itself with ASEAN's inclusive diplomacy, despite facing institutional and political obstacles in its accession process (Soares, 2021). Meanwhile, its decision to maintain bilateral cooperation with Singapore, despite the lack of full ASEAN membership, reflects Timor-Leste's use of partial institutional networks to enhance its capacity and legitimacy in the international arena (Fadillah, 2025).

Public diplomacy has also emerged through cultural, educational, and diaspora networks. For example, the chapter "Overseas Chinese, Soft Power and China's People-to-People Diplomacy" illustrates how the Chinese diaspora in Timor-Leste has been mobilized as agents of China's public diplomacy through economic relations, scholarship programs, and cultural exchanges (Soares, 2021). This form of diplomacy aligns with the liberal logic that power is expressed through persuasion and attraction rather than military dominance.

Moreover, Timor-Leste has adopted development diplomacy and health diplomacy as part of its broader soft power strategy. In the study "Increasing Indonesia–Timor-Leste Borders Diplomacy through Community-Based Health Security", cross-border health diplomacy is projected as a form of non-traditional cooperation between Indonesia and Timor-Leste in the post–COVID-19 period (Madu et al., 2025). This demonstrates that issues such as health can serve as a medium for diplomacy within a liberal framework, particularly for states with limited military or material capabilities.

However, applying liberalism as an analytical lens also presents challenges. In the context of peacebuilding and post-conflict state transition, the study "Peacebuilding Practices in Timor-Leste" questions whether external actors' interventions (e.g., by China or Japan) align with the liberal peace paradigm or challenge it (Berutti & Yuan, 2025). The dynamics of democracy and political consolidation in Timor-Leste discussed in "The Path to Peace and Democracy: The Case of Timor-Leste" highlight how democratic norms and institutions play a central role in both domestic and international legitimacy-building efforts (Guterres & Maschietto, 2025).

In sum, liberalism remains a relevant theoretical framework for understanding how Timor-Leste, as a newly independent state, integrates state power with international norms, cultural

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networks, and multilateral institutions. Strategies such as public diplomacy, development diplomacy, health diplomacy, and engagement with regional organizations (even in a limited capacity) illustrate Timor-Leste's efforts to enhance its legitimacy and influence through persuasion and cooperation rather than military dominance.

Previous Studies and Research Gaps

A number of local and regional studies have sought to analyze the relationship between state power and the role of international organizations in the context of Timor-Leste. For instance, Arisanto (2020) examined the international factors influencing Timor-Leste's decision to pursue ASEAN membership since 2011, highlighting the regional political constellation and support from neighboring states.

Soares (2021) explored the ambiguities in Timor-Leste's relationship with ASEAN, particularly how exclusionary practices have hindered the country's full integration into the ASEAN community. These findings are significant for understanding the structural limitations of regional organizational mechanisms toward small states.

In the field of bilateral economic cooperation, Jatmika & Jabar (2024) highlighted the contributions of Indonesian companies in strengthening economic linkages with Timor-Leste through investment and technology transfer. Their study illustrates how non-state actors, particularly private companies, can serve as important intermediaries in interstate relations.

Meanwhile, in the context of border diplomacy and post-pandemic dynamics, Madu et al. (2025) analyzed cross-border health diplomacy between Indonesia and Timor-Leste. Their work illustrates a paradigm shift from traditional security concerns to non-traditional security (particularly health), within the collaborative framework of border communities.

Based on the review of these studies, several research gaps remain insufficiently addressed:

a. Limited theoretical integration

Existing studies on Timor-Leste tend to be thematic, focusing on issues such as health diplomacy, economic cooperation, or ASEAN integration, without simultaneously integrating major theoretical frameworks such as realism and liberalism to explain interactions between the state and international organizations.

b. Imbalanced focus: dominance of soft power over hard power

Most local research emphasizes soft power dimensions, such as cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and health cooperation, as well as economic collaboration. In contrast,

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issues related to hard power, such as military diplomacy, security policies, or national defense strategies in relation to international organizations, are rarely addressed in the local scholarship on Timor-Leste.

c. Lack of longitudinal analysis of global dynamics

Although studies such as Madu et al. (2025) have begun to incorporate pandemic and health variables into border diplomacy, there remains a paucity of research tracing the evolving role of international organizations in Timor-Leste over time (e.g., before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and within the broader context of Asia-Pacific geopolitical rivalries).

d. Narrow scope of international organizations examined

Most existing studies focus primarily on ASEAN and Indonesia–Timor-Leste bilateral diplomacy. In contrast, the roles of other organizations such as the United Nations, WHO, CPLP (Communidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa), and various international donor institutions have not been examined in sufficient depth within the Timor-Leste context.

