

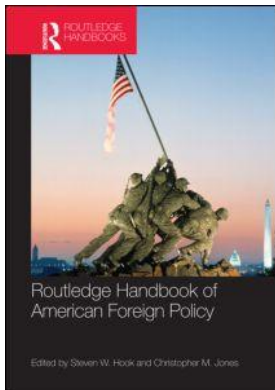
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Part II

Theoretical Perspectives

5

Realism

Henry R. Nau

Realism is still the most venerable—and scrutinized—theoretical approach to the study of international relations and American foreign policy. As such, it is important to know what realism is and what it is not. This chapter discusses briefly how realism contrasts with other approaches such as liberal and constructivist studies of American foreign policy. The bulk of the chapter then deals with the dimensions and differences of four types of realism—classical realism, neo-realism, defensive realism, and offensive realism.

Scholars explain world events in terms of three broad sets of variables—material or power factors, repetitive interactive or institutional factors, and ideational or identity factors. Thus, war may be explained primarily by a power struggle (realism), by the failure of diplomacy (liberalism), or by ideological rivalries (constructivism). These variables in turn come from different levels of analysis. The conflict may emanate from competition for material advantage among individuals or groups at the decision-making level of analysis. Wars may also emanate from the domestic level of analysis—a country bent on an expansionist drive for power, for example, or from the systemic level of analysis—a consequence of the balance of power and security dilemma. At the systemic level, scholars often distinguish between structural and process factors. War is a consequence of polarity (structure or distribution of power) or of flexible and inflexible alliances. Finally, and especially relevant to this volume, analysts focus on the foreign policy level of analysis, a level between the domestic and systemic levels in which individual leaders weigh influences from both levels while competing against one another in a decision-making environment.

All of these substantive and directional dimensions of causation are present in every situation. And they are interrelated with one another, which makes it difficult to determine which variable is causing another. As Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry (1991–1992: 114) observe, “Although it is possible to separate these factors analytically, many of them are in fact highly interconnected. Given these interconnections, it is difficult to identify one element of the system as its core or taproot cause.” Any analysis, therefore, has to be selective and break into the chain of causation by identifying independent and dependent variables and prioritizing the levels of analysis from which they come.¹ These choices are critical because they separate realist from other approaches to the study of foreign policy.

Realist approaches ultimately conclude that power factors influence institutional and ideational factors more than the reverse. They do not exclude institutions or ideas from their analysis; they simply see them largely as consequences of power factors. An actor’s relative

power determines how it behaves in various international relationships and what ideas or identities it espouses in international discourse. Large powers tend to favor free trade; small powers generally do not. Large powers adopt identities that espouse interests of the international system as a whole; small powers generally do not.

Realist studies also start from and include different levels of analysis. Classical realism, for example, starts from the foreign policy level of analysis, while neo-realism starts from the systemic structural level of analysis. Often realism (like other approaches) is elaborated by moving from one level of analysis to another. A frequent elaboration of neo-realism is to add variables from the systemic process level (for example, the role of intentions, strategic interactions and ideology) or from the foreign policy and domestic levels of analysis (for example, misperceptions and domestic politics). As long as these variables are endogenous, that is, influenced primarily by power variables with which neo-realism starts, they elaborate the theory, albeit sacrificing parsimony to explain additional variance or suboptimal outcomes that deviate from the theory's predictions.² But, if non-material variables from any level of analysis become so important that they matter as much as or more than power, the analysis ceases to be realist. Otto Hintze (1975) gives an example of the limits of realism by noting that "the form and spirit of the state's organization will not be determined solely by economic and social relations and clashes of interests, but primarily by the necessities of defense and offense, that is, by the organization of the army and of warfare." We move onto the terrain of neoliberal institutional or ideational (constructivist) studies of American foreign policy, not realist ones (see Keohane 1984, and Nau 2002).

