

of you would like to throw the pistols out of the window, yet it defeats the intelligence to find a way of doing it' (1949: 89–90). The 'security dilemma' (Jervis 1978; Glaser 1997) has a similar logic. 'Given the irreducible uncertainty about the intentions of others, security measures taken by one actor are perceived by others as threatening; the others take steps to protect themselves; these steps are then interpreted by the first actor as confirming its initial hypothesis that the others are dangerous; and so on in a spiral of illusory fears and "unnecessary" defenses' (Snyder 1997: 17).

Anarchic pressures towards balancing and against cooperation are reinforced by the relativity of power. Power is control over outcomes, 'the ability to do or effect something' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). It is less a matter of absolute capabilities – how much 'stuff' one has – than of relative capabilities. Facing an unarmed man, a tank is pretty powerful. The same tank facing a squadron of carrier-based attack jets is not very powerful at all.

The relativity of power requires states to 'be more concerned with relative strength than with absolute advantage' (Waltz 1979: 106). Bandwagoning seeks absolute gains, aligning early with a rising power to gain a share of the profits of victory. Balancing pursues relative gains.

Relative gains concerns dramatically impede cooperation. One must consider not only whether one gains but, more importantly, whether one's gains outweigh those of others (who, in anarchy, must be seen as potential adversaries). Even predatory cooperation is problematic unless it maintains the relative capabilities of the cooperating parties. In fact, states may be satisfied with conflicts that leave them absolutely worse off – so long as their adversaries are left even worse off.

## Polarity

The preceding two sub-sections have considered some of the theoretical implications of anarchy, the first element of structure (ordering principle). If, following Waltz, we see minimal functional differentiation in anarchic orders, the other principal contribution of structural realism should lie in its analysis of the impact of the distribution of capabilities. How does polarity, the number of great powers in a system, influence international relations?

Unipolarity has become a hot topic since the end of the Cold War. Structural logic (Layne 1993; Mastanduno 1997) suggests that unipolarity is unstable. Balancing will facilitate the rise of new great powers, much as a rising hegemon (e.g. Napoleonic France) provokes a 'grand coalition' that unites the other great powers. (Wohlforth 1999, however, rejects this argument. More generally, see Kapstein and Mastanduno 1999.) But whatever the resilience of unipolarity, while it persists hegemony (and

resistance to it) will give international relations a very different character from systems with two or more great powers.

Schweller (1998) has shown that tripolar systems have a distinctive structural logic. And systems with very many or no great powers – the two are effectively equivalent – have a different structural logic than multipolar systems with a few (four, five, or a couple more) great powers. Systems with a one, two, three, or a few great powers are monopolistic or oligopolistic. Those with many or no great powers are more like competitive markets.

Most of the attention, however, has focused on the differences between bipolar and multipolar orders. For example, conflicts in the periphery pose little threat to the general bipolar balance. In multipolar systems, where power is divided among more actors, a change in the periphery of the same absolute magnitude may have a noticeable impact on the general balance.

The significance of such a difference, however, is obscure. Should peripheral conflicts be more frequent in bipolar systems because they are less destabilizing and thus ‘safer’ (for the great powers)? Or should they be less frequent because there are no compelling reasons to become involved? There is thus considerable disagreement over the relative stability of bipolar and multipolar systems. Deutsch and Singer (1964), Waltz (1964) and Rosecrance (1966) argue, respectively, for bipolarity, multipolarity, and ‘bi-multipolarity’ (both/neither). More sophisticated accounts try to incorporate, for example, the impact of different forms of alignment (Christensen and Snyder 1990) and changes across time in the distribution of capabilities (Copeland 1996). Unfortunately, empirical tests are constrained by the fact that in 2,500 years of Western history there have been as few as four bipolar systems (Athens–Sparta in the fifth century BCE, Carthage–Rome in the third century BCE, the Hapsburg–Bourbon rivalry in the sixteenth century and the United States–Soviet Union in the twentieth century) (Copeland 1996).

### The nature of structural predictions

Part of the problem with the debate on the relative stability of bipolar and multipolar orders is that the question itself, posed as it is in structural terms, is probably misguided. For example, a rising ‘revisionist’ or ‘revolutionary’ power with a high propensity for risk poses very different problems than risk-averse, satisfied ‘status quo’ powers. Such considerations fall outside the scope of Waltz’ structural theory (although they are important to many classical realist theories, e.g. Kissinger 1957; Morgenthau 1948/1954/1973: Chapters 4, 5). If their effects characteristically are as great or greater than those of polarity, there can be no

answer to the (structural) question of the relative stability of bipolar and multipolar orders.

Structure pushes states in certain directions. It does not mechanically determine outcomes. States are also subject to numerous other pressures and influences. Sometimes 'exogenous variables' are decisive in determining outcomes. This does not make polarity or anarchy unimportant. It just happens that other forces are sometimes more powerful.

The predictions of structural realism are, as Waltz repeatedly notes, 'indeterminate' (1979: 124, 122, 71; 1986: 343). Theories in the social sciences typically identify law-like regularities rather than exceptionless deterministic laws. They identify forces that press in a particular direction. It is the job of the analyst, not the theorist, to determine where a particular theoretical logic applies in the real world. Whether a 'good theory', in the sense of a rigorous logic of interaction, is a 'good' theory to apply in any particular case depends not on the theory but on contingent facts about the world.

