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Collecting to the Core — International Relations

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

For most of its history, the predominant concern of the study of international relations (IR) has been to analyze and explain the nature of the international system of states and their interactions, particularly why states frequently engage in violent conflicts and war. The field of IR has produced many ambitious attempts at building theories to explain these interactions, and the debate has been vigorous and wide-ranging. While the literature of IR theory is voluminous, two seminal works by **Kenneth Waltz** stand out as classics that belong in every political science collection. **Waltz's** 1959 *Man, the State, and War* and his *Theory of International Politics*, written two decades later, had a profound impact on the subsequent scholarship of IR.¹⁻² **Waltz's** arguments were concise and forceful and strongly shaped the contours of the debate in IR for more than two decades, influencing a generation of IR scholars. These works continue to occupy a prominent place in most introductory IR courses.

In *Man, the State, and War*, **Waltz** pioneered the application of "levels of analysis" in explaining the causes of war and international relations more generally. **Waltz** posited that explanations of war could be grouped at three distinct levels or "images," as he called them. "First image" explanations of war focus on human nature and individual psychology. Explanations at this level argue that war is a result of human selfishness, greed, evil, miscalculation, or other individual factors. "Second image" theories look instead to the internal structure of states to explain war. For example, wars may be caused by despotic or imperialist states looking to expand their territory, by states attempting to overcome internal strife by uniting against an external enemy, or by domestic political pressures that may make it costly for states to pursue peaceful diplomatic solutions.

Without dismissing the contributions of explanations at these levels, **Waltz** forcefully argued that they were incomplete without a consideration of the international environment in which states operate, his "third image." For **Waltz**, states exist in an anarchic international system. It is anarchic, because there is no uni-

versal government to enforce a system of law or compel obedience to a set of shared rules or norms of behavior. In this **Hobbesian** state of nature, each sovereign state is forced to rely on its own power and capabilities to secure its interests. In a system of many sovereign states with competing interests, conflict leading to war becomes inevitable, because there is no global authority to prevent some states from using force to achieve their aims. Since the preeminent desire of all states is to ensure their own survival, all states must account for this existential threat and prepare accordingly.

Of course, this insight was not new. In explaining the origins of the **Peloponnesian War**, **Thucydides** argued more than 2,000 years ago that the "growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable."³ However, **Waltz's** point was precisely that anarchy is the most important and enduring feature of the international system, and he traced attention to its consequences through the writings of numerous statesmen and philosophers, including **Thucydides**, **Rousseau**, **Machiavelli**, and **Clausewitz**. The first and second levels of analysis can explain the forces driving states' interests and policies, but without considering the effect of international anarchy, "it is impossible to assess their importance or predict their results."⁴ Furthermore, failing to consider the international environment leads to erroneous conclusions about preventing war, essentially saying "To end war, improve men; or: To end war, improve states."⁵ However, as long as there is the possibility that some men or states may not improve and will choose to resort to force to accomplish their goals, all states will be forced to consider war as an option to ensure their survival.

In *Theory of International Politics*, **Waltz** extended this argument into a more ambitious attempt at theorizing the major patterns of international politics. **Waltz** sought to explain various "laws" of state behavior by formulating explanatory theories rooted in the structure of the international system. Much of **Waltz's** argument revolved around defining the concepts of system and structure and showing the necessity for systemic theories in explaining international relations. **Waltz** defined a system as a set of interacting units or parts (in this case states) and a structure, which he defined as a set of conditions or forces that limit the variety of behaviors and outcomes that occur in the system. In social and political systems, structure constrains behavior indirectly through

processes of socialization and competition among the units. As the units independently act and react to one another in a shared environment, their interactions generate pressures that promote a similarity of behaviors and outcomes — for example, individuals may be ostracized for violating group norms or firms may go bankrupt if they fail to emulate the practices of successful competitors.

Structures thus define the arrangement of the units and their relation to each other in the system. In the international system, **Waltz** argued, three key elements define this structure. First, the organization of the units is decentralized and anarchic; in the absence of a central authority "whether those units live, prosper, or die depends on their own efforts."⁶ Second, the principal units of the system are

states, which are functionally similar, even though their interests and capabilities differ widely. States are not the only actors that matter in international politics, **Waltz** argues, but they are the major ones, and it is their interactions that drive the structural dynamics of the international

system. Third, the structure is defined by how power is distributed across the units in the system. Changes in the number of great powers (e.g., a change from a bipolar to a multipolar system) will change our expectations about state behavior and the outcomes of international interactions. For **Waltz**, the structure of the anarchic international system produces regular patterns of behavior: to ensure their survival, states will seek to maximize their power and will seek to counter the rise of potential aggressors or hegemonic states, leading to a balance of power in the system.

