Offensive and defensive realism

Predictions based solely on anarchy and polarity are so indeterminate that they are rarely of significant value. If realist theories are to be of substantial utility to analysts and policy makers, additional variables must be included – not in the ad hoc and incoherent way that Waltz appeals to multiple motives, but rigorously integrated into one or more theoretical models.

Survival and domination can be seen as extreme statements of defensive and expansive orientations. The literature on offensive and defensive realism (see, e.g., Lynn-Jones 1995; Labs 1997: 7–17; Zakaria 1998: 25–42; Taliaferro 2000/1; Snyder 2002) in effect revives the classical realist distinction between status quo and revolutionary or revisionist powers and develops two different realist theories from these contrasting orientations. For example, Michael Mastanduno (1991) argues that 'realists expect nation-states to avoid gaps that favor their partners, but not necessarily to maximize gaps in their own favor. Nation-states are not "gap maximizers." They are, in Joseph Grieco's terms, "defensive positionalists." ' (Mastanduno 1991: 79, n. 13). John Mearsheimer, by contrast, argues that 'states seek to survive under anarchy by maximizing their power relative to other states' (1990: 12). His states are 'short-term power maximizers' (1994/5: 82); that is, *offensive* positionalists. As Fareed Zakaria puts it, 'the best solution to the perennial problem of the uncertainty of international life is for a state to increase its control over that environment through the persistent expansion of its political interests abroad' (1998: 20).

This internal debate among realists is often presented (e.g. Labs 1997) as a matter of choosing 'the best' or most truly realist assumption/ theory. We saw above, though, that a world of defensive positionalists would be unrealistically peaceful. Yet unless most states are defensive positionalists, international relations would be a Hobbesian war of all against all – which it simply is not. Realism would seem to need *both* assumptions to retain the scope to which most realists aspire.

There are at least two ways to proceed. Offensive and defensive realism could be seen as abstract logics of interaction rather than substantive claims about the nature of states (compare Snyder 2002: 172). The contrasting predictions of the two models can be used both to guide policy or analysis and to facilitate further inquiry into the objectives of the parties (by inferring intentions from theoretically predicted behaviour). The other alternative would be to include offensive and defensive motives in a single theory that explains when each orientation should be expected to prevail. Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) might be read as an effort to explain when, why, and how, offensive

motivations characteristically take priority in the behaviour of great powers.

Process, institutions and change

Explicitly introducing state motives is only one of many possible strategies for improving the determinacy and range of realist theories. In this section, we examine Glenn Snyder's introduction of what he calls 'process variables' into structural realist theorizing. We then turn to institutions, norms and identities, variables that have traditionally been denigrated by realists. This section concludes by addressing the issue of change in international relations, a topic of considerable importance that arises out of a discussion of the importance of process and institutions in the discipline.

Process variables

Snyder tries to produce more determinate realist explanatory theories by introducing a series of 'process variables'. This in effect involves rethinking the nature of system-level theorizing and expanding it from Waltz's extraordinarily narrow structuralism.

A system is a bounded space defined by (a) units that interact with each other much more intensively than they interact with those outside the system; (b) the structure within which they interact; and (c) the characteristic interactions of the units within that structure. Process variables focus on patterns of interaction that are neither structural nor at the level of the unit – that is, are systemic but not structural.

Consider *alignment*. States may stand in relations of amity or enmity, seeing themselves as allies or adversaries. (Other relationships – most obviously, neutrality – are regular features of international relations, but allies and adversaries is a useful preliminary simplification.) States rarely fear all external concentrations of power, nor is their fear based solely on material capabilities. States, for example, are more likely to balance against adversaries than allies. Conversely, relative gains considerations may be substantially muted among allies, as illustrated by US support for European integration in the 1950s and 1960s.

Both allies and adversaries may have common or competing interests, which also help to make predictions more determinate. Common interests facilitate cooperation – although, of course, anarchy and relative gains always work against successful cooperation. Conversely, competing interests may be impede or prevent balancing against a common enemy.

Waltzian structural realism allows us only to predict *that* balances will form. Taking alignment, interests and other process variables into account allows us to predict which particular balances are likely or unlikely to develop. 'If, as Waltz says, system structures only "shape and shove", [process variables] give a more decided push' (Snyder 1997: 32).

The cost, however, is greater complexity and less generality. Greater depth typically requires a sacrifice in breadth. The additional variables that add depth, richness and precision produce a theory with a narrower range. Structure influences all states. Particular process variables influence only some parts of the system.

Parsimony and scope are great theoretical virtues; to explain everything with a single variable is the theorist's utopia. It is important that we appreciate the attractions of Waltz's ability to say some very important things about international relations, more or less anywhere and any time, based only on anarchy and the distribution of capabilities. Such a theory, within the domain of its operation, has considerable power. Snyder, however, argues – correctly, in my view – that Waltz is guilty of 'excessive parsimony, in the sense that the explanatory gain from some further elaboration would exceed the costs in reduced generality' (1996: 167).

This does not, however, sacrifice system-level theorizing. Alignment, for example, is about the *distribution* of amity and enmity and thus no less systemic than the distribution of capabilities. The system level of theorizing is not restricted to structure (which is only one of the defining elements of a system). Similarly, offensive and defensive realists usually treat motives by assumption or stipulation, identifying abstract kinds of actors and thus still functioning at the level of the system. To the extent that anarchy or distribution of capabilities shapes the choice of offensive or defensive objectives, the theory may even be rigorously structural.