While all four types of realism considered here weigh power variables more heavily than institutional or ideational variables, they do so to different degrees and from different primary levels of analysis. Classical realism gives more weight to domestic ideational and institutional factors and operates primarily from a foreign policy level of analysis. Neo-realism slights both ideational and institutional variables and operates primarily from the systemic structural level of analysis focusing on anarchy and excluding hierarchy or hegemony. Defensive realism also operates primarily at the structural level of analysis but pays more attention to intentions and interactions and in some cases gives independent status to institutional (information) and ideational (state motives) variables. Offensive realism diminishes the importance of ideational and institutional factors but operates at the systemic structural level of analysis that includes hegemony or hierarchy, which neo-realism never really considers.

Classical Realism

Classical realists do not deny that ideational factors are important in the study of foreign policy; they are just frustrated by them. As Hans Morgenthau (1985: 31), the eminent scholar of classical realism, writes, "statesmen and peoples may ultimately seek freedom, security, prosperity, or power itself . . . [and] define their goals in terms of a religious, philosophic, economic, or social ideal." But these state goals are so varied it is impossible to think systematically about foreign policy in terms of goals: "Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim." Thus, a science of international politics can be achieved only by focusing on the pursuit of power which all states engage in, rather than studying goals about which states vigorously disagree.

Classical realists, unlike neo-realists, take domestic ideas or cultures seriously, so seriously in fact that they cannot envision that states will ever agree on a common culture. Thus, states always remain separate and competitive. The structure of anarchy emerges not as an assumption, as in neo-realism, but as a consequence of a world in which culture, morality,

philosophy and other normative factors are always contested and relative. Ideational factors fade into the background, not because they are unimportant but because they are diverse and unchanging; they become epiphenomenal or rationalizations that “render involvement in that contest for power psychologically and morally acceptable to the actors and their audiences” (Hans Morgenthau 1985: 102). In the end, classical realists become rather pessimistic about the role of ideas in foreign policy, worrying that democracies in particular are too eager to put ideas first and disrupt the prudence and moderation needed to manage the pursuit of power (see Kennan 1996). Realists cannot imagine a convergence of state goals (types) around any single philosophy, including democracy, and thus miss completely or are mystified by manifestations of the democratic peace, such as contemporary state relations in the North Atlantic region. Henry Kissinger (2001: 25), while he has no realist explanation for it, concludes that “in relations between the United States and Western Europe and within the Western Hemisphere ... the idealist version of peace based on democracy and economic progress demonstrates its relevance” (see also Huntington 1996).

Classical realists are also sensitive to institutional factors at both the domestic and international levels. Domestic institutions are crucial variables for mobilizing power resources (Zakaria 1998). Some states are more efficient at such power conversion than others. In World War I, for example, Germany was much more efficient in extracting power from its available resources than Russia. Domestic institutions also vary in terms of their effectiveness in processing information and minimizing misperceptions. International institutions and diplomacy matter as well. Morgenthau devotes a considerable part of his seminal book on international politics to diplomacy, law, institutions and peace. Again, however, domestic institutions and international diplomacy are not independent factors in foreign policy. Classical realists, in fact, actually worry, as George Kennan and Henry Kissinger did during the Cold War, that ideological (democracy) and institutional (collective security) factors may become too important and distort foreign policy behavior which should reflect principally power realities.

Because classical realists are equally sensitive to both domestic and international influences, they give preference to the foreign policy level of analysis, which uniquely straddles these two levels.³ Classical realism thus occupies a middle ground between nationalist studies of foreign policy where domestic level influences are seen to dominate and neo-realist studies of foreign policy in which systemic influences dominate. For an example of classical realism, consider George Kennan’s view of the origins and end of the Cold War. In his famous “long telegram,” Kennan argued that Russia’s foreign policy behavior was primarily a product of its historical insecurity, not its communist ideology. As a result, he did not expect the Soviet Union to cooperate in international organizations such as the United Nations and called for a policy of *containment* to counter Soviet expansion without creating any “prestige-engaging showdowns.”

