

Neorealism

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1 Introduction

Few theories have shaped that branch of political science known as International Relations (IR) as powerfully as neorealism. However, as even one of its avowed exponents, John Mearsheimer, concedes, this theory paints a “rather grim picture of world politics” (1995: 9). The neorealist view of international relations is marked by the absolute dominance of security interests, states’ drive for self-preservation and the refusal to cooperate. As there is no authority outside of states (such as a world government) that lays down rules and norms mandatory for all states and that can if necessary ensure compliance by force, states must live in a condition of permanent insecurity regarding their neighbours’ intentions. They must always be prepared for the worst to happen, namely, war. These assumptions clearly place neorealism within the tradition of realist authors such as Hans J. Morgenthau, Edward H. Carr and Henry Kissinger, but it goes beyond them when it comes to theory building (hence *neorealism*). The school was founded by Kenneth Waltz in 1979 in the shape of his book *Theory of International Politics* (henceforth TIP). It is hard to overstate the impact of Waltz’s work on the IR community. According to, for example, Ole Wæver, “TIP is undoubtedly the most important book produced in the discipline within the last 60 years, possibly ever (at least referring to the discipline in its modern form)” (2009: 203). In light of his decisive influence, Waltz plays a central role in this chapter.

Contrary to realism, which was strongly influenced by the experience of the inter-war period and the Second World War and which explained wars anthropologically by reference to human nature, Waltz rejects such explanations of international relations:

While human nature no doubt plays a role in bringing about war, it cannot by itself explain both war and peace, except by the simple statement that man’s nature is such that sometimes he fights and sometimes he does not.

(Waltz 1959: 29)

Against the central aim of traditional realists, and Morgenthau in particular, to produce a theory of international politics in the form of a theory of *foreign policy* (see the chapter by Andreas Jacobs in this volume), Waltz aspires to develop a *systemic* theory of international politics. Neorealism thus shifts the analytical focus to the level of the international system. It comes to conclusions about the behaviour of states in light of the structure of the international system; because of this, it is often referred to as *structural realism*. The historical genesis of neorealism is closely bound up with the East–West conflict. When the super-powers finally entered a phase of rapprochement in the 1970s after decades of Cold War,

traditional realism increasingly lost its explanatory power. Approaches centred on interdependence or world-systems theory seemed far better suited to an international scene marked by increased cooperation (see chapters by Manuela Spindler and Andreas Nölke in this volume). With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, however, the short period of *détente* seemed to have come to an end, while in the view of many, the United States no longer exercised much of a pacific influence on international relations, at least after the revolution in Iran. The economic supremacy of the leading Western power also seemed to be under threat in view of the drastic increase in the price of oil. It was during this period of relative US decline within the world economy that Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* was published.

Neorealism had two central concerns. First, it sought to explain why the bipolar world of the East–West conflict, a world bristling with arms, had proved astonishingly stable and averse to war, despite successive phases of rapprochement and confrontation. Second, in light of the decline of American hegemony in the 1970s and the economic resurgence of Europe and Japan, as well as the global economic crisis, it tried to explain why the US had begun to lose its pre-eminent status. Waltz was looking for a *general* International Relations theory that could explain *both war and periods of peace* in international politics in a systematic fashion.

In addition to the real historical context of the East–West conflict, the theoretical debate between so-called traditionalists and scientismists on the correct scientific *method* – carried on with such vehemence in the 1960s and 1970s – exercised a particularly profound influence on neorealist theory building. Methodological traditionalists, among them the leading realists, generally proceed inductively, producing statements of a general character on the basis of specific empirical observations. Scientismists, meanwhile, gear their research towards the natural sciences or economic theory and attempt to apply the conception of science found in these fields, namely, the deductive-nomological model, to International Relations.¹ For Waltz, clearly aligned with the scientismists in this debate, the focus is on the *deductive* discovery and explanation of *general patterns* of international relations on the basis of a small number of key assumptions. Inspired by economic theories, he applies this approach to the international system. Its *structure*, Waltz tells us, forces states to concentrate on ensuring security and power, but at the same time the system generates webs of power on the international level that prevent armed conflicts. In Waltz's writings, then, the structure of the international system takes on the central role formerly played by power and the pursuit of power in realist analysis. From this perspective, neorealism improves on traditional realism in a dual sense, both in its choice of analytical category and its epistemological approach. So, for Waltz, neorealism was a tremendous scientific advance on the writings of traditional realists.

With the end of the East–West conflict, neorealism initially seemed to be facing a crisis, having failed (along with other IR theories) to predict this development. On September 11 2001, however, neorealist theory received an unexpected boost. Problems of national security and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been central to international politics ever since – though the state-centredness of neorealism initially appeared ill suited to comprehending the “new” threats and security policy challenges. But, as Christopher Layne argues: “There is little reason to believe that postmodern warfare will replace great-power rivalries and security competitions as the most salient phenomenon of international politics” (2004: 106). Given the current tension between nation states in, for example, the Middle East or Asia, it seems obvious that theories which focus on states as the key actors in international politics will continue to be significant into the future, at least in the security realm.

Finally, despite all the criticisms levelled against it, another key reason why neorealism matters is the ongoing role of the (neo)realist world-view in shaping policy in many foreign and defence ministries (Gyngell and Wesley 2003). So in order to understand certain foreign policy decisions, one has to understand how neorealists perceive the world.

2 The neorealism of Kenneth N. Waltz

The core question for neorealism is whether, and if so why, despite differing political systems and different ideologies, states tend to behave in much the same way towards the external world, and why powerful states especially must always expect challenges to their pre-eminence. At the same time this theory attempts to explain why more wars occur during certain periods of history, while others are more peaceful despite great tensions. The theory concentrates solely on “high politics” (in other words the “classical” politics of security) while leaving “low politics” (social and economic issues) out of the account.

The leading and most influential exponent of neorealism continues to be Kenneth N. Waltz. In his book *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz aims to formulate a comprehensive theory of international relations. Because of its highly abstract nature, however, many readers of TIP struggle to reconcile their everyday experience of politics with Waltz’s theoretical suppositions and conclusions. To avoid misunderstandings, before presenting the theory itself it is helpful to clarify why Waltz believes it necessary to produce a new IR theory, the aspirations he associates with this theory, and the conception of theory that undergirds his neorealist thinking.

