Neorealism

POSC 1020 – Introduction to International Relations

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Goal for Today

Discuss neorealism (and everything that's wrong with it).

Classical Realism

Drawn from Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*.

- Heavily inspired by Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*.
    - Anarchy reduces "Man" to his "nature".
- The state, *viz*, "Man" is hardwired to will for power.
- End result: bellum omnium contra omnes (war of all against all)

The state (i.e. "Man") pursues power to dominate his rivals.

- Nothing can be done to avoid this.

Neorealism

Neorealism (aka "structural realism") remains the most prominent, powerful approach in security studies. The argument, in a nutshell:

- The *structure* of the international system, not "human nature", forces states to pursue power.
- Anarchy has a single logic that forces a state to see means to protect itself.
- Power is the *means*, not the end.

Neorealism's Assumptions

Neorealism is built on a few core assumptions (think: parsimony).

1. The international system is anarchic.
2. All states possess some type of offensive military capability.
3. States can never be 100% certain of other state's offensive intentions.
4. States are motivated to *survive*.
5. States are rational/strategic actors.

These assumptions differ slightly from what your book presents.

- They actually come from Mearsheimer (2001).
- Most neorealist scholarship has done a poor job outlining its assumptions, as we shall see.

Neorealism's Main Conclusions

All told, these assumptions imply states seek a **balance of power** in the international system.

- States eventually fear each other.
- This fear can never be inconsequential.
- International politics becomes a self-help world under anarchy.
- Power becomes the means to security.

Power-seeking leads to the famous problem of the **security dilemma**.

Neorealism's Hypotheses

Several hypotheses follow these arguments.

- Bipolar systems are more stable than multipolar systems.
- States engage in balancing behavior, such that power distributions converge on a balance.
- States mimic, or echo, one another's behavior.

As we will see, these explanations are flawed in multiple ways.

- The assumptions do not logically imply the hypotheses.
- The empirical record does not vindicate the hypotheses.

Bipolarity and Stability

Polarity constitutes possibly *the* core argument of neorealism:

- Bipolarity: peace
- Multipolarity: war

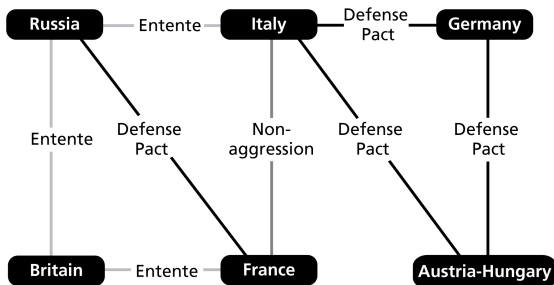International system was multipolar before the Cold War

- The period saw multiple systemic wars dating back to 1648.
- Cold War was only point in history in which the two largest powers did not (directly) fight each other.

An Example of Multipolarity

**FIGURE 4.2** — **European Great Power Alliance Commitments, 1914**

After World War I was over, many experts maintained that rigid alliance commitments created a trip wire that allowed the 1914 crisis between Austria-Hungary and Serbia to escalate into a global conflict. However, a look at the great power alliance ties in June 1914, just before World War I erupted, suggests that in fact the boundaries demarcating commitments were far from clear.

An Example of Bipolarity

FIGURE 4.3	European Great Power Alliance Commitments, 1989
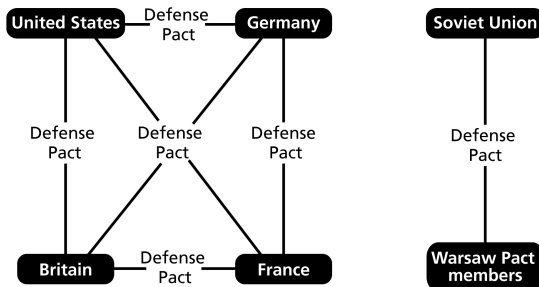
The bipolar structure of major power alliances during the cold war contained little ambiguity.

The Hypotheses Do Not Follow the Assumptions

By itself, neorealism's assumptions do not imply the relationship between polarity and stability.

- i.e. "certainty" may embolden risk-taking, "uncertainty" may foster risk-aversion.
- We'd have to add another assumption: all states are equally risk-averse in the face of certainty.

If we relax this even a little bit, we've violated core assumptions of neorealism.

- Violates the unitary actor assumption
- Reduces hypothesized effect of polarity on stability to zero.
- States no longer mimic each other.

The Polarity-Stability Relationship

Consider a world with A and B in which there are 300 units of "power".

- A: 150
- B: 150

Such a bipolar system would be stable.

- Neither A nor B could destroy each other.

The Polarity-Stability Relationship

Consider a different world with A and B with 300 units of power.

- A: 151
- B: 149

Neorealism assumes this should be stable, but A could destroy B.

- Only when power is perfectly balanced does bipolarity produce peace.

Objection: power is balanced "enough".

- However, this would deny neorealism's own claim. Bipolarity is supposed to reduce uncertainty!