Waltz's work formed the basis for what came to be known in IR as structural realism or neorealism. His emphasis on structural forces shaping state behavior thus distinguished his work from the classical realist tradition in IR. This tradition — exemplified by **Hans Morgenthau's** classic *Politics among Nations*, first published in 1948 — was also concerned with anarchy and state power, but it traced the source of power politics in the international realm to the fundamental role of human nature.⁷ "Human nature, in which the laws of politics have their roots, has not changed" since antiquity, **Morgenthau** declared, and "the tendency to dominate, in particular, is an element of all human associations."⁸ Furthermore, while society "restrains aspirations for individual power within the national community," it "encourages



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and glorifies the tendencies of the great mass of the population, frustrated in its individual power drives, to identify itself with the nation's struggle for power on the international scene."⁹

In contrast, **Waltz's** structural realism was able to explain recurrent patterns of international outcomes without the need to assume a universal lust for power or to examine the character of individual states. The structure of the international system "constrains [states] from some actions [and] disposes them toward others."¹⁰ To take a current example, in **Waltz's** theoretical framework, Iran's drive for nuclear weapons is not the irrational policy of "mad mullahs" belonging to an "axis of evil," but rather an attempt to assuage its own security fears. "In no other region of the world does a lone, unchecked nuclear state exist. It is Israel's nuclear arsenal, not Iran's desire for one, that has contributed most to the current crisis."¹¹ **Waltz** argues that letting Iran get the bomb would produce stability, because "by reducing imbalances in military power, new nuclear states generally produce more regional and international stability, not less...Power, after all, begs to be balanced."¹²

Structural realism was not and is not the only approach to IR, of course. Another prominent approach, liberalism, emphasized the possibilities for harmony and cooperation between states facilitated through international organizations, institutions, and laws. Disparaged during the interwar period as naively utopian and dangerously unrealistic (epitomized by the failure of the **League of Nations** to prevent **WWII**), liberalism saw a major resurgence in the 1960s and '70s that was driven by interest in increasing economic ties between Western states, the growing importance of non-state actors (like NGOs and multinational companies), and the deepening political and economic integration among erstwhile enemies in Europe. This "new" liberalism (neoliberalism) argued that Western states existed in a condition of "complex interdependence" characterized by a web of economic, social, and other ties that diminished the importance of military security and the relevance of force as a policy option.¹³

But the forceful articulation of anarchy's central importance in *Theory of International Politics* influenced even liberal writers. **Robert Keohane** — creator, with **Joseph Nye**, of the concept of complex interdependence — advanced a modified liberal argument in his influential 1984 *After Hegemony* that accepted structural realism's key assumptions about anarchy, the centrality of states, and the role of power.¹⁴ But in contrast to realist arguments, he showed that cooperation among self-interested states is possible through international institutions or regimes ("sets of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures" in a specific area like trade or aviation).¹⁵ Realists argued that these kinds of cooperative arrangements are created by dominant powers to reinforce their own power and interests, but that in the absence of a hegemon, they

break down as security fears trump interest in cooperation. Using both logic and historical evidence, **Keohane** argued that this pessimism wasn't warranted. Even after hegemony, regimes persist because states find them useful in lowering the costs of negotiating, monitoring, and enforcing mutually beneficial agreements.

There were other critiques of **Waltz's** structural realist theory, many of which attacked realism for an overly simplistic view of international politics that ignored other important actors and forces at work. They were right, of course, but **Waltz** never argued that realism provides a complete picture of international relations. Rather, he argued that theories are necessarily abstractions from reality, simplifications "that lay bare the essential elements in play and indicate the necessary relations of cause and interdependency — or suggest where to look for them."¹⁶ And as events in Ukraine have recently demonstrated, one of those "essential elements in play" is an anarchic international system where "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."¹⁷ 🌱

Endnotes

1. **Waltz, Kenneth N.** *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, 2nd ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.*
 2. **Waltz, Kenneth N.** *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1979.*
 3. **Thucydides.** *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, edited by **Robert B. Strassler**. Translated by **Richard Crawley**. New York: Free Press, 2008, Book I, par. 23, p. 16.*
 4. *Man, the State, and War*, 238.
 5. *Ibid.*, 233.
 6. *Theory of International Politics*, 91.
 7. **Morgenthau, Hans J.**, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2006.*
 8. *Ibid.*, 4, 39.
 9. *Ibid.*, 119.
 10. *Theory of International Politics*, 65.
 11. **Waltz, Kenneth.** "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb." *Foreign Affairs*. 91.4 July/August 2012. Accessed March 19, 2014. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137731/kenneth-n-waltz/why-iran-should-get-the-bomb>
 12. *Ibid.*; For a more complete debate on nuclear proliferation, see **Scott D. Sagan** and **Kenneth N. Waltz.** *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate*, 3rd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2013.*
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 14. **Keohane, Robert O.** *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005.*
 15. *Ibid.*, 59.
 16. *Theory of International Politics*, 10.
 17. *The Landmark Thucydides*, Book V, par. 89, 352.
- *Editor's note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.

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