From this body of literature, it can be concluded that Timor-Leste's state power relies heavily on a combination of soft power, good governance, and support from international organizations. Realist theory helps explain its survival strategies through defense alliances and maritime diplomacy, whereas liberal theory highlights the importance of multilateral cooperation, international norms, and public diplomacy. However, previous research has tended to focus predominantly on soft power and has not yet offered a comprehensive theoretical integration. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a more integrated analysis of the interactions between a small state and international organizations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach combined with comparative analysis. This approach was chosen because the primary objective is not to test hypotheses quantitatively, but rather to explore, understand, and compare in depth the perspectives of two major schools of thought in international relations, realism and liberalism, regarding the concepts of state power and the role of international organizations. Accordingly, the research focuses on the exploration of theoretical concepts, arguments, and interpretations developed in the academic literature.

The data sources are derived from library research, involving the collection, review, and

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analysis of relevant scholarly works. The literature includes both classical and contemporary books on international relations theory, peer-reviewed journal articles, reports published by international organizations, and other academic publications that discuss realism, liberalism, state power, and international organizations. To ensure validity, only literature with a strong academic reputation, published within a relevant time frame, and directly related to the research focus was selected.

The data analysis was conducted using content analysis, which involved critical reading, identification of key themes, and classification of main arguments from the reviewed literature. The data were then organized within a comparative framework to highlight the similarities, differences, strengths, and weaknesses of each theoretical perspective. At this stage, source triangulation was employed to enhance interpretive accuracy by cross-examining views from diverse scholarly sources.

The results of the analysis were synthesized to address the research question on how realism and liberalism conceptualize state power and the role of international organizations, as well as the extent to which both theories explain contemporary international relations phenomena. Through this method, the study aims to provide a comprehensive depiction of the theoretical debates and the practical relevance of these perspectives in today's global context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Comparative Analysis of Realism and Liberalism

Realism and liberalism are two dominant paradigms in the study of international relations, shaping both academic and policy perspectives on global politics. Realism is founded on the core assumption that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no overarching authority with absolute power to regulate states. In such a system, states are seen as rational actors primarily concerned with their national interests, particularly survival and security. Realist thought emphasizes that the distribution of power, especially military power, is the key determinant in interactions among states. From this perspective, international organizations are viewed merely as instruments that reflect the interests of powerful states rather than as autonomous entities. This logic is evident in global political practice, for example when major powers engage with multilateral forums only insofar as these institutions support their foreign policy strategies.

In contrast, liberalism offers a more optimistic view of the potential for cooperation among states. Unlike realism, which focuses on conflict and competition, liberalism argues that states can build order through institutions, norms, and international rules. International organizations are

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not merely tools of powerful states; they are collective arenas that can foster stability, mediate conflicts, and facilitate cross-border cooperation. Modern liberalism highlights economic interdependence, democratic values, and international institutions as key pillars for achieving peace. The European Union exemplifies this perspective, demonstrating that member states can cede portions of their sovereignty to pursue broader collective interests, an outcome that is difficult to explain through realist assumptions.

A comparative perspective reveals fundamental differences between the two theories in terms of primary actors and mechanisms of international order. Realism positions states as the main unit of analysis, relying on coercive mechanisms such as the balance of power. Liberalism, by contrast, expands the analytical lens to include international organizations, multinational corporations, and global civil society, emphasizing normative and procedural mechanisms rooted in rules and institutions. Realism thus prioritizes power politics, whereas liberalism underscores a rule-based international order.

Importantly, these paradigms are not entirely contradictory but rather complementary in explaining global phenomena. Realism offers a robust framework for understanding conflict dynamics, military rivalries, and geopolitical competition, as seen in U.S.–China relations in the Indo-Pacific. Liberalism, meanwhile, provides stronger explanatory power for international cooperation, such as climate action through the Paris Agreement or global vaccine distribution via COVAX. In other words, realism and liberalism should not be seen solely as competing perspectives but as mutually reinforcing frameworks that together offer a more comprehensive understanding of international relations.