Clearly, for Kennan, power mattered more than ideas and institutions. But power mattered more at the foreign policy than the systemic level of analysis. He later opposed policies that expanded containment to peripheral areas, such as the Third World, because they focused too heavily on “prestige-engaging” competition between the superpowers at the systemic level of analysis. Prudent statesmen should moderate the role of ideological competition at the systemic level, while unit-level factors unique to each country’s values and outside the direct influence of foreign policy largely determine outcomes over the longer run. Kennan (1967) expected the Cold War to end through the mellowing of communism in the Soviet Union and the maintenance of the “health and vigor of our own society” in the United States. Can you see how classical realism “black boxes” diverse domestic values and gives primary influence in international affairs to power rather than ideology (communism) or institutions (the United Nations) and to foreign policy rather than systemic or domestic levels of analysis?

Neo-realism

Neo-realism evolved out of frustrations with the ambiguities and unique focus of classical realism. If every country is unique in the way it assesses and pursues power, how can we predict outcomes and develop a science of international politics? Classical realism got the dependent variable right, namely the pursuit of power by each country, but it relied on too many independent variables (domestic and international) to draw any conclusions about how different countries might behave in similar circumstances. A more parsimonious theory was needed that focused on fewer independent variables and on common international structures rather than unique individual actors. In his path-breaking *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz (1979: 88) came up with three overarching variables or principles of realism: the ordering principle of anarchy, the functional similarity of all states, and the distribution of material capabilities.

The ordering principle of anarchy established the decentralized structure of political authority in the world as the defining feature of international politics, separating it clearly from domestic politics in which the ordering principle was hierarchy. For whatever reasons, states established patterns of interactions over the centuries that preserved separate states and perpetuated the condition of anarchy. Particular states may merge (the European Union?) or disappear (Soviet Union), but anarchy persists. If it ends, we are in a different realm entirely, namely domestic politics. As Wagner (1993) observes, neo-realism never dealt with a global situation of hegemony or unipolarity (the equivalent of domestic politics at the international level). Offensive realism later addressed this omission (see section below).

Under the condition of anarchy, states face similar tasks to provide for their security and independence. This was Waltz's second principle of differentiation of units: "States perform or try to perform tasks, most of which are common to all of them" (Waltz 1979: 96). They may pursue different goals, values, and political ideologies, as classical realists insisted, but they perform similar tasks in the process if doing so. Each has to establish a government, make, execute and interpret laws, raise revenues, conduct foreign policy, and provide for national defense. Thus, states may be socially and politically differentiated, but they are functionally undifferentiated. It follows then that "the functions of states are similar, and distinctions among them arise principally from their varied capabilities," not from their domestic ideologies or international interactions (Waltz 1979: 97).

Variations in capabilities or the distribution of power in the international system is the third principle of neo-realism and the only independent variable that varies. Anarchy and the functional similarity of states are constants, but the distribution of power changes. The number of great powers in the system or polarity is critical. This number—bipolar, multipolar and so on—affects the war-proneness of state interactions and therefore has most to do with the likelihood of stability or instability of the system. Neo-realism clearly privileges structural over foreign policy or domestic levels of analysis and power capabilities over interdependence or ideologies.

Which state of polarity was most stable? Waltz hypothesized that bipolarity was more stable than multipolarity. Two major powers could focus their attention exclusively on one another, whereas multiple poles created distractions and miscalculations. In addition, balancing under bipolarity took place through internal developments not external alliances, removing another feature of uncertainty under multipolarity. However, other structural realists hypothesized that multipolarity was more stable because there were more opportunities for countries to find allies and small differences in power balances did not matter as much under multipolarity as they did under bipolarity (Copeland 2000). Studies failed to find consistent support for either hypothesis: "The results of data-based studies on polarity and warfare are mixed with no definitive linear patterned evident regarding unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar configurations and the occurrence of war" (Geller and Singer 1998: 119).

