Sir Harold Nicolson (1886–1968) is well known as a historian of diplomacy and diplomatic thinker. Yet his achievements in other fields—as a man of letters, gardener, broadcaster, and an unorthodox marriage—have obscured his contribution to the realm of international theory. Nicolson’s diplomatic background and upbringing in a diplomatic household, followed by an Oxford classical education and twenty years in diplomacy, combined to forge a distinctive philosophy of international affairs. As a diplomatic practitioner between 1909 and 1929, Nicolson was ideally placed to observe the maelstrom of international politics, and as an anti-appeasement and wartime MP (1935–1945) he became a highly regarded authority on international relations. During and after the Second World War, he turned his mind to the questions of a united Europe and global peace. Central to Nicolson’s international thought is a conception of international order rooted in ancient Greek and Roman political theory and history. It represents a synthesis of realism and idealism to form liberal realism, his distinctive approach to resolving the major dilemmas of peace, war and, power for the twentieth and later centuries. Between the 1910s and 1960s, Nicolson’s international thought evolved from an idealist outlook on international relations at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, to one of limited realism after the Locarno Pact (1925), to a more realist, and ultimately liberal realist, approach during the 1930s. Henceforth, Nicolson sought to develop policies and devise practical means of addressing international problems on the basis of both ethical considerations and those of Realpolitik. He concluded that Hitler and Mussolini had to be dealt with through dialogue backed by overwhelming force, and that a European federation, world government, and universal peace in the Kantian sense were possibilities, but only when supported by the necessary institutional foundations and military safeguards.
Sir Harold Nicolson’s philosophy of international relations is well summed up by the term ‘liberal realism’, a fusion of two key approaches to the resolution of international problems: realism and idealism. It has its origins in ancient Greek and Roman political thought and history, notably, the writings of Aristotle and Thucydides. It also owes much to the contributions to international theory of Grotius and Kant. The liberal realist outlook closely resembles the conception of a via media. Notwithstanding this, it represents one man’s distinctive theorizing (born of his background, education, and experience) about the main issues of international relations.

European Security, 1919–39
Derek Drinkwater

Sir Harold Nicolson’s approach to the questions of inter-war European security represented an evolution from an idealist outlook at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 to a more measured degree of idealism during the late 1920s. As the 1930s advanced, and the League of Nations and action based on the principles of collective security proved unable to quell the Japanese, Italian, and German aggression, Nicolson sought to devise new methods of resolving the major questions of peace and war. His solution was liberal realism, a fusion of idealism and realism. It was an amalgam of Aristotelian and Thucydidean principles of statecraft and diplomacy. By the late 1930s, with Germany rejecting reasonable revisions of the Treaty of Versailles, he began to believe that war could only be avoided if the democracies and the USSR initiated a cohesive strategy of alliance diplomacy while pursuing dialogue with the dictators. The Munich Agreement of 1938 and the steady unravelling of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement finally convinced Nicolson that war was inevitable.
Sir Harold Nicolson was seen during his lifetime, and has been regarded since his death, as a gifted authority on diplomacy. He was also the twentieth-century heir to a tradition of Western diplomatic theorists who espoused diplomatic values deriving from ancient Greek and Roman political theory and history. As an international relations thinker, Nicolson had much in common with the scholars of the English School (e.g., the conception of an international society). While his international thought contains elements of realism and idealism, Nicolson made a unique contribution to international theory through his liberal realism—an amalgam of realist and idealist outlooks on international affairs. It constituted a coherent approach to the central questions of international order, diplomacy, European integration, world government, and universal peace.

Sir Harold Nicolson’s writings on diplomacy represent the twentieth century’s most eloquent expression by a diplomatic practitioner of classic Western European diplomatic theory. He was firmly within the tradition of the great diplomatic theorists, Callièrès and Wicquefort. Yet his interests went well beyond diplomacy. Nicolson’s approach to international relations and his outlook on international society, which have many similarities with the writings of the members of the English School, constitute a well-grounded contribution to international theory. He combined an understanding of ancient Greek and Roman political philosophy and history, Kantian thinking, and the concepts of idealism and realism with extensive diplomatic and political experience to forge a distinctive theory of international relations—liberal realism. Nicolson tested its assumptions and principles in addressing the major questions
of international order, inter-war European security, a united Europe, and the possibility of eventual global peace.

Diplomacy
Derek Drinkwater

in Sir Harold Nicolson and International Relations: The Practitioner as Theorist

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Sir Harold Nicolson was a distinguished historian of diplomacy and a leading commentator on the subject. He was also a notable contributor to diplomatic theory. The main sources of his approach as a diplomatic thinker were ancient Greek and Roman political theory and history, chiefly, the writings of Aristotle and Thucydides and Grotian conceptions of international relations. Nicolson’s philosophy of diplomacy centred on its relationship with the principal elements of foreign policy such as the balance of power; he emphasized, too, the effects on diplomacy of national character and prestige. His diplomatic theorizing encompassed ancient Greek, medieval, and Renaissance diplomacy as well as Imperial Europe’s Old Diplomacy and the so-called New Diplomacy of the twentieth century. Nicolson applied the tenets of his liberal realism, an amalgam of idealist and realist outlooks on international relations, in developing an ambitious and original theory of diplomatic intercourse.

Liberal Realism or Liberal Idealism
Richard Just

in A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq

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This chapter reports the younger generation of liberals who have abandoned idealism for realism, thus jeopardizing the continuation of the most important defining quality of the liberal internationalist tradition. It is much more difficult to justify the Iraq war in October 2004 than it was in April 2003. Even in the absence of Al Qaeda links or weapons of mass destruction, even given the extraordinary difficulty of building a democracy in Iraq, it was clearly in our moral interest and self-interest to see Saddam removed from power. The war on terrorism and the situation in Iraq are clearly the nation's most important foreign policy priorities,
as they should be. While the Democrats' embracing of foreign policy realism is disturbing, perhaps it is only a transient matter of politics; after all, political realities change quickly. It is believed that Barrack Obama's impulse is worth following, at home and abroad.

Conclusion
Phillip Cole

in Debating the Ethics of Immigration: Is There a Right to Exclude?

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This book has argued that there can be no ethically grounded distinction between citizens and immigrants that a liberal state can appeal to in order to exercise a right of civic or territorial exclusion. It has considered the counterargument to this issue: that liberal states are unsustainable without it. In this concluding chapter, two ways forward are outlined. The first is to adopt the “liberal realist” position based on international relations theory and its contention that the only rational approach for nation-states is to pursue their self-interest vis-a-vis immigration. Liberal realism takes the view that, not only the liberal nation-state, but the liberal institutions that make it up, such as the welfare system, have to be protected from dangerous “outsiders” even if that requires illiberal practices. This approach has enormous implications for the very idea of liberal theory and the very ideas of international human rights and global justice. The second way forward is to imagine a transformed political theory that is genuinely liberatory and inclusive.

Obama and Kim Jong Un
Walter C. Clemens

in North Korea and the World: Human Rights, Arms Control, and Strategies for Negotiation

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Chapter 15 begins with the Obama administration taking office. In this chapter, Clemens examines several interactions that help illustrate how difficult it was for the US and North Korea to overcome restraints and reach a mutual advantage in regards to denuclearization. Clemens discusses Obama’s lecture on liberal realism to the Nobel Committee,
while the rest of the chapter focuses primarily on the relationship between the US and North Korea in the years 2009-2015. The chapter ends with the discussion on the lack of negotiation between the two countries in 2015 and how neither side seems able to make a move without adding an insult or precondition to abort the offer of any deal.