Contextual Case Studies

To examine the relevance of realism and liberalism in explaining the relationship between state power and the role of international organizations, it is essential to review several contemporary case studies that reflect the dynamics of global politics. These cases demonstrate how both theories, despite being grounded in different assumptions, offer explanatory power for phenomena occurring in the international arena.

The first case concerns the Russia–Ukraine conflict and the role of the United Nations (UN). Russia's invasion of Ukraine since 2022 provides a clear example of how realist logic dominates international politics. As a major power, Russia employed military force to achieve its geopolitical objectives, while Ukraine relied on support from Western countries in the form of military assistance and international diplomacy. From a realist perspective, the UN appeared constrained,

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as the Security Council was paralyzed by Russia's veto power as a permanent member. This highlights how the structure of global power allows powerful states to leverage international organizations to advance their own interests. From a liberal perspective, however, the UN remains significant as a forum for legitimizing collective action, a platform for multilateral diplomacy, and a normative arena upholding sovereignty and international law. Although it proved ineffective in halting the aggression, the UN continued to play a key role in coordinating humanitarian assistance and diplomatic efforts.

The second case involves the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of the World Health Organization (WHO). The pandemic offers a contrasting illustration of both the limitations and relevance of international organizations. Realist perspectives emphasize that the WHO lacks coercive authority, leading states to pursue domestic strategies according to their national interests. Major powers such as the United States and China prioritized national policies over global coordination. At one point, the U.S. even withdrew funding and accused the WHO of politicization, reflecting the dominance of state interest logic. In contrast, liberal perspectives underline WHO's crucial role as a global information hub, a facilitator of vaccine research collaboration, and the driving force behind vaccine distribution through the COVAX mechanism. Although not flawless, WHO's efforts to foster international solidarity demonstrated the continuing relevance of international organizations in addressing transnational challenges. Thus, while WHO's institutional limitations are real, its coordinating function remains indispensable.

The third case examines international trade and the role of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The WTO often serves as a battleground between realist and liberal logics. Realists argue that major powers exploit the WTO to maintain global economic dominance. Trade disputes between the United States and China illustrate how state power can override institutional mechanisms. Meanwhile, liberals emphasize that the WTO provides a set of multilateral rules binding all member states, thereby ensuring legal certainty, stability, and predictability in global trade. The WTO's dispute settlement mechanism is a prime example of how international organizations can regulate state behavior, even though implementation often encounters resistance from powerful states.

The fourth case considers development assistance from the World Bank to Timor-Leste, which also reflects tensions between realist and liberal logics in international relations. From a realist perspective, the World Bank's financial support for Timor-Leste, particularly in infrastructure development, fiscal governance, and institutional capacity building, can be understood as part of major donor countries' strategies to expand their political and economic

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influence in Southeast Asia. These powerful states, as key contributors to the Bank, play a decisive role in determining program priorities and policy directions, indirectly shaping economic dependency structures. From a liberal standpoint, however, this assistance demonstrates the importance of international organizations in supporting post-conflict state-building through multilateral cooperation frameworks emphasizing transparency, good governance, and sustainable development. Through programs such as education sector development, health system strengthening, and economic diversification, the World Bank functions as an institutional facilitator helping Timor-Leste integrate into the global economic order.

Taken together, realism and liberalism offer complementary explanations for understanding the dynamics of international relations. Realism highlights the role of power, conflict, and state interests, while liberalism underscores the importance of cooperation, norms, and global institutions in creating stability. The various case studies indicate that international organizations play roles not only in security and trade issues but also in supporting the development of smaller states through a combination of structural power and multilateral cooperation mechanisms. Therefore, a multi-paradigm approach is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of contemporary global politics.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, the comparative analysis between realism and liberalism offers a deeper understanding of the dynamics of international relations. Realism, with its emphasis on the distribution of power, national interests, and the anarchic nature of the international system, explains why states remain the dominant actors in global politics. This perspective is particularly relevant for interpreting the behavior of major powers that frequently exercise their veto rights in the UN Security Council or strategically use international organizations to expand their geopolitical influence. Realism thus provides a sharp conceptual framework for understanding power politics and rational state calculations in foreign policy decision-making.

Liberalism, by contrast, enriches academic discourse by highlighting the importance of norms, institutions, and interdependence. It argues that international stability is not solely achieved through military dominance but also through the institutionalization of shared rules that bind states together. The liberal perspective is especially pertinent in explaining why many states continue to engage in multilateral cooperation frameworks, despite the sovereignty compromises involved. Theoretically, this challenges the realist paradigm by offering alternative explanations grounded in institutionalism and collective action. The enduring debate between realism and

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liberalism underscores that no single theory can fully explain the complexities of global politics, thereby opening space for synthetic approaches such as neoliberal institutionalism or neorealism.