Nevertheless, structural neo-realist studies illuminate many aspects of the repetitive rather than unique causes of war. At the structural level, neorealist studies expect states that do not follow balance of power prescriptions to be selected out; they do not survive. At the foreign policy level, they expect decision makers to act primarily on the basis of external power factors. If leaders are influenced more by internal bureaucratic, psychological, ideological or other factors, they will misperceive power balances and behave suboptimally. By examining perceptions of foreign policy elites, Copeland (2000) finds neo-realist expectations explain not only German leaders' decisions to initiate World Wars I and II but also President Harry Truman's decision to initiate the Cold War. The cause in all three cases is an expected shift of power toward the Soviet Union, the disadvantages of which were seen as greater at the time than the disadvantages of war. In Truman's case the choice is a "cold" war, not a hot one, because nuclear weapons portended catastrophic systemic consequences.

Neo-realist logic assumes states are unitary rational actors; they have little interest in domestic politics. This is often seen to be a serious shortcoming of neo-realism but for some purposes it is actually a big advantage. Neo-realist approaches inspired many of the early studies of nuclear deterrence, which sought to avoid nuclear war by manipulating credibly the threat to go to nuclear war. The systemic consequences of war were now so severe that decision makers could not afford to be diverted by domestic bureaucratic and ideological factors. Thomas Schelling (1960), Herman Kahn (1962), and other realist scholars used the highly stylized assumptions of neo-realism—*anarchy, similar states, and unified rational actors*—to tease out the various scenarios of force, counterforce and escalation that threatened the use nuclear weapons or to stop their actual use.

Many strategists and scholars worry, nevertheless, that such logic ignores too many other important variables. Neo-realism, it is argued, is underspecified (Vasquez 1997). Polarity and unitary actor assumptions are simply not enough to account for specific outcomes. There are many types of behavior under anarchy besides balancing, and equilibrium does not always ensure the absence of war.⁴ The focus shifts from anarchy to the "security dilemma" (Jervis 1978). This dilemma results when states arm under anarchy for purely defensive reasons but, in the process, threaten other states because other states can never be sure of their intentions. But maybe states could know more about intentions than neo-realism assumes. Defensive realism focuses on states that have defensive intentions primarily and might communicate these intentions so as to mitigate the security dilemma. Offensive realism focuses on states that have offensive intentions primarily and seek to grab more power because more power is always better for security. The next two sections deal with these variants of realism.

Defensive Realism

Defensive realism argues that the security dilemma may not be as bad as neo-realism makes it out to be. Waltz assumes that states pursue security rather than maximum power. This is a clear assumption that intentions are more defensive-oriented than offensive-oriented. But Waltz did not play out the implications of this assumption. He went on to argue that states could never be sure about other states' intentions and therefore had to focus on their capabilities only. If another state armed, the first state had to assume that it might use those arms to attack. Defensive realism pays more attention to factors that might clarify intentions. Stephen Walt (1987) suggested that states respond to threats, not just capabilities, and threats are a function of proximity (geography), the offensive-defensive balance of military technology, and a state's intentions or ideology (see also Levy 1984 and Lynn-Jones 1995).

States close to one another are more threatening than are those further away. Island states (United Kingdom and the United States in the sense of being separated from Eurasia by

two huge oceans) tend to feel more secure than continental states, or states surrounded by mountains (Switzerland) feel more secure than states existing in the middle of open plains (Poland).⁵ More geopolitically secure states convey more benign intentions. That may be one reason why the two longest-lasting periods of peace in modern history—Pax Britannica and Pax Americana—were overseen by states that relied primarily on sea power and did not threaten other states as much as land-based hegemony might.