2.1 Epistemological foundations

In his 1959 book, *Man, the State and War*, Kenneth Waltz already distinguishes between three levels of analysis he believes help us explain international politics, and these he calls “images of the world” or “levels of analysis”. The “first image of the world” is the *level of the individual* and is based on the assumption of fixed anthropological predispositions that determine the behaviour of political decision-makers. Generally, realists draw on this first level of analysis by attributing to states anthropological traits by analogy to the human individual. A state’s *political system* makes up the second level of analysis. Liberal theorists, for example, operate on this level when they examine whether democracies behave in a different way towards the external world than non-democracies (see also the chapter by Andreas Hasenclever in this volume). Finally, Waltz identifies the third level as that of the international system.

As Waltz sees it, most International Relations theories suffer from a serious handicap: their analyses of international politics are limited to the first or second image of the world, and on this basis they make inferences about how the specific foreign policies of a *particular* state have come about. The whole – international politics – is then no more than the sum of its parts, namely states’ foreign policies. Waltz calls theories that proceed in this way “reductionist” (Waltz 1979: 18), and for him this applies both to liberal approaches and traditional realism. While it is true that these approaches collect a wealth of empirical data, their power to deduce *general theoretical* statements (in the sense of regularities) about overall conditions within the international system based on this data is limited. Further, Waltz argues, as a result of the tendency to remain analytically on the subsystemic first or second level, these approaches succumb to the temptation to add new variables to a theory *ad hoc* if they have failed to come up with a satisfactory explanation on the basis of those variables so

far considered. In sum, Waltz concludes that “[i]t is not possible to understand world politics simply by looking inside of states . . . from simple description no valid generalizations can logically be drawn” (1979: 65). Waltz therefore heads in the exact opposite direction.

According to Waltz, only simplification or “elegance” (ibid.: 69) allows us to conceive of the core and definitive elements of international processes in the abstract without irrelevant factors distorting things. The key term that crops up again and again in this context is theoretical *parsimony*: the smaller the number of variables that must be alluded to in order to explain particular behaviours, the greater a theory’s general explanatory power is thought to be.

Waltz’s conception of theory thus takes its lead from economics, which he views as a role model for the theory of international politics. According to Waltz, the decisive breakthrough in achieving an economic theory generally recognized as valid was the abstract – and admittedly unrealistic – separation of the economic sphere from other social and political issues (Waltz 1990: 22). Inspired by this, he sees the necessity of producing a theory of international politics that focuses on the *sphere of international politics* in an analogously exclusive fashion, without factoring in economic or social factors. Only in this way it is possible to explain the fundamental realities of international politics. But this inevitably involves a shift of analytical perspective. Waltz focuses on the level of the *international system*, the third image of the world. Just as the market determines the behaviour of firms, by forcing them to sell their product at the normal market price for example, Waltz sees forces at work in the international system that determine the behaviour of states from the outside, forces that states are unable to evade for any length of time. We shall now take a look at these forces.

2.2 *The international system: actors and structures*

Every International Relations theory whose analytical focus lies on the level of the international system must begin by defining its concept of system. For Waltz, the international system consists of two basic elements: the *actors* or *units* of the system, namely states, and the *structure* of the system. From a neorealist perspective, these two elements must be examined separately.²

In the line with the “ban on reductionism”, here states are understood as *homogeneous* or *uniform* actors whose “inner life” is of no relevance to formulating a neorealist theory. From a neorealist perspective, the internal organization of states – such as the specific political system – can be disregarded; it represents something of a “black box” that neorealism leaves unopened. So it is irrelevant to the explanation of international politics whether a state is a liberal democracy or whether it is ruled by an autocratic, monarchical or dictatorial regime. The key distinguishing features of states are consciously disregarded. This theory assumes that all states are essentially identical (“like units” or “unitary actors”, see Waltz 1996: 54). In light of this assumption, neorealism inevitably exposes itself to the criticism that it neglects crucial aspects of political processes with important influences on the international level. Waltz responds by conceding that to explain some things, such as a specific foreign policy, it is indeed necessary to look at a state’s “inner life”. But, he explains, his goal is not to develop a theory of foreign policy. It is instead to identify general trends and pressures (Waltz refers to “systemic effects”) of relevance to *all* states. Neorealists who take their lead from Waltz thus work with at least three core assumptions:

1 Although the specific interests of individual states are not taken into account (they are in the “black box”), neorealists do assume the existence of at least one central need,

- which is the top priority for any state: *survival*. This refers to states' efforts to maintain their political and geographical integrity.
- 2 States try to realize their core preferences rationally, in other words their decisions are based on the criterion of means–ends rationality.³ But uncertainty prevails regarding other states' intentions. Their potential aggression and desire for expansion are ever-present threats that must be taken into account.
 - 3 Finally, while the first two assumptions apply to all states, there is one criterion in light of which we might distinguish between them: the extent of their “capabilities” (Waltz 1979: 195), which give them different degrees of “power”. How precisely capabilities and power are to be measured is not explained. They remain abstract concepts, hanging in the air (*ibid.*: 129ff). Waltz does at least imply that determining the power of a state is not a simple matter of counting up its weapons systems and soldiers. Economic and even social factors are also components of state power. In a sense, power is the “unit of account” by means of which states compare themselves with others, just as monetary evaluation makes it possible to distinguish between different goods (Waltz 1986: 333).

It may seem surprising that so far only states have been mentioned as relevant actors within the international system. Neorealists do not, of course, dispute that in reality actors such as transnational corporations, NGOs and international organizations have a certain importance as well. But from the theoretical perspective of neorealism, such actors seem unworthy of attention, as they have no influence on those processes that neorealists consider the key determinants of international politics. In other words: “Realism is designed to understand relations and interactions between states” (Glaser 2003: 407).

