**Neorealism in International Relations – Kenneth Waltz**

***Neorealism – or structural realism – is the bedrock theory of International Relations. Starting from a simple set of assumptions, it seeks to explain how states, in particular the most powerful ones, behave, and how they interact with each other on the international arena.***

Neorealism – or structural realism – is a theory of international politics. The theory is usually associated with Kenneth Waltz (1924–2013) and his 1979 book bearing the obvious name *Theory of International Politics*. That book endeavored to construct a very general framework for explaining recurring patterns of state behavior and state interaction in the international system.

As is the case with all theories, there are many things that Neorealism fails to explain. In fact, most types of state behavior and state interaction cannot usefully be accounted for by Waltz’s parsimonious theory. Thus it is that neoralism has attracted many adversaries in the academic world; much – but by no means all – of the criticism Neorealism faces is really of a straw man character: Neorealism is often faulted for failing to explain or predict events or behavior that Neorealists have never set out to explain or predict in the first place.

Every theory claims its own domain. Neorealism’s consists of the biggest issues – past, present, and future – in international relations: war, the avoidance of war, power balancing, power seeking, the death of states, security competition and arms races, alliance formation, and the like.

Even then, Neorealism on its own is usually unable accurately to account for the *specifics* *concerning each case* of war, or of the avoidance of war, or of power balancing, or power seeking, or of the death of states, or security competition and arms races, or alliance formation. If a student’s objective is, say, to acquire a fairly encompassing grasp of why the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, or why the Cold War ended exactly when it did, neoralism *on its own* is inadequately suited for such a task.

But Neorealists can easily, and with some justification, claim that their theory is almost always the natural and necessary starting point – a logical first-cut – when the events or developments under study represent the “big” issues in international politics, like the U.S. invasion of Iraq, or the end of the Cold War.

Neorealism is often called “structural realism,” which signifies that the theory primarily centers on the effects of the *structure* of the international system when it seeks to explain outcomes in international politics. In Waltz’s conception of structure, two things are especially noteworthy about the international system.

Firstly, the international system’s ordering principle is *anarchy*. This simply means that there is no such thing as a world government; there is no higher authority above the main units that exist in the system – the states. Furthermore, this results in an international system that is essentially a *self-help system*consisting of states that are autonomous, functionally undifferentiated actors each of which must always be prepared to fend for itself.

The units of the system closely resemble each other with regard to the functions they perform, the tasks the face, the primary goals they seek (with survival always being the fundamental goal on which the attainment of all other objectives rests), and how they go about accomplishing their objectives. The main point is that, under anarchy, each and every state by and large operates on its own without having recourse to any higher authority.

The second defining principle of the structure of international politics is the *distribution of capabilities*across the units inhabiting the international system*.* Capabilities, or power, vary significantly between states; states, though functionally undifferentiated, are differentiated according to how much power they possess. Variations in power yield variations in the types and magnitude of *structural constraints* that states face, thereby effectuating variation in how states behave (or *should* behave).

These two simple assumptions – anarchy and the importance of the distribution of power – result in the famous image of international politics as a “pool table” consisting of balls whose inherent properties (shape, the material they are made of, etc.) are essentially the same. However, the sizes of the balls vary greatly. And on the proverbial pool table, the smallest balls – and indeed the medium-sized balls as well – tend to congregate around the corners where they more or less stay put. The largest balls, on the other hand, can be found roaming about the whole table, often interfering with the smaller balls, sometimes knocking them over, dominating the game and determining how it is being played out.

We can use the Cold War as an example. The Second World War had changed the structure of international politics. Not in terms of ordering principle (the system was still anarchic) but in terms of the distribution of world power, which had been fundamentally altered by 1945. The old multipolar world had gone; two great powers remained – the Soviet Union and the United States, the superpowers of the new bipolar world.