Second, defensive realism appeals to the nature of military technology. Not all military capabilities are equal, and to the extent that offensive and defensive technologies can be differentiated from one another, deployment of defensive rather than offensive weapons would reassure other states that the first state has no intention to attack. Offensive and defensive capabilities may be distinguished in terms of types of weapons—MIRVed missiles are offensive, tactical nuclear weapons are defensive; or types of missions or strategies, defense vs. offense. A balance of relative forces in terms of quantities may be less relevant than a balance of capabilities to meet respective missions.

Third, defensive realism places more emphasis directly on intentions. Defensive, like classical, realists distinguish between satisfied and dissatisfied states, status quo and revisionist intentions. But, more recently, defensive realists conceptualize intentions as a feature of state identities. These theorists (e.g., Schweller 1998 and Deudney 2007) examine different state interests, state motives (security-seeking and greedy states), and state types (republican security). Some, such as Glaser (2010), even add information (or institutional) variables that work independently along with relative state power and motives to determine outcomes. Different state types signal one another what their motives might be by choosing various strategies of both competition and cooperation.

Two situations arise that correspond to the spiral and deterrence models of arms racing (see Jervis 1976, 1978). In spiral models, states are mostly defensive-minded or security-seeking, but because security may still require, under certain circumstances, expanding territory, they get caught up in the competitive acquisition of armaments which at some point becomes threatening even though they never intend their actions to be threatening. If states are defensive-minded, spiral situations are wasteful of resources and may be relatively easy to overcome if states are aware of and more sensitive to the security fears of others.

The second situation models the deterrence model and is more difficult. Actors now include greedy states, those seeking non-security goals such as prestige, ideology, or religion as well as security. States become more wary of one another. In this type of security dilemma, armaments are not wasteful but justified to deter and stabilize the situation.

The difference between the two situations is a question of state motives. How does one state determine whether the other state is defensive-minded and arming competitively against it would be counterproductive (spiral situation) or whether the other state seeks non-security goals and arming competitively against it is necessary to deter it (deterrence situation)? States can signal or provide one another information about their motives. If states are security seeking, they have options for maintaining equilibrium other than an arms race; they can also pursue security through arms control. In this case, cooperation is as much a form of self-help as competition (Glaser 2010: 63). The trick is to influence the other states' assessments of the risks of cooperation versus the risks of competition. In the 1970s, for example, the Soviet Union and the United States convinced each other that it was less risky to limit offensive weapons through the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks and a ban anti-ballistic missiles (ABM) than to continue an arms race to gain first-strike advantages. They signaled mutual reassurance that the other side did not intend to attack first.

There are major problems, of course, in differentiating between offensive and defensive weapons or missions. Were ABM systems offensive or defensive? The superpowers in the 1970s defined them as offensive because they envisioned their deployment in the context

of massive offensive missile systems. If one country could develop an ABM system that significantly reduced the damage of a retaliatory strike by the other country, the first country might be tempted to undertake a first strike convinced that its ABM system could repel whatever retaliatory missiles the other side might have left.

But in a different context ABM systems might be considered defensive. In the 1980s the superpowers embarked on substantial reductions of offensive weapons systems (the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks), even declaring the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. At the same time, they accelerated programs to develop defensive anti-missile weapons systems (the Reagan administration's Strategic Defense Initiative and the Soviet Union's longstanding ABM program). In a world of much lower, perhaps zero, offensive weapon systems, a defensive missile system, even one short of being perfect, might provide sufficient assurance for each country that it could defend itself against the few offensive missiles that might remain or be deployed suddenly in a nuclear free world. The only prerequisite would be that such defensive technology be available to all nuclear powers. That premise was the basis of President Reagan's policies not only to reduce offensive weapons systems but also to develop and share defensive technologies with the Soviet Union. Nuclear deterrence would shift from mutual assured *destruction* to mutual assured *protection*. The latter would be a deterrence system no less imperfect than the former but premised on defending civilian populations rather than destroying them. If you had to have nuclear weapons, it seemed a much more humane or moral option (see Anderson and Anderson 2009).