If a theoretically predicted outcome does not occur because the assumptions of the theory are not satisfied in the case under consideration, such a 'failure' is entirely attributable to the analyst. If the underlying assumptions are satisfied but the predicted results do not occur, the failure is attributable to the theory. The most interesting situation, however, is when the theoretically predicted pressures operate but are overwhelmed by other forces.

The significance of this third type of theoretical 'failure' depends on which exogenous variables prevail, how often and in what kinds of cases. We will also want to know how powerful those exogenous forces must be to overcome the effects of the endogenous variables. If endogenous variables almost always hold up against all but the strongest expressions of a few exogenous variables, the theory is extremely powerful. If a wide range of relatively weak exogenous variables regularly swamp the effects of the endogenous variables, the theory is not exactly 'wrong' – the predicted pressures do still operate – but neither is it very useful.

Every theory must make simplifying assumptions. Fruitful assumptions abstract from factors that are typically less important to determining outcomes than those highlighted by the theory. Many of the disagreements between realists and their critics can be seen as, in effect, disputes about the frequency and significance of realism's failures of the third type.

## **Motives matter**

How far we can go with purely structural theories – that is, with anarchy, the distribution of capabilities and nothing else? Not very far, I will

argue. State motives are essential, as suggested by their centrality to the Prisoners' Dilemma and the security dilemma.

### Abstracting from or assuming motives

Waltz claims to 'abstract from every attribute of states except their capabilities' (1979: 99), as suggested by his talk of 'units', abstract, characterless concentrations of capabilities. In fact, however, his theory, by his own admission, 'is based on assumptions about states', 'built up from the assumed motivations of states' (1979: 118; 1996: 54). But there is a huge difference between abstracting from all particulars and assuming certain ones. And the substance of realist assumptions about states accounts for much of the distinctive character of the theory.

Anarchy alone does not produce Hobbes' war of all against all. It arises from equal individuals driven by competition, diffidence and glory interacting in anarchy. Homeric heroes seeking glory through great deeds, Hobbesian egoists driven by a fear of violent death, Nietzschean individuals driven by a will to power and *homo economicus* may behave very differently in the same anarchic structure. As Butterfield puts it, 'wars would hardly be likely to occur if all men were Christian saints, competing with one another in nothing, perhaps, save self-renunciation' (McIntire 1979: 73).

Even Waltz, despite repeated claims to the contrary, admits this. 'Structurally we can describe and understand the pressures states are subject to. We cannot predict how they will react to the pressures without knowledge of their internal dispositions' (1979: 71). To abstract from all attributes of states (other than capabilities) leaves the theory no predictive or explanatory power. Thus in practice Waltz, like other realists, relies heavily on knowledge of or assumptions about the interests and intentions of states.

If assumptions about state motivation are simple, clear, and coherent, and if they apply to all units in the system, the resulting theory will still be very strongly structural. The easiest way to do this would be to assume a single motive. States 'are unitary actors with a single motive – the wish to survive' (Waltz 1996: 54; compare Spykman 1942: 18; Morgenthau 1948/1954/1973: 9; Kissinger 1977: 46).

But if states seek only survival – as they must if survival is the sole motive assumed in the theory – there will be no aggression. Introducing acquisitive motives makes the theory more 'realistic'. But allowing that 'some states may persistently seek goals that they value more highly than survival' (Waltz 1979: 92) admits that such states may rationally choose *not* to balance. And in practice Waltz introduces many additional motives that fatally undermine the logical coherence of his theory.

Waltz claims that states 'at minimum, seek their own preservation and, at maximum, drive for universal domination' (1979: 118). Survival, however, is not a small quantity of domination, nor is domination a surplus of survival. And the area 'between' them involves neither a lot of survival nor a little domination but something else – actually, many other things.

'The first concern of states is ... to maintain their positions in the system' (Waltz 1979: 126). Preserving one's relative position, however, is neither survival nor domination. It is obviously inconsistent with domination (except for hegemons) and may require risking survival. And the risk to survival may be even greater if, as Mearsheimer argues, states 'aim to maximize their relative power position over other states' (Mearsheimer 1994/5: 11).

But Waltz does not stop here. He also claims that states seek wealth, advantage and flourishing (1993: 54; 1986: 337; 1979: 112), peaceful coexistence (1979: 144) and peace and prosperity; (1979: 144, 175) that they want to protect their sovereignty, autonomy and independence; (1979: 204, 107, 104) and that they act out of pride and the feeling of being put upon (1993: 66, 79). Predicted behaviour, however, will vary dramatically among states seeking to survive, maintain their relative position, improve their welfare, respond to slights, or achieve universal domination. Yet Waltz, despite his reputation for rigour, shifts between these motives entirely without theoretical justification, and with no appreciation of the deep incoherence it introduces into the theory.

But even if states seek only survival, without knowing who holds which particular capabilities and their intentions – as well as who we are and what we value – we simply cannot say whether there is a threat against which to balance. Thus Stephen Walt (1987), one of Waltz's leading students, has introduced balance of threat theory: states balance not against (all) external capabilities but against threats, which are defined as much by intentions as by capabilities. Compare American behaviour towards British, French and Chinese (or Israeli, Indian and North Korean) nuclear arsenals, which weigh about equally in the global distribution of capabilities.

Unfortunately, realism has had very little to say about threats. And structural realism in principle can have nothing to say about threat (as opposed to capabilities), leaving the crucial explanatory variable completely outside the scope of the theory. Thus John Vasquez (1998: 254–7) argues that balance of threat is theoretically degenerative, an ad hoc addition to the theory inconsistent with its basic propositions but necessary to 'rescue' it from the theoretical failures inherent in those basic premises.