Norms, institutions and identities

Snyder also identifies what he calls structural modifiers, 'system-wide influences that are structural in their inherent nature but not potent enough internationally to warrant that description' (1996: 169). He looks at military technology and norms and institutions. On the role of military technology, consider, for example, the special character of nuclear weapons, which Waltz (however inconsistently) uses to explain the Cold War peace (1990), or the impact of the relative advantage of offensive or defensive forces on conflict and the propensity to war (e.g. Glaser and Kaufmann 1998; Van Evera 1998). Here I will briefly consider norms and institutions.

Norms and institutions are clearly structural in domestic society. 'They create the hierarchy of power and differentiation of function that

are the hallmarks of a well-ordered domestic polity, but that are present only rudimentarily in international society. In principle, they are also structural internationally' (Snyder 1996: 169).

As both this quote and the earlier reference to potency make clear, the actual international impact of norms and institutions is an empirical, not a theoretical question. Shared values and institutions may in particular cases shape and shove actors even more strongly than (Waltzian) structure. Consider not only the European Union but also the Nordic countries and the US–Canadian relationship. The literature on pluralistic security communities (e.g. Adler and Barnett 1998) emphasizes the potential impact of institutions, values and identities even in the high politics of international security. In a somewhat different but largely complementary vein, see the discussion of regional security relations in (Buzan and Waever 2003).

Even at the global level, norms and institutions can have considerable influence. Sovereignty and other rights of states are a matter of mutual recognition, not capabilities. Power alone will not even tell us which of their rights states actually enjoy. It simply is untrue that, as the Athenians at Melos put it, 'the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must' (Thucydides 1982: Book V, Chapter 89). The strong are often constrained by the rights of even weak states. They may, of course, violate the rules of sovereignty. But predictions based on, say, the norm of non-intervention are no more 'indeterminate' than those based on anarchy or polarity. And it is an empirical not a theoretical question whether the logic of rights or the logic of power more frequently accounts for international behaviour.

Consider also the principle of self-determination, which played a central role in creating scores of new, usually weak, states. Most postcolonial states have survived not through their own power or the power of allies but because of international recognition. Their survival – which offensive realists in particular must find inexplicable – was further enhanced by the effective abolition of aggressive war in the second half of the twentieth century.

Pursuing this line of analysis (see also Buzan, Jones and Little 1993) leads us well into the 'weak' or 'hedged' range of the realist spectrum – or off the scale altogether. Snyder clearly is a realist: he emphasizes anarchy and the struggle for power and is sceptical of the relative power of norms and institutions. But his approach to institutions and norms is unusually open, suggesting interesting conversations with convergent non-realist analyses.

For example, Alexander Wendt (1999: Chapter 6) shows that anarchic orders function very differently when actors see each other as 'enemies' out to destroy each other, 'rivals' who compete but do not threaten

each others' survival and 'friends' who have renounced force in their relations. Realism in effect becomes a special case; what Wendt calls the 'Hobbesian' anarchy of enemies. Sovereignty, understood as rights to territorial integrity and political independence, transforms relations into those among 'Lockean' rivals, with the rivalry having been substantially moderated by the abolition of aggressive war.

Most realists, however, downplay the significance of institutions, as suggested in titles such as 'The False Promise of International Institutions' (Mearsheimer 1994/5) and *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Krasner 1999). Institutions and norms are treated as largely reducible to the material interests of the powerful. They are at best 'intervening variables' that can be expected to have independent effects only in minor issue areas far removed from the struggle for power. (An interesting, and little explored, alternative is represented by the effort of Schweller and Priess 1997 to theorize institutions from within a realist framework.)

Realists are a bit less reluctant to talk about identities – although usually this seems to be done unwittingly. This is most evident in the classical realist distinction between status quo and revisionist powers or the parallel split between offensive and defensive structural realists. But there are many other examples. 'Great power' signifies not merely unparalleled material capabilities but also a managerial role in international society (Bull 1977: Chapter 9; Simpson 2004) and an identity type. Balance of power is also a complex set of institutions (Gulick 1967; Bull 1977: Chapter 4; Cronin 1999: Chapter 1). The sovereign territorial state is a particular system-wide construction of 'unit' identity (Compare Cronin 1999; Reus-Smit 1999). To take a simple example, the attitude towards territory is very different among early modern dynastic sovereigns and late nineteenth- and twentieth-century national/territorial sovereigns. (On the general importance of identity in international political thought see Keene (2005).)

Structural realists, however, have no theoretical basis for incorporating identity. Like Waltz on state motivation, identity conceptions are implicitly, and illicitly, incorporated into an analysis that presents itself in different terms. (Neo-)classical realists do have theoretical space for identity and institutional roles, but few have pursued the issue systematically. One notable exception is Schweller's work on revisionist powers (1994, 1999: 18–23), which aims to meld structural, motivational, and identity elements into a coherent and rigorous realist account.

Constancy and change

Identities, institutions and norms are important for our purposes here not so much because they are central concerns of most realists but because