If the distinction between offense and defense relies too heavily on strategies that imply moral or other ideational variables, however, defensive realism may cease to be realist. To be realist, the proposals have to accept, not do away with, the security dilemma. The latter is a fundamental baseline for realist explanations. By adding state types (ideational factor) and levels of information (an institutional variable) to material capabilities as structural level starting points, more recent versions of defensive realism introduce non-material factors as independent variables. If these non-material starting points increase trust to the point, for example, that the world can disarm or share critical military technologies without a decentralized system of mutual defense capabilities to cope with cheaters, we have left the theoretical world of realism and entered other worlds of collective security or even the democratic peace.

Take propositions by presidents Obama and Reagan to eliminate nuclear weapons. At the UN in September 2009, Obama called for "nuclear zero" but did not mention national missile defenses to protect states against defectors or terrorists that might acquire small numbers of nuclear weapons which could now be decisive. Was he assuming that the world could depend primarily upon international institutions to enforce such agreements? In the 1980s, President Reagan also called for the "zero option" but insisted that missile defenses be shared equitably by all nations to safeguard against cheaters. Was he assuming that trust between the superpowers was now so great they could share a critical military technology and never fear that the other side was holding back? If so, he never convinced Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader. In one response at Reykjavik, Gorbachev said: "Excuse me, Mr. President, but I do not take your idea of sharing (ABMs) seriously" (Anderson and Anderson 2009: 297). If states trust common institutions or one another more than competitive national military forces to deal with defectors to international agreement, there is no longer any significant security dilemma.

Defensive realism may also find the security dilemma less fearsome because it sets arbitrary thresholds for defining state types. At what point exactly do security-seeking intentions end and greedy or non-security (ideology, religion, etc.) objectives begin? If security-seeking states can expand territory to improve security, can they do so right up to the point of regional or global hegemony, which offensive realists say may be the most secure situation? Apparently not, because defensive realists reject the assumption of offensive realism that states maximize power rather than security and ultimately strive for hegemony because more power always

yields more security. Indeed, defensive realist studies often assume that any effort to seek hegemony is pathological and hence explained by myths, misperceptions, and the like (Snyder 1991). Greedy states are defined by the fact that they seek more security than they need or at least more than security-seeking states need in the same situation (Glaser 2010: 87–90). Greedy states go beyond anything security might reasonably require.

But who is to say what level of security is reasonable? If each state makes this judgment, it follows that, using their own standards as a reference point and behaving rationally, security-seeking states will systematically underestimate the security needs of greedy states, and greedy states will systematically overestimate the security needs of security-seeking states. The resulting security dilemma may be quite severe. Security-seeking states get snookered and greedy states become more and more aggressive. Signaling may help but it cannot change state types, or we are no longer operating primarily at a structural level because process-level interactions now change structural variables. And if analysts arbitrarily determine the distinction between security-seeking and greedy states, they inject their own bias into the analysis. If they set the threshold high enough, practically all states become security seeking and by definition the security dilemma is moderated.⁶ If they set it low enough, the desire to seek always more security to dominate and eventually achieve hegemony, rather than just to defend against and deter adversaries, may make sense under more circumstances than defensive realism expects. The logic of offensive realism captures this possibility better than defensive realism.

Offensive Realism

Offensive realists argue that states seek security not only by deterrence, defense and equilibrium but also by dominance and hegemony. Since power is always changing and inherently difficult to assess, states always seek more power because more power yields more security. According to John Mearsheimer (2001: 2), a leading offensive realist, “[t]he overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power ... Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon.” Hegemony is the safest position because, by definition, no other state can challenge the hegemon. Security seeking now involves the pursuit of hegemony, which is justified for security reasons. The distinction between security-seeking and greedy states diminishes because hegemony gives a state the means to implement any other goals it may have, such as spreading its religion or exploiting the wealth of other countries.