While reductionist theories see structure as arising from interactions between states and thus as dependent on these interactions, for Waltz, structure is defined independently of actors, their interests and interactions. From a neorealist perspective, the structure of the international system has an autonomous causal influence on actors and ensures that they behave in basically similar ways in specific situations (“like units”). But if we wish to determine just what is meant by the structure of the international system, we are faced with the problem that this structure cannot be directly observed as such. So we have to make an abstract model of it. According to Waltz's definition, there are three elements to the political structure of the international system: (1) the ordering principle; (2) the functional specifications or characteristics of actors; and (3) the distribution of resources or power among actors.

- 1 The first structural feature of the international system is its ordering principle. For Waltz, there are two basic ways in which actors can be organized (or ordered) within a system: hierarchically or anarchically (Waltz 1979: 114ff). As with national political systems, a hierarchical structure is distinguished by the presence of a superordinate authority with sanctioning power (a monopoly on violence) that guarantees the safety of the individual units. Conversely, *anarchy* – and this differs from the everyday use of the term – refers to the *absence* of such an authority: under these conditions, each actor is left to its own devices. All neorealists work on the premise that the international system is characterized by anarchy – understood as the absence of a “world government” or superordinate authority. This assumption of anarchy, as we will see, has far-reaching consequences for theory building.
- 2 The second structural feature that Waltz takes into consideration is the functional differentiation of the units or *character of the units*. Functional differentiation is present if there is a “division of labour” between states, in other words, if different states fulfil

different functions – by analogy to the division of labour in a society. In assessing the extent to which a division of labour between states within the international system is possible, the system’s ordering principle plays a crucial role. For Waltz, the assumption of anarchy means that states will be unwilling to risk functional differentiation, in other words, an international division of labour. Anarchy compels each state to focus on its core preference – maintaining its sovereignty, i.e. its own survival – without relying on external help. “The international imperative is: ‘take care of yourself’” (Waltz 1979: 107). It is because of this that the system described by neorealists is also referred to as a “self-help system”.

- 3 The third element that characterizes the structure of the international system is the power relation between the individual states (*distribution of capabilities*). While the power of each individual state is an attribute of a given unit, Waltz sees the distribution of power within the international system as a feature of the system’s structure (see *ibid.*: 80, 98). Power may be distributed in three possible ways. The international system may be structured on a unipolar (there exists a particularly powerful state, the hegemon), bipolar (there exist two particularly powerful states, as, for example, during the East–West conflict), or multipolar (there are more than two particularly powerful states) basis.

Now that we’ve clarified the key assumptions underpinning neorealist theory building, the next section sets out the key political processes within the international system that Kenneth Waltz derives from these assumptions.

2.3 International politics from a neorealist perspective

How does the structure of the international system affect actors? Or to put it in concrete terms, how do states act under conditions of anarchy? The point of departure here is as follows. States that wish to survive in an anarchically structured environment are forced to do everything they can to maximize their security. They are secure, proponents of this argument continue, only when there is a balance of power within the international system, as potentially aggressive states are deterred by the prospect of defeat. In line with this, it is crucial to nip power imbalances in the bud, because state *x* may become more powerful than state *y*, thus threatening the latter’s survival. Neorealists refer to such processes as *balancing*. The key imperative of states within the international system, then, may be summed up as follows: If you want to survive, even out power imbalances. This is how the structure of the international system impinges on the conduct of states, exercising a particular kind of causal effect on them. In the neorealist explanatory model, this structure has the status of an *independent variable*. However, the status of structure as a cause has to be qualified, because as Waltz argues: “Structures are causes but they are not causes in the sense meant by saying that A causes X and B causes Y” (1979: 74). This suggests that Waltz’s neorealism does not paint a full picture of why things happens on the international level – and that Waltz is aware of the fact “that structure is not the only cause in play and that the presence of unit-level factors precludes structural determinism” (Humphreys 2012: 400). This rather soft understanding of the causal effect of structure becomes clearer when looking at how actors might react to structural pressure.

For Waltz, the international system exhibits a fundamental proclivity for equilibrium. But this does not mean that states’ behaviour is determined, that they *must* always pursue a policy of balancing:

States' actions are not determined by structure. Rather . . . structures shape and shove Because states coexist in a self-help system, they are free to do any fool thing they care to, but they are likely to be rewarded for behavior that is responsive to structural pressures and punished for behavior that is not.

(Waltz 1997: 915)

So a balance of power or the tendency for one is not inevitable, but highly probable:

A self-help system is one in which those who do not help themselves . . . will fail to prosper, will lay themselves open to dangers, will suffer. Fear of such unwanted consequences stimulates states to behave in ways that tend toward the creation of balances of power.

(Waltz 1979: 118)

It follows from these observations that it is particularly important for a state that wants to survive and that acts rationally to constantly compare its capabilities with those of other actors and determine its position within the international system. In essence, a state may compensate for power shifts in another state's favour either by *upgrading its military forces* or *forming alliances*. If a particularly powerful actor makes use of its capabilities in order to improve its position within the international system, it is unlikely that other states will enter into competition with this state unilaterally (e.g. by enhancing their military forces); instead, they will attempt, through the formation of an *alliance*, to re-establish the power balance. If we assume in addition that most states do not have the option of achieving security vis-à-vis more powerful states through military enhancements because they lack the requisite resources, then the need for a balance of power would suggest that states will always band together with the weaker party in order to compensate for the other side's strength.