Practically, the implications of this analysis are evident in how both states and international organizations formulate and implement foreign policy. First, states must recognize that while hard power remains essential, success in international politics increasingly depends on their ability to build alliances, leverage multilateral forums, and enhance international legitimacy. For instance, the global response to climate change demonstrates that without coordination through platforms such as the UN Climate Change Conference (COP), domestic policies alone are insufficient to achieve meaningful impact. Second, international organizations must also acknowledge their limitations. Without the full backing of member states, especially major powers, their effectiveness weakens. This was evident in the World Health Organization's constrained capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic, where global initiatives largely depended on the commitment of donor states to provide vaccines and financial resources.

These practical insights reveal a mutually reinforcing relationship between states and international organizations. States rely on international organizations as instruments of legitimacy and coordination, while international organizations depend on states for resources, authority, and operational legality. Consequently, managing contemporary global issues effectively requires a hybrid approach that integrates the logics of realism and liberalism: states safeguard their sovereignty while simultaneously strengthening their commitment to global institutions as platforms for sustained cooperation.

The roles of the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO) illustrate how realism and liberalism interact in practice. From a liberal perspective, these institutions are vital instruments for fostering international economic cooperation through regulation, financial support, and facilitation of cross-border trade. The World Bank provides loans and technical assistance for infrastructure development and poverty alleviation, deepening economic interdependence among nations and contributing to global stability through development. The WTO, through its multilateral trade regime, sets binding rules and serves as a forum for collective dispute resolution.

However, realism reveals that their effectiveness is ultimately shaped by the interests and support of major powers. Donor state dominance in the World Bank's decision-making processes and the strategic bargaining of powerful states in WTO negotiations show that power distribution continues to influence the direction of global economic governance. Thus, these institutions represent arenas where national interests and international norms intersect, exemplifying the

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relevance of a hybrid realist-liberal framework for understanding global economic order.

Theoretically, this analysis reinforces the necessity of integrating realist and liberal perspectives in the study of international relations. Practically, it highlights the importance of adaptive foreign policy strategies that safeguard national interests while embracing international cooperation. Only by combining these approaches can global governance evolve toward a more stable, equitable, and sustainable system.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis reveals that realism and liberalism offer distinct yet complementary conceptual frameworks for understanding the relationship between state power and the role of international organizations. From a realist perspective, states remain the primary actors within an anarchic international system, where international organizations are viewed merely as instruments serving the interests of powerful states. This dynamic is clearly reflected in various contemporary global conflicts, in which national interests often prevail over commitments to international norms.

Conversely, liberalism positions international organizations as vital mechanisms for promoting cooperation, building trust, and establishing more stable forms of global governance. Case studies of the United Nations (UN), World Health Organization (WHO), World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Bank demonstrate that despite inherent limitations, global institutions play a significant role in reducing uncertainty and expanding the scope of interstate collaboration. In this sense, liberalism offers a more optimistic outlook on the prospects for international cooperation amid complex global political dynamics.

In addition, this study identifies several critical gaps in the existing literature. First, there remains limited integration of grand theories: previous research has tended to be thematic and has not systematically combined realism and liberalism within a single analytical framework, particularly in the context of small states such as Timor-Leste. Second, the predominant focus on soft power has resulted in insufficient attention to hard power dimensions, including defense policy, military diplomacy, and strategic security. Third, longitudinal analyses are scarce, especially those examining the evolving role of international organizations before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as within the broader context of geopolitical rivalry in the Asia-Pacific. Fourth, the scope of international organizations analyzed remains narrow, with most studies focusing on ASEAN and Indonesia–Timor-Leste bilateral diplomacy, while the roles of the UN, WHO, CPLP, and international donor institutions remain underexplored.

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Overall, the debate between realism and liberalism illustrates that no single perspective is fully dominant in explaining the dynamics of international relations. Realism remains relevant for understanding power- and security-oriented state behavior, while liberalism provides a better lens for analyzing interdependence and the institutionalization of cooperation. Therefore, an integrative approach that combines both theoretical perspectives, expands analytical coverage of hard power aspects, and incorporates global institutional dynamics will offer a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between states and international organizations, particularly in the context of small states in today's multipolar world.

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