The logic of offensive realism draws from power transition theory. Unlike power balancing or defensive realist theory, power transition theory argues that “the usual distribution of power in the world has not been a balance but rather a preponderance of power in the hands of one nation and its allies ... [and] world peace has coincided with periods of unchallenged supremacy of power, whereas the periods of approximate balance have been periods of war” (Organski 1968: 363–364). Thus, an equilibrium of power (in other words, power balancing) is destabilizing not stabilizing.⁷ Wars occur not when one state dominates but when the dominant state declines and a challenging state begins to approach an equilibrium of power with the declining state. In that moment of power transition between declining and rising states, the likelihood of conflict and war is greatest. The logic of power transition theory thus is just the opposite of power balancing theory (see Tin-bor Hui 2005). States strive to avoid balance and achieve dominance because dominance or hierarchy greatly tempers and perhaps even eliminates the security dilemma, as it does in domestic politics (see Lieberman 1996).

Defensive realists disagree. They argue that seeking more power than is needed (meaning, beyond what is necessary for equilibrium) is greedy and hence unnecessary. It provokes counterbalancing and a greater risk of war. Conquest usually does not pay, and hegemony

never last. But states continue to strive for hegemony. Why? Defensive realists (e.g., Snyder 1991) believe that because of pathologies, ideational (myths) and institutional (logrolling, misperceptions) fallacies that lead to overexpansion (notice the prefix “over” suggesting the analyst knows exactly where the line is). But if such factors play a persistent role in explaining outcomes, we are no longer in a realist world. If it makes sense to strive for ever greater power because states cannot know how much power is enough (even if analysts can), then the pursuit of security through hegemony must be as much a part of the logic of realism as the pursuit of security through deterrence and defense.

And indeed this seems to be. Take the case of the United States. For the last century, it has pursued and achieved hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. Would any realist or policy analyst argue that its position today as a hegemon in this region is more insecure than it would be if it were balanced by another great power, as China is balanced by Japan in Asia or Russia by other powers in Europe? Japan and Germany or other states in Europe would probably trade places with the United States in a heartbeat. America is obviously safer as an unchallenged hegemon. And, like any other state, it would be safer still if it were an unchallenged hegemon at the global level.

After the end of the Cold War and before 9/11, the United States in fact assumed a position as the world’s sole nuclear superpower. Some realists celebrated America’s unipolarity. Its dominance was so great there was no likelihood that it would be challenged (see Wohlforth 1999). While some realists saw the situation as a “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer 1990–1991), expecting challengers to push back, others decided that the position could be preserved and talked about preempting any challengers to American hegemony. Terrorist attacks, especially after 9/11, signaled both pushback by asymmetric means and heightened prospects of preemptive or indeed preventive war (launched without a clear sign of imminent attack). There seemed to be no other way to fight an invisible terrorist enemy that might acquire nuclear weapons. You could not wait for the mushroom cloud.

The logic of hegemony, and of preemption that follows from its attainment, is no less compelling than the logic of deterrence or defense. Why then do some offensive realists pull back from the logic? Perhaps because it is so interventionist and risks military overstretch. The prospect of increasing U.S. interventions to preempt terrorist threats in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, and so on, let alone the challenge of preempting rising powers such as China or Russia, would tax any hegemon’s resources beyond its limits. Mearsheimer (2001) accepts American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere as proof of the logic of offensive realism but then adopts the concept of the “stopping power of water” to suggest that hegemony cannot be achieved globally. Land power cannot be projected across large bodies of water, such as the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, and the United States can defend its global interests best through an off-shore balancing (rather than dominating) strategy using naval and air forces designed to safeguard vital supply sources such as oil in the Middle East and to prevent any state in Europe or Asia from achieving hegemony in those regions.