But when is the international system inclined towards war and when may we expect peaceful periods in world history? This is the second question posed earlier and in what follows Waltz's answers are discussed in detail. Central here are the different power configurations that the international system may exhibit: unipolarity, bipolarity or multipolarity. Waltz works on the assumption that *bipolar systems* featuring two particularly powerful states are least inclined towards war on the international level or are particularly likely to be stable over the long term because bipolar power relations are fundamentally clear and comprehensible. So it is unlikely that a given state will misjudge the power of other states and it is easy to take countermeasures (such as building up one's own military forces) when the opponent changes the status quo. In this case, bringing about a balance of power that impedes war is fairly straightforward (Waltz 1979: 161ff). One empirical example is the Cold War. But Waltz considered another argument relevant to the long phase of bipolarity during the Cold War: the stabilizing effect of nuclear weapons (Waltz 1988: 624). Their huge destructive power and the second strike capability of both superpowers generated a balance of power in which starting a war would have benefited neither of the two actors.⁴ *Multipolar systems*, meanwhile, entail far greater problems, as each state inevitably feels threatened by a large number of other states, whose capabilities it can assess only very imprecisely and whose intentions are unclear. Alliances tend to be rather unstable as states have many opportunities to ally. In line with this, it is much more likely that actors, wrongly believing that they can win a war, will attack other states. In sum: "Miscalculation by some or all great powers is a source of danger in a multipolar world; . . . it is . . . likely to permit an unfolding of events that finally threatens the status quo and brings the powers to war"

(Waltz 1988: 623). In a *unipolar system*, meanwhile, a hegemon represents a palpable threat to all other states. As Waltz writes: “The possession of great power has often tempted nations to the unnecessary and foolish employment of force” (Waltz 1979: 201). But even if the hegemon is a benign one, other states cannot be sure whether this good-will will persist in the future. In line with the imperative for balance, other states will therefore forge alliances to compensate for this. This can never be in the interest of the hegemon, so the number of potential disputes and the probability of military conflicts increase.

Is international cooperation possible under these conditions? I mentioned earlier that within the context of a balancing process, states are quite capable of forming alliances. As neorealists see it, this is about as far as voluntary cooperation on the international level can go. States will not enter into more extensive cooperation with the aim of increasing overall prosperity because of the risk of potential dependencies. States must always work on the assumption that potential partners in cooperation will renege on agreements if they can benefit from doing so, by secretly violating the terms of disarmament treaties, for example. Some writers therefore speak of a problem of defection with which states find themselves confronted and which is especially virulent in the security field. For neorealists, the pursuit of security within a self-help system makes dependency and the risk of defection unacceptable. So international institutions and regimes are thought not to play any special role, because they are unable to solve these basic problems in any comprehensive way (see also the critical section in the chapter by Bernhard Zangl in this volume). For neorealists the only conceivable form of international cooperation that goes beyond alliance formation is *hegemonically induced cooperation*. Here the hegemon forces other states to embrace functional differentiation in order to enhance their common welfare. To sweeten things, the hegemon takes over a large portion of the costs and protective functions for cooperating states, thus offering them incentives to engage in cooperation (we might interpret the role of the US in the establishment of the post-war global economic order, with its core institutions of GATT, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, in this way). But this form of “cooperation” is basically based on fear rather than free will.

Do states have any room for manoeuvre at all to shape the international system? Here Waltz makes a fundamental distinction between a *change in* and a *change of* or *transformation of* the system (Waltz 1986: 342; Waltz 2000: 6).⁵ When states influence the distribution of capabilities, we are dealing with a change *in* the international system. Through a unilateral military build-up, disarmament or a war it is possible for actors, at least over the short term, to make an impact on this structural attribute – before the balancing process works to correct this. This possibility of change must be distinguished from the *transformation of* the system. The latter occurs only if the attribute of anarchy is overcome, for example, through the construction of a world government or if the world is ruled by an overwhelmingly powerful state. Waltz considers this possibility so improbable, however, that he declares the anarchy of the international system and the resulting self-help character of this system *timeless* constants. While changes, such as transitions from bipolarity to multipolarity, are possible in principle, a transformation of the international system is extremely unlikely. We should not rule out the possibility of overcoming anarchy, though this places clear limits on the shelf-life of neorealism: “If the anarchy of international politics were to give way to a world hierarchy, a theory of international politics [in other words, Waltzian neorealism] would become a theory of the past” (Waltz 1986: 340).

Overall, neorealism paints a highly pessimistic picture of international relations. The pressure emanating from the international system forces states to concentrate on ensuring their

own security. Power imbalances must be evened out immediately and international cooperation can be achieved only with great difficulty.

3 Differentiation within neorealism and further developments

In debates in International Relations the term neorealism is primarily associated with the works of Waltz. Nonetheless, a very broad range of authors see themselves as neorealists. It is quite possible to view “neorealism” as a collective term covering all those studies that are rooted in classical political realism and share its pessimistic world-view but that expand on it in significant ways. It is interesting to note that while TIP caused intense debate within the IR community at large when it was published (see below), more recent debates have been largely amongst realists themselves, either “pinning down in more detail the mechanics of the core theory . . . or adding unit-level variables to make it a theory of foreign policy” (Wæver 2009: 202).

I now highlight some of the more significant studies and themes that seek to address the central propositions found within the TIP, have a critical take on them or develop them further.⁶

3.1 Processing Waltz: responses to TIP within realism

While intra-realist debates after TIP threw up a whole range of objections to Waltz’s neorealism, I want to take a closer look at just two fundamental issues.

- 1 Do states really tend towards behaviour that leads to a balance of power, as Waltz suggests, or is this state of affairs exceptional?
- 2 Are states really interested in maximizing *security*, or are they more concerned with maximizing their power?

Waltz’s balancing hypothesis, according to which weak states form alliances vis-à-vis strong states, soon prompted exhaustive empirical investigations. Stephen Walt, for example, carried out an extensive study of the alliance-forming behaviour of states (Walt 1985). His conclusion is that balancing is indeed a commonly observable empirical phenomenon, but for reasons other than those mentioned by Waltz. Rather than always responding to objective capabilities as they pursue balance, what counts for states is instead the perceived threat. What Walt has done here is to reformulate neorealism as balance-of-threat theory: “Balance-of-power theory predicts that states will ally against the *strongest* state in the system, but balance-of-threat theory predicts they will tend to ally against the most *threatening*” (Walt 1997: 933; original emphasis). While at first sight this idea seems fairly plausible, it has been criticized for leaving the systemic level to focus on subsystemic or psychological factors by introducing the category of “threat” (Legro and Moravcsik 1999: 36ff).

In contrast to this reformulation of the balance-of-power hypothesis, it has often been subject to more fundamental critique. Against Walt, Randall Schweller (1994), for example, argues that balancing behaviour can be observed empirically far less often than assumed by Waltz and Walt (a view shared by historian Paul Schroeder (1994) or, more recently, by Wohlforth *et al.* (2007)).⁷ Schweller argues that under certain circumstances it makes more sense for weaker states to band together voluntarily with strong ones, even without hegemonic pressure. This conduct is referred to as *bandwagoning*. States are particularly inclined

towards bandwagoning if they can gain something from it (Schweller 1994: 74). He calls this approach the “theory of balance-of-interest” (ibid.: 99).

Schweller (2006) also argues that what we often observe empirically is “underbalancing”. What he means by this is that despite a clearly recognizable threat, states forego a commensurate unilateral military build-up. Here again, Schweller believes that intra-state factors are responsible (such as the degree of elite consensus and elite cohesion, social cohesion or the stability of the government; see Schweller (2006: 11ff). In so doing, he too lays himself open to the criticism that he has shifted key elements of his ideas to the subsystemic level (Legro and Moravcsik 1999: 30). However, as Schweller – unlike Walt – sees himself located within the tradition of classical realism (hence “neoclassical realism”), this criticism is less applicable to him.⁸

Finally, the unipolar distribution of power in the international system since the end of the East–West conflict has led to a debate over whether balancing must always occur on the level of military capabilities or whether countervailing power can be achieved in other ways. In a debate carried on chiefly within the pages of the journal, *International Security*,⁹ some authors have come to the conclusion that possible challengers to the US, above all the People’s Republic of China, which are not (yet) in a position to confront America directly, are instead concentrating their efforts systematically on “soft” factors in order to curb the influence of the US and its capacity to wield power. On this view, so-called “soft balancing” banks on the effect of “international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements” (Pape 2005: 10) in order to undermine or at least limit aggressive unilateral actions by the US, such as the Gulf War of 2003. Critics, however, question the concept’s explanatory power and see neither evidence of the systematic use of soft power against the US nor any relevant constraint on America’s room for manoeuvre as a result of “soft balancing” (see Brooks and Wohlforth 2005: 75). Instead, these critics contend that it is the US’s own “soft power” that helps it attain exceptional influence within international relations (Nye 2004).

The debate over the extent to which and in what way balancing is in fact empirically observable has far-reaching consequences – depending on whether one is among the critics or proponents of neorealism. This is because balancing is the only key hypothesis amenable to empirical testing (Schroeder 1994). If we assume with Waltz that neorealism is capable only of making statements of probability, and also that balancing is a process that may potentially last for decades, then we minimize the theory’s capacity for prediction and immunize it against any strict test – according to critics (such as Guzzini 1998: 130ff). Hence Schweller’s view that: “[E]ven system theories must investigate historical cases of state behavior and foreign policy to see if actors spoke and acted in the manner predicted by the explanation” (2003: 322). Neorealists such as Waltz (1996, 1997) and Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2009), however, are quite unimpressed even by comprehensive “tests” and conflicting empirical observations, as, according to them, the analysis of specific historical cases falls under the rubric of foreign policy research rather than International Relations (Masala 2005: 99). However, this view runs counter to Waltz’s own meta-theoretical claim as he states: “The trick, obviously, is to link theoretical concepts with a few variables in order to contrive explanations from which hypotheses can be inferred and *tested*” (Waltz 1979: 17, my emphasis).

A second point of debate within the neorealist camp was whether states go all out to enhance their power or pursue power only to the extent necessary to guarantee their own security and autonomy. Attempts to answer this question led to a – by now widely uncontested – division of neorealists into “defensive” and “offensive” camps. This bifurcation is

described by Stephen Walt as the “most interesting conceptual development within the realist paradigm” (1998: 37). Walt himself is considered a member of the defensive camp. For him, it is security rather than power that is states’ top priority. John Mearsheimer, meanwhile, is viewed as one of the most dedicated offensive neorealists, having taken this approach further theoretically than anyone else. His focus is on great powers.

“Offensive” realists, such as Mearsheimer . . . , argue that great powers seek to maximize security by maximizing their relative power, while “defensive” realists . . . argue that great powers are generally more secure when they refrain from power maximization and seek to defend the status quo.

(Walt 1997: 932ff)

Though at first sight this assumption recalls classical realists such as Morgenthau, Mearsheimer does not see anthropological factors as relevant, instead deriving the pursuit of power maximization as a survival strategy from systemic factors (Mearsheimer 2001: 29). According to Mearsheimer, because of the prevailing uncertainty about other states’ behaviour, states pursue power until such time as they have attained hegemonic status – or fail to do so. As soon as a state attains hegemonic status, it ceases to pursue power, as the self-help imperative is no longer relevant (*ibid.*: 35). As early as 1991, coming from a defensive realist angle, Snyder (1991: 6) claimed that the pursuit of security through expansion would fail because of the inevitable formation of countervailing power and exponentially increasing costs. Walt, however, has pointed out that the question of whether states pursue security or power has no effect on the logic of his theory: “[A] balance of power system works whether we find states seeking only the minimum of power needed for security or whether some of them strive for domination” (Walt 1986: 334).¹⁰ Essentially, offensive and defensive realism have more in common than attempts to cleanly separate them would imply. Taliaferro (2000/2001: 130), however, represents a dissenting view in this regard. He argues that the distinction between offensive and defensive realism is extremely important, not least in view of the very different policy recommendations to which they give rise.

3.2 Alternatives to Walt in times of upheaval? The political economic theory of Robert Gilpin and “power transition theory”

With just a few exceptions, neorealists accept the thesis that American supremacy, which has persisted since the end of the Cold War, is a temporary phenomenon because eventually a countervailing power will emerge. From Walt’s perspective, the formation of such a countervailing power – ideally a return to a bipolar world – would be a welcome development, as this configuration of power has proved particularly stable. Other authors, however, also located broadly within the (neo)realist camp, dispute this “beneficent” effect of a balance of power. Robert Gilpin’s theory of political economy and so-called *power transition theory* (PTT) come to some particularly disquieting conclusions.

In his magnum opus, *War and Change in World Politics*, Robert Gilpin also adopts an approach inspired by economic theory, but rather than trying to explain consistencies and stability, his analytical focus is on “dynamics”. The questions he asks are therefore different as well: “How and under what circumstances does change take place at the level of international relations? What are the roles of political, economic, and technological developments in producing change in international systems?” (Gilpin 1981: 2). In attempting to answer these questions, Gilpin first appears to share key neorealist assumptions: “International

relations continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy” (ibid.: 7). Gilpin, however, does not focus on the international system and how it influences states (top-down). Instead he assumes the existence of individual actors with specific interests and preferences (bottom-up), though in analogy to Waltz, these actors operate within the anarchical environment of the international system.

While Gilpin determines the degree of constraint on state action within the anarchical international milieu partly by considering the material distribution of power, he also takes account of factors such as “prestige” or “authority” (ibid.: 26–39). Alongside the drive to survive, Gilpin analyses other (sub)state interests. States may, for example, have an interest in making the international system conform to their desires, though this entails certain costs. So the system is stable only if “no state believes it profitable to attempt to change the system” (ibid.: 10). Gilpin regards this as unlikely, however: in the course of history, he discerns an unending cyclical change in the international system in which new states are forever emerging as hegemonic. But this hegemony can only ever be maintained for a certain period, namely, until new challengers oust the hegemon. On this view, then, the international system is characterized by “the cycle of hegemony” (ibid.: 220). This conclusion applies even in the nuclear age (Gilpin 1988: 34ff).

Gilpin identifies three key reasons why a hegemon’s dominance inevitably comes to an end. First, “Turgot’s law of diminishing returns” also applies to states’ production of capabilities. A state’s power initially grows very quickly, but then ever more slowly,¹¹ so that eventually potential power rivals can catch up with the hegemon. Second, hegemons tend to consume proportionately more than they invest, which, according to economists, hampers growth. Third, it is impossible for the hegemon to preserve its initial technological edge over the long term as it cannot prevent the dissemination of knowledge. All three aspects enable up-and-coming states, after an initial delay, to “catch up” with the hegemon and to challenge its supremacy, which might ultimately lead to wars: as soon as the existing order of the international system is no longer compatible with the prevailing distribution of power, processes of adaptation, including armed conflict, inevitably ensue.

Much like Gilpin, A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler scrutinize the preconditions for major wars in the context of power transitions. In their magnum opus, *The War Ledger* (1980), they put forward the hypothesis that sooner or later every hegemon will find itself confronted with a challenger. For them, this throws up the question of whether a politics of power balancing can guarantee peace over the long term – a question that Organski had already answered in the negative in the 1950s, against the prevailing balance-of-power mainstream. Organski and Kugler, whose approach has come to be known as *power transition theory* (PTT), come to the conclusion – a surprising, indeed antithetical one for neorealists – that it is in fact periods of relatively balanced power relations between two rival states that entail a particularly great risk of armed conflict. The focus of interest here, as with the work of Gilpin, is on the path towards balance, rather than balance itself. The co-authors too argue that the challenger can increase its power more quickly than the hitherto dominant state because of its higher economic growth, such that the two states’ power curves will inevitably cross over. PTT takes no account of the alliance as an external means of enhancing power as it assumes that it is too inflexible an instrument and that states rely primarily on their own power resources. If the challenger wins the contest with the formerly most powerful state, a power transition will occur.

As exponents of PTT see it, however, power transitions do not necessarily lead to wars. This depends instead on whether the challenger accepts the norms and rules of the international system laid down by the formerly dominant state or wants to change them, in other

words, whether it behaves in “revisionist” fashion (Organski and Kugler 1980: 23). In the first case a peaceful power transition is possible, while, in the second, war is significantly more probable, and, according to these authors, this war will be started by the new most powerful state *after* the power transition (ibid.: 206).¹² So it is not just the configuration of power in the international system that determines the probability of war, but also whether the challenger is willing to accept the prevailing normative order (whether it is “satisfied”) or not (and must therefore be considered “dissatisfied”). On the question of how we might determine whether a given challenger is “satisfied” or not, however, Organski and Kugler remain very vague, and there is an ongoing debate regarding exactly how we might identify different types of states.¹³

All in all, Gilpin’s political economic theory and the PTT approach are very similar in their assumptions and their view of international relations. Both approaches see the international order as far more strongly influenced by powerful states than does neorealism with its notion of alliance formation as a means of power balancing. They also refer to the destabilizing effect of power balances, working on the assumption that the probability of war increases in phases of the equal distribution of power. At first sight, then, they seem better equipped to provide predictions and guides to coping with the challenges of contemporary international politics, such as the rise of the People’s Republic of China and India. Given that TIP (1979), *The War Ledger* (1980) and *War and Change* (1981) were published at almost the same point in time, it is legitimate to ask “[w]here would the scholarly field of international relations (IR) be today if Robert Gilpin had become the standard bearer for realism instead of Kenneth Waltz?” (Wohlforth 2011: 499) or, one might add, Organski and Kugler. Introducing the (subsystemic) categories of “prestige” or “satisfaction with the prevailing normative order”, however, compels these approaches to open the black box of the state. This brings Waltz’s dictum back into play: “With both system-level and unit-level forces in play, how can one construct a theory of international politics without simultaneously constructing a theory of foreign policy?” (Waltz 1988: 42).

3.3 Neorealism: not an exclusively American IR theory

It is fair to say that while neorealism is one of the most important IR theories world-wide, its reception and relevance in the academic communities of different countries have been rather mixed. In Germany, for example, neorealism has always had and still has the status of the unloved relative you somehow have to get along with. While it is taught in almost all introductory seminars, only very few scholars publicly subscribe to the theory. But at least some attempts have been made and continue to be made to augment and apply neorealist theory there.

The *Munich School* founded by Gottfried-Karl Kindermann, for example, claims to be *neorealist* in character. As the title of an essay by Reinhard Meier-Walser declares: “Neorealism is more than just Waltz” (Meier-Walser 1994; my translation). This particular approach is characterized by a focus on practical analytical value and a synopsis of systemic and subsystemic factors (e.g. Meier-Walser 1994: 115). Overall, though, the Munich neorealists take their lead much more from Morgenthau, and thus realism, than from Waltz.¹⁴

Meanwhile, among German scholars, Werner Link (1980) is closer to Waltzian neorealism. On the basis of studies by David Singer, and taking the East–West conflict as an example, he seeks to demonstrate how different ways of dealing with conflict can be explained in light of a given web of power relations or changes in this web. Link thus concludes that the best time to achieve improved relations between the superpowers was

during periods when a balance of power had removed the threat to their economic and political survival (Link 1980: 224ff.).

Currently the best-known German neorealist is Carlo Masala, whose theoretical stance is very close to the original Waltzian thinking. He is the author of the most comprehensive volume on Waltz in German (Masala 2005) and a defender of “pure” neorealism (e.g. Masala 2012).

4 Criticisms from outside neorealism

Since the publication of TIP in 1979, there has been a virtually ceaseless flow of criticism from the exponents of other schools – not least because neorealism has seemed an increasingly fissiparous and inconsistent theoretical edifice. In addition, this theory has exhibited glaring explanatory weaknesses with respect to crucial international developments such as increasing European integration¹⁵ or the end of the East–West conflict. This is because it has such a poor grasp, or no grasp at all, of dynamic developments whose causes are to be found on the subsystemic level (see, for example, Schweller and Wohlforth 2000; Waltz 2000). As we have seen, some avowed (neo)realists (such as Walt) make the same point. Most neorealists, however, view the inclusion of subsystemic factors as a concession to a complex reality, without questioning neorealism and its basic pessimism in any fundamental way.

In the following section we turn our attention to two fundamental debates. The first is that between neorealists and neoinstitutionalists in the 1980s (the so-called “neo-neo debate”),¹⁶ the second, the constructionist critique of the neorealist conception of anarchy, which goes back to Alexander Wendt. Both these debates proved especially relevant to the development of International Relations theories as they helped theorists break out of the dominant, pessimistic world-view of neorealism without lapsing into idealist arguments.

Not long after the publication of TIP, neorealism seemed to be confronted with its first crisis. Many observers believed that the US’s international pre-eminence had diminished substantially over the course of the early 1980s. Generally, they saw the reasons for this as lying in the economic crises of the 1970s (above all, the oil crises) and the growing economic strength of Europe and Japan. Yet the US’s economic weakness seemed to have no effect on the degree of international cooperation, in the GATT or the IMF, for instance, which conflicted with the neorealist hypothesis of hegemonically induced cooperation. Finally, in 1984, against neorealist doctrine, Robert O. Keohane asked whether international cooperation was possible *After Hegemony*.¹⁷

In an attempt to answer this question, those authors referred to as “neoinstitutionalists” or “neoliberal institutionalists” drew on a wide range of neorealist assumptions. On the basis of these assumptions and with the aid of rational choice theory, particularly game theory, they made systematic studies of opportunities for cooperation in order to refute neorealist pessimism not just empirically but also theoretically. Neoinstitutionalists such as Robert O. Keohane (1984) and Robert Axelrod (1984) believed they could show that cooperation is possible in principle even on the premise of international anarchy and that it facilitates *positive absolute utility* for all cooperating states. They were also convinced that the problem of defection (see above) could be tackled by an appropriate international framework (see also the chapter by Bernhard Zangl in this volume).¹⁸ In the neorealist camp, Joseph Grieco countered this view in 1988 with an argument that was already present in the work of Waltz but that had subsequently been largely overlooked, namely, that relating to “relative gains” (see Waltz 1979: 105; Grieco 1988: 499ff). Because of anarchy and the drive for self-preservation, what matters is not whether states make *absolute* gains through cooperation, but rather how the common gains from cooperation are distributed among those cooperating. Neorealist

logic assumes that states always consider to what extent absolute shared gains from cooperation change the existing power balance between them. Even if two states gain from cooperation, one might gain more and thereby achieve a so-called *relative* gain in contrast to the other state, changing the power structure to the former's advantage, thereby destabilizing the international system.¹⁹ By thinking in this way, it is possible to transform every positive sum game (absolute gain for all states involved in cooperation; no one is left worse off) into a zero sum game (that is, any gain by one state necessarily means a corresponding loss by another such that the gains of all those involved add up to zero). This logic also applies to cooperation between states enjoying friendly relations, such that the probability of cooperation even between allies and partners is extremely limited if cooperation changes the power structure between the states: "There is even the danger, however remote, that today's ally will become tomorrow's enemy" (Grieco 1988: 47). Although the argument concerning relative gains as a factor hampering cooperation is logical as far as it goes, game theoretical analyses have shown that the significance of relative gains falls as the number of cooperating actors increases (see Snidal 1991). Waltz and Grieco also fail to take account of the fact that every absolute gain also constitutes a relative gain *vis-à-vis* states not involved in the cooperation, such that we can estimate the net gain accruing to a state through cooperation only with great difficulty.

Probably the most substantial criticism of Waltzian neorealism was formulated in 1992 by Alexander Wendt in his provocative article "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics", with which he ushered in a wave of constructionist criticism (see also the chapter by Cornelia Ulbert in this volume). For Wendt, it is not logically necessary to assume that international anarchy will automatically give rise to a self-help system featuring an irresistible impulse to engage in power politics (Wendt 1992: 394). Here, the constructionist conception of "structure" diverges markedly from that of neorealism. From a neorealist perspective, structure – and especially the element of anarchy – is an exogenous given, such that in principle states have no prospect of affecting the structure of the international system. From a constructionist perspective, on the other hand, structure is always a *social* element, which is crucially *moulded*, and endowed with meaning, by *interactional processes* between states but which in turn has a constitutive effect on actors. For Wendt, there is a mutually constitutive web of relations between actors and structure (the "agent–structure problem"). "Wendt's key assertion is that the culture in which states find themselves at any point in time depends on the discursive social practices that reproduce or transform each actor's view of self and other" (Copeland 2000: 195). From a constructionist perspective, states' conception of the international system, but also of themselves, is the result of a long-term process of repeated interaction between actors, a process whose outcome is *not determined in advance*. To bring out the nature of this relationship, Wendt devises a hypothetical situation in which two actors, ego and alter, meet without background knowledge of one another under conditions of anarchy (Wendt 1992: 404). Wendt shows that in such a situation how relations between the two will develop is not predetermined – if we forego the assumption that each actor will orient itself towards the worst possible case, namely, its own immediate annihilation, should it behave in an accommodating way. In this case, then, anarchy has *no* necessary influence on how actors deal with one another. But if states behave in an egotistical way right from the outset, subsequently putting their faith in military might in order to secure their survival, as assumed in realist and neorealist theory, it becomes ever more difficult for them to extract themselves from this "Hobbesian culture" (Wendt 1999: 259ff) of anarchy. From a constructionist perspective, however, it is always possible to reverse this process and move away from a self-help system – even without being