The Polarity-Stability Relationship

Consider a five-country system as follows (with 300 units of power).

- A: 75
- B: 74
- C: 75
- D: 74
- E: 2

System 1 is **stable**.

- No one can be eliminated, not even E.

The Polarity-Stability Relationship

Consider another five-country system:

- A: 78
- B: 74
- C: 73
- D: 73
- E: 2

This system is **unstable**. E is an **inessential actor**.

The Polarity-Stability Relationship

However, that doesn't mean multipolarity is unstable?

- A could destroy E by itself.
- B, C, and/or D could approach A with a deal to facilitate the elimination of E.

A new system: A (150), B (39), C (38), and D (73).

- This is another stable multipolar system.
- B-C-D is a **blocking coalition**.

Bipolarity, Uncertainty, and Stability

Can we salvage the bipolarity-stability argument if we relax the "uncertainty" claim?

- After all, our simple example may not do justice to understanding the real world.

Assume A thinks there's chance p it could eliminate B.

- $p = $ A's resources/(B's resources + A's resources)

A does not attack B if:

$$p(U_{AW}) + (1 - p)(U_{AL}) < U_{ASQ}$$

... where $U_{AW} = $ utility for A winning and $U_{AL} = $ utility for A losing.

Bipolarity, Uncertainty, and Stability

Assume $U_{AW} = 1$ and $U_{AL} = 0$. When would A attack B?

$$\begin{array}{rcl}
p(U_{AW}) + (1-p)(U_{AL}) & > & U_{ASQ} \\
pU_{AW} + U_{AL} - pU_{AL} & > & U_{ASQ} \\
pU_{AW} - pU_{AL} & > & U_{ASQ} - U_{AL} \\
p & > & \dfrac{U_{ASQ} - U_{AL}}{U_{AW} - U_{AL}} \\
p & > & \dfrac{U_{ASQ} - 0}{1 - 0} \\
p & > & U_{ASQ}
\end{array}$$

A attacks B if the probability of winning is greater than A's utility of the status quo.

Bipolarity, Uncertainty, and Stability

Assume a world of 300 units of power.
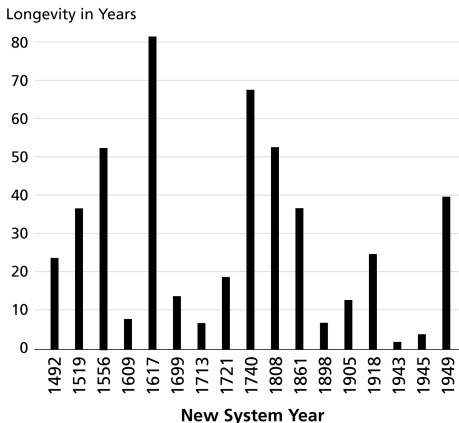
- A: 60
- B: 240

When would A attack B?

- $p = \frac{60}{60+240} = .2$
- If A is really dissatisfied with the status quo (i.e. $U_{ASQ} < .2$), it'll attack B.

This is intuitive but it violates a neorealist assumption of security-oriented behavior!

Is There Anything Special about Bipolarity?

FIGURE 4.4   Stability of International Systems


Longevity in Years

A survey of systems over the past five hundred years makes clear that, contrary to the claims of neorealists and other structural theorists, the bipolar major power system that began in 1945 and ended in 1989 was not especially long lived.

Essential and Inessential States

1. Essential states never become inessential.
2. Essential states are never eliminated from the international system.
   - Square this with USSR, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Empire.
3. Inessential states never become essential states.
4. Inessential states are always eliminated from the international system.
   - Square this with the United States.

Does Uncertainty Increase War?

FIGURE 4.5 **War and Uncertainty**
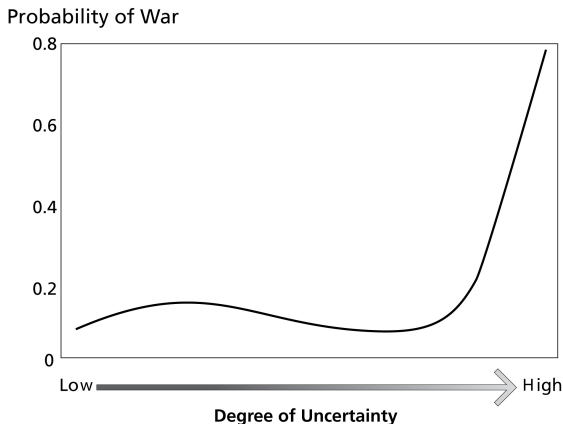
Except at extreme levels, it is not true that uncertainty increases the risk of war. Moderate levels of uncertainty actually produce less war than do low levels of uncertainty.

Conclusion

Neorealism purports to be a parsimonious explanation of international politics.

- It's also the most common approach in security studies.

However, neorealism suffers from major flaws.

- The assumptions do not imply the hypotheses.
- The hypotheses, however derived, are not supported by the empirical record.

Neorealism is both a false and useless paradigm to explaining international relations.

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