But if the United States is safer because it enjoys regional hegemony, won’t states in other regions strive for the same degree of safety through hegemony in their region? After all, the logic of security through dominance applies to all states. And won’t the quest for dominance by states in other regions continue to require U.S. interventions, because as in the case of Hitler’s Germany’s or Hirohito’s Japan once these states acquire hegemony in their region they may attack the United States in its region? Thus, in a world of offensive realism, any U.S. pullback to an offshore strategy is bound to be at best temporary. In a world of defensive realism, attempts at hegemony are episodic and seldom accumulate because most states are not greedy. An offshore strategy may be a sufficient response. But in a world of offensive realism, the pursuit of hegemony is endemic and cumulative. A reactive offshore strategy is unlikely to suffice. Even some defensive realists advocate a more ambitious strategy than off-shore

balancing. They advocate maintaining forward bases in other regions such as Europe and Asia as the best way to head off a possible bid for hegemony before it succeeds and threatens the western hemisphere.

A good example of the logic of offensive versus defensive realism is provided by a story of policy debates during the George H. W. Bush administration (see Bush and Scowcroft 1998: 539–541). This story also helps to demarcate offensive realism from neoconservatism which, although it advocates U.S. hegemony, is more focused on spreading democracy than achieving preeminent power. Realist theories cannot advocate spreading democracy as a central goal of foreign policy. So neoconservatism crosses the line beyond realism to ideational approaches to American foreign policy which aim at altering and eventually replacing, not stabilizing, power balances (see Nau 2009).

At a long National Security Council meeting in September 1991, President Bush and his cabinet focused on the potential breakup of the Soviet Union. Bush posed the question of whether the United States should support the breakup of the Soviet Union or try to help the Soviet Union preserve control of its sixteen constituent republics. Bush was cautious and worried that another violent breakup might occur such as the one the previous year in Yugoslavia. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney called for a more aggressive approach. He thought the United States had more leverage and saw an opportunity to weaken permanently the Soviet Union. He suggested establishing consulates in all the Soviet republics and offering them humanitarian assistance. Brent Scowcroft, the national security adviser, and James Baker, the secretary of state, disagreed. They saw Cheney's suggestion as "a thinly disguised effort to break up the USSR" and said aid programs should be administered through strong central governments, not individual Soviet republics. Cheney responded, "that's an example of old thinking.... The voluntary breakup of the Soviet Union is in our interest.... If it's a voluntary association, it will happen. If democracy fails, we're better off if they're small" (Bush and Scowcroft, 1998: 539–541).

Here is a classic confrontation between defensive and offensive realists. Bush, Scowcroft, and Baker are thinking like defensive realists, worried about instability above all and thinking in terms of cooperation with other great powers to preserve the status quo, in this case a failing Soviet Union. Cheney, on the other hand, is thinking like an offensive realist. He sees an opportunity to expand U.S. power and thereby enhance U.S. security. The breakup of the Soviet Union, he says, is unequivocally in the interests of the United States. It creates smaller states over which the United States will have greater leverage and power. It does not matter whether these republics become democratic or not. Notice Cheney has his eye on expanding power, not democracy. He is thinking in this case not as a neoconservative but as an offensive realist. He worries that if the Soviet Union remains intact, "we could get an authoritarian regime still," but whether authoritarian or not a continuing Soviet regime would wield more power than sixteen separate republics. On the other hand, if the Soviet Union broke up, each republic would be smaller and regardless of its form of government would be weaker. The United States would be in a stronger and safer position.

Offensive realists always look for additional power because that provides greater leverage and ultimately greater security in a world of material struggle and competition. Admittedly offensive realists may try to do too much. Defensive realists worry about that, just as Bush, Scowcroft, and Baker did in this case. But offensive realism does not advocate expanding in all directions at once, any more than defensive realism advocates defending or deterring in every direction at once. Both approaches set priorities. But in any specific situation they assess the risks with different goals in mind. Defensive realists fear losses