What this meant for the old great powers of Europe – Germany, Great Britain, and France – was that their freedom of action, their security relations, and indeed their overall fate, were suddenly severely constrained by the shifts in the balance of power. They were structurally constrained inasmuch as they could no longer afford to view Europe as an isolated realm of a world where security, power, and prosperity were almost exclusively a product of intra-European interaction.

In light of the perceived threat from communist Soviet Union, neither (West) Germany, nor the UK or France could act as *producers* of their own security. They were simply too weak to follow the strategy of internal balancing; instead they had to rely on external balancing by soliciting American protection by way of an alliance. Europe had become *consumers* of security and had no choice but to accept significant U.S. influence in European affairs as the price for her friendship.

Neither could the British or the French uphold their respective world-wide empires. On this score, these two demoted great powers were structurally constrained as regard their global reach; the power resources necessary to continue dominating far-away places were not any longer in the possession of Paris or London. Economically, they were both significantly weakened. Militarily, they were both significantly weakened. In the end, and after the point was hammered home to them by events such as Dien Bien Phu, the Suez Crisis, and the Algerian War, retrenchment became accepted as the only sensible option.

On a more positive note, however, the shifts in the balance of power also resulted in constraints being placed on the European states in terms of the efficacy and rationality of engaging in security and power competition. Given that America functioned as the continent’s security provider, it was no longer required of France to view Germany as the major threat and competitor, and Germany rationally didn’t have to fear France or any other West European nation.

Neither of these states would gain much from choosing guns over butter; none would be able to balance the Soviet Union on its own in any case. Engaging in serious security and power competition against each other would indeed be counterproductive irrespective of perceptions of national goals or eventual *revanchism* as long as the overriding question was, and needed to be, how to relate to the two true consequential states of the time – the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Peace in Western Europe no more hinged on the relations between Germany, France, and the UK, but rather on the relations between: (a) the U.S. and the USSR; (b) Western Europe and the U.S.; (c) Western Europe and the Soviet Union.

One of Waltz’s main points is that such structural constraints that arise from the distribution of power force or induce states to act in certain ways and avoid acting in others. As rational actors – or at least we should assume that they are rational actors – states tend, over the long haul at least, to choose the means that best help to realize their objectives. The fundamental objective for any state is to survive – for if survival is not ensured, all other goals the state may have will be rendered unachievable. A more elusive version of the term survival is the slightly broader notion of “security.” As a matter of assumption, Neorealists highlight security as a key objective of states. Waltz tells us that states generally aim to maximize security.

According to Neorealism, if states are to be secure in an anarchic world, they need to pay heed to the structural constraints under which they operate. Simplistically stated, powerful states can and indeed should or must “do more” than less powerful states. Interests expand as relative power increases. Still, even the most powerful states shouldn’t get too excited about the power-projection opportunities that arise simply from having great capabilities.

Nazi Germany lost the Second World War because it gaped over more than it could chew; faced with (self-inflicted) opposition from and constraints provided by the United States and the Soviet Union, it could scarcely have won the war following the strategy it did trying to maximize power and expand the Reich ever more. Knowing where and when to stop – i.e. acknowledging and abiding by the structural constraints of the system – is vital for any state that seeks successfully to fulfil its objectives, key among which is security.

The United States – a post-WWII superpower – expanded greatly after 1945 in the sense that, starting with Western Europe, it assumed global responsibilities of an unprecedented magnitude. It did so because: (a) it could (i.e. it had the capabilities to do so); and (b) it was perceived to be in the interests of national security to do so. As relative power increases, interests expand – and they also expand geographically.

The U.S. increased its influence in and over Western Europe quite rapidly in the late 1940s and early 1950s. That was in a sense *terra nullius* for Washington: they had to fill the vacuum in the wake of the World War lest communism do so instead. Soviet communist control over Western Europe or, alternatively, good old security competition within Western Europe, would clearly work to the detriment of the United States with regard to its security, economic, and ideological interests. The U.S. were commanded to expand. Big nations have big goals.

However, the U.S. was also structurally constrained during the Cold War. Whereas goals can be pretty much unlimited, the actual *achievement* of these goals critically depends upon – again – the distribution of capabilities across the international system. The U.S. could not, even if it wished to (which it surely did), achieve complete world dominance; they could not shape the world completely according to its own image. They could not do this because of the existence of a countervailing power, vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union balanced the power of the United States, whereas the United States balanced the power of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union could not expand (militarily, economically, or ideologically) into Western Europe for the simple reason that the United States acted as a check on such expansion. Likewise, the United States could not expand (militarily, economically, or ideologically) into the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence for the equally simple reason that the Soviet Union acted as a check on such expansion.

Such a check – such balancing – represents a structural constraint on expansion, a structural constraint on the achievement of hegemony. The concept of the *balance of power* plays a key role in Neorealism. Considering the ultimate objective of survival/security, hegemonic aspirations by others constitute the key threat to the units of the system. As states arise that have the means or capabilities to expand, others need to react lest they face the risk of extinction or, in any case, a loss of sovereignty, autonomy, or control over their own fate. Hegemonic threats, in other words, need to be balanced in an anarchic world.

The peculiar thing about bipolarity, Waltz has famously and rightly stated, is that, on a global scale at least, only the two superpowers possess the means required to balance each other (having allies helps, but for purposes of balancing, they are all disposable under bipolarity). Hence, if the U.S. had failed to abandon its isolationist grand strategy of earlier times, the Soviet Union’s influence would quite likely have expanded. And vice versa: If the Soviet Union had failed to assume responsibility of checking the expansion of the United States in Europe and, eventually, across the globe, the United States would quite likely have expanded even further.

But Waltz also says that states are normally and gradually *socialized* into accepting the view that power needs to be balanced. You never know when a revisionist state appears on the international stage. A lack of proper socialization – a lack of acknowledgment of the risks out there and of the appropriate means of facing the risks – can have catastrophic consequences for national security. This is not to say that states are*automatically* socialized into behaving sensibly; it does not mean that they automatically learn from their own or others’ mistakes.

States indeed falter from time to time. In the 1930s, a series of key “mistakes” were made by France and Great Britain vis-à-vis the threat posed by Adolf Hitler. The common denominator of these mistakes was that they, overall, represented relative ignorance toward the salience of power balancing. Nazi Germany was not properly balanced. The result was World War II and, with it, the end of France and Great Britain as great powers.

Above I have stated that the Soviet Union acted as a check on U.S. power. The United States could not expand its influence too much, lest it would find itself fighting a war (an *actual* war, not only a “Cold” one) with the USSR. That was something the United States was not interested in, to put it mildly. In general, states do not wish to fight wars; indeed, they tend to fear war more than anything else, and that fear generally works as a significant constraint on state behavior, instilling some degree of prudence into leaders.

Contrary to what some people seemingly believe, Neorealism is not a theory that goes around predicting war here, there, and everywhere. Wars happen, Neorealists will say, and they will continue to plague the international system from time to time. The basic sources of war and peace – the*permissive causes* of war and peace – are exactly the two fundamental elements of the structure of the international system: anarchy and the distribution of power.

The assumption about anarchy as the ordering principle of the international system leads to the simple but inherently correct contention that wars will occur because there’s nothing there to stop them from occurring. States will always have conflicting interests; sometimes these conflicting interests center on vital issues, sometimes adversaries make mistakes when they are trying to gauge relative power, and sometimes states make mistakes when they try to estimate the resolve of adversaries.

Thus, sometimes a conflict of interest simply escalates into war proper. Moreover, sometimes wars occur because power is insufficiently balanced, making war of conquest a potentially fruitful endeavor. In all such cases, the *basic cause* of armed conflict is the lack of a global sovereign – the lack of a world government complete with a “police” force – to stop them from occurring.

That wars are often down to mistakes, miscalculations, and accidents is perhaps an unsatisfactory conclusion when one attempts to obtain a grasp of the general forces and patterns in international politics. And it is true that Neorealism fails to account for many of the *specific causal mechanisms* at play in most cases of interstate armed conflict. For that, additional theoretical knowledge – the assistance of other theories about causes of war and peace – are required.

Yet Neorealism can still usefully inform us about the permissive causes of war and peace; that is, under what general circumstances are war likely, and under what circumstances are they not? And, given certain circumstances (structures/constraints): What types of wars are likely? What types of wars are less likely? Who will fight these wars (big states, small states)? Who won’t fight these wars?

Anarchy is in this instant a constant. Wars occur because of anarchy, but wars also *fail to occur* despite that the international system is anarchic. The key *variable* is the distribution of power. Waltz has indeed much to say about this issue, on which I will not dwell too much. Suffice it to say that, according to Waltz, *great-power wars* are much more likely to occur under multipolarity than under bipolarity. This is so not least because bipolarity diminishes uncertainties among the adversaries and eases estimations of relative power and relative resolve, making crises and conflicts of interest less likely to spill over into war proper.

But perhaps an equally interesting question revolves around an issue that Waltz does not specifically address in his 1979 book, namely, what happens in an anarchic world where neither bipolarity nor multipolarity characterizes the distribution of power. In other words: What happens under unipolarity?

In brief, the end of the Cold War (1989/91) and the collapse of the Soviet Union also spelled the immediate end of bipolarity. One superpower faced its sudden demise, one was left standing. And standing completely and utterly alone to boot. Thus the world suddenly became distinctly unipolar. And it still is unipolar, especially considering how Waltz and others define relative power in terms of the *possession* of material resources – as opposed to the *use* of such resources. In other words: The world is unipolar because the United States commands aggregate material resources (especially but not exclusively military capabilities) of a magnitude that no other state in the world is remotely close to matching.

In terms of power resources, the U.S. stands alone. In terms of the *capacity to act*, the U.S. stands alone. In theory, the U.S. does not *have* to act globally even if its absolute and relative power allows it to. To what extent Washington seeks to exert its influence around the world critically depends on its grand strategy, the outline of means and ends in U.S. foreign policy; a specification of what is America’s mission, what are the threats to its mission, and how America should deal with these threats.

If America’s leaders, acting on behalf of the people of America, conclude that America’s security and prosperity are best served by America staying at home, then America will choose an isolationist grand strategy that pretty much leaves the rest of the world alone. The U.S. would still, though, be the unipole of the international system given the actual distribution of material resources throughout the globe. A sudden reversal to isolationism would spell the end of American hegemony but not of unipolarity.

Waltz, however, teaches us that such a move by Washington would be extremely unlikely. Power shapes interests: the more power, the more extensive the interests. The United States behaves like a hegemon because it has the power to behave like a hegemon. If power is present, it will be used. At the very least, a state having no peer competitors, with a military machine that gobbles up around 40 percent of world military spending (with its allies accounting for an additional 25 percent), with an economy twice as large as the next one on the list, with unmatched technological and academic prowess, with a prestige second-to-none in an international system whose institutions are largely the embodiment of that very state’s core values – well, such a state is not likely to retrench any time soon.

Neorealists and Kenneth Waltz himself would make two major points about such a situation, both of which have to do with the dangers of unchecked power. Firstly, it matters what the United States actually does in such unprecedented circumstances. The temptation *to do a lot* is obviously there once the Soviet Union disappears – once Moscow cannot any longer function as a countervailing power that balances the power of the mighty United States. And to do a lot means to expand. And expansion, for its part, does not (necessarily) mean territorial expansion. It means increasing the influence of the United States in key areas around the globe.

The United States *has* expanded its influence and activities following the end of the Cold War, despite the fact that the level of its influence and activities was already unparalleled at the moment the Soviet Union collapsed. One would indeed think that the marginal utility of expanding even further would be fairly limited after the shift from bi- to unipolarity. The exceptions are to be found, of course, in the areas left behind by the Soviet Empire. And indeed, most of East and Central Europe – including the Baltic States bordering Russia – are now firmly entrenched within the U.S. sphere of influence, contravening alleged promises made by the U.S. to Russian authorities in the early 1990s to be magnanimous in victory and to pay heed to Moscow’s security objectives.

But apart from that, arguably important, region, U.S. exploitation of the “unipolar moment” has perhaps first and foremost consisted of attempts to *institutionalize*(and, where possible, expand)*the world order*of which the U.S. itself has been the key shaper. The list of examples is long and includes the enlargement and further strengthening of NATO; the bolstering of key security alliances around the world; enhancing the institutions underpinning economic globalization and capitalism; ostracizing (and sometimes attacking) recalcitrant regimes; and, more generally, entrenching its ideological hegemony and agenda-setting powers in the world.

Many Neorealists – Kenneth Waltz included – would argue that the United States have gone a bit too far; facing no serious countervailing force, it has set out to expand its influence around the globe in too hasty a fashion – with the years 2001–2009, under George W. Bush, representing the high-water mark of what some would call slightly counterproductive unilateralism and hegemonic endeavors that effectively risk(ed) overstretching even the impressive resources of the American unipole. Personally, I’m not so sure. Institutionalizing the spoils of the victor is not necessarily unwise – and the mistakes of Afghanistan and Iraq are not irredeemable; eventually Washington wisely chose to cut its losses in both these cases. And, despite the current financial predicament, there is as yet little evidence to suggest that unipolarity is anywhere close to eroding due to overextension, as Waltz has readily admitted as well.

Nevertheless, in terms of major-power contests, power balancing, and security competition, the era into which we are about to enter will undoubtedly be far more interesting than the previous two decades. This brings me to the second danger that follows from the existence of unchecked power, according to Neorealism, namely the response of other major states in the system, the brief discussion of which will also conclude this article.

One of the big – if not *the* biggest – debates among International Relations scholars in the last twenty years have been exactly this: How will the other major powers respond to U.S. unipolarity and U.S. hegemony? (Under unipolarity, Waltz refers to secondary states as “major powers” rather than “great powers,” the U.S. being the only state entitled to the latter label.) Specifically, will the other major powers attempt to balance the mighty American power?

That is the expectation of Neorealists. Indeed, in the early 1990s Waltz himself anticipated that balancing would soon occur on a major scale. He was wrong, however; the overall evidence points to the *absence* of balancing throughout the first 10–15 years of that period: Unipolarity and American hegemony have as yet not been seriously challenged. The most convincing (among several) explanation of why this non-balancing has characterized the unipolar moment so far centers, *inter alia*, on the argument that U.S. power has been – and still is – so overwhelming that balancing is largely rendered impossible, ineffective, and indeed also quite risky considering that it might lead to serious confrontations with the superpower at a time where no other state can confidently expect to pose a real military challenge against it.

Waltz and Neorealists should nonetheless be exonerated. They got the timing slightly wrong; real balancing did not occur on any significant scale in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, history sometimes moves with the pace of a glacier, and moreover, the picture has changed somewhat in the last few years – partly in the form of the resurgence and assertiveness of Russia, but in particular with the rise of China and its conscious translation of speedy economic growth into military capacity *specifically aimed at countering U.S. military power in East Asia*.

At present, real balancing *is* occurring. It will also very likely continue to occur. And for an explanation of why this will happen, we need not go much further than to Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*. In an anarchic world, where interests collide, where survival and security constitute the basic goals of states, where the distribution of power largely shapes what states can and cannot do and whom they have reasons to fear and not fear, the biggest gamble one takes is to remain oblivious to the risk posed by unchecked power. America’s power is as yet unchecked and unbalanced. Waltz tells us that this will eventually change, though perhaps only slowly. We should in any case listen to him, because he is in all likelihood in the right.