dependent on a hegemon that establishes a hierarchical structure through the threat of violence. As an empirical example, one might look at the relations between France and Germany. While over centuries their relations were highly bellicose, today a war seems virtually impossible. So states are not completely at the mercy of the structural forces identified by Waltz. With this fundamental critique, Wendt's article ushered in the "constructionist turn" in International Relations.

To conclude, it is fair to say that the internal and external debates carried on in the wake of TIP were not without consequence for the development of neorealist theory. Neorealists have increasingly incorporated subsystemic factors or constructionist elements into their analyses, and have rapidly distanced themselves from the parsimony of Waltzian neorealism in its original form. Today, almost all those who describe themselves as neorealists include elements in their work that contradict the basic assumptions of Waltzian theory. This neglect of *systemic* factors in contemporary neorealism ultimately prompted Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik to ask the provocative question "[i]s anybody still a [neo-]realist?" (see Legro and Moravcsik 1999). "Avowed" exponents of this approach have yet to come up with a satisfactory answer to this very legitimate question.

5 Notes

- 1 Waltz does not explicitly subscribe to the deductive-nomological (or "covering-law") model but offers a "checklist" restating core assumptions of this approach (Waltz 1979: 13). See also Onuf (2011: 103, fn. 7). There is, however, a tension between Waltz's metatheoretical rhetoric and development of his theory and his own application of the theory to real-world problems in later chapters of TIP. See the very instructive article by Humphreys (2012).
- 2 Waltz's concept of system thus differs from that of other systemic perspectives, such as, for example, world-system theory. See Ruggie (1983: 262ff) and the chapter by Andreas Nölke in this volume.
- 3 The assumption that states are rational is not present in explicit form in TIP. In later essays, however, Waltz concedes that he *implicitly* works on this premise. See, for example, Waltz (1986: 330). There is still debate, however, over how rational states actually are according to Waltzian neorealism and how the assumption of rationality is consistent with the Waltzian notion that states are free to act in contradiction to what rationality dictates. See, for example, the critique by Mearsheimer (2009).
- 4 Based on this reasoning, Waltz argued for deliberate proliferation of nuclear weapons (Waltz 1981) – a stance that has stirred much controversy ever since.
- 5 Waltz has, however, been inconsistent with his terminology over the years. In TIP, for example, he speaks of the Second World War as a "system-transforming" war (Waltz 1979: 199), while later works refer to transformation as a fundamental change rendering international politics obsolete (Waltz 2000: 6).
- 6 For a comprehensive survey of the development of the realist paradigm in International Relations and International Political Economy, see Guzzini (1998).
- 7 For a response to this criticism, see, for example, Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2009).
- 8 On realism in general and "neoclassical realism" in particular, see the chapter by Andreas Jacobs in this volume, and Lobell *et al.* (2009).
- 9 See especially the summer 2005 issue (30:1), in which both cited texts appear, and the winter 2005/06 issue (30: 3), particularly the "Correspondence" section.
- 10 For an overview of different realist approaches to the concept of a "balance of power" see Little (2007).
- 11 This law, originally formulated in 1768 with agriculture in mind, states that the output of a production process initially increases *disproportionately* to the deployment of means, but once a certain level of production has been reached, it increases under-proportionately before finally reaching a maximum. Gilpin references Turgot implicitly rather than explicitly concept of curves. See, for example, Figure 3 in Gilpin (1981: 79).

- 12 There has been some debate within the PTT camp about the timing of a potential war as it seems equally plausible to assume that the hegemon will start a war to prevent the challenger from overtaking him in the first place. See, for example, the model by Alsharabati and Kugler (2008).
- 13 See, for example, Tammen (2008).
- 14 For a discussion of how Waltzian neorealism and the Munich approach differ and overlap, see Meier-Walser (1994: 122ff).
- 15 Initially, neorealists simply declared the EC or EU a unitary actor; see Grieco (1990).
- 16 The key essays in this debate have been brought together by Baldwin (1993).
- 17 To quote the title of his book. See Keohane (1984).
- 18 An example of absolute gains by two states through cooperation: state *a* gains 50 “units of power” through cooperation, state *b* 100. This means that both benefit vis-à-vis the initial situation, as the “power” of each has now increased in *absolute* terms.
- 19 An element of imprecision creeps into the accounts of the problem of relative gains in the work of both Kenneth Waltz and Joseph Grieco at this point. They argue that relative gains are avoided by equal distribution of the benefits of cooperation. But this statement applies only to the *special case* of an identical starting point. Let’s assume that two actors, *a* and *b*, possess 100 and 50 power units respectively prior to cooperation. If both now gain 50 units each through cooperation, the power ratio shifts from 100:50 to 150:100, or from 2:1 to 3:2. Actor *a* has suffered a relative loss of power *despite* absolutely equal distribution of the benefits of cooperation. See, for example, Schweller (1996: 109ff). The only solution in this case is for the distribution of the collective gain to exactly match the *ex-ante* power structure, i.e. actor *a* receives 66.6 and actor *b* 33.3 units (*ex-post*: $166.6:83.3 = 2:1$). This example shows that certain distributions even permit a relative loss *despite* getting more than the other (e.g. *a* receives 60 and *b* 40 which changes the power-relation in *b*’s favour, i.e. 1.78:1). It is interesting to note that this logic resembles Aristotle’s concept of distributive justice, which is thought to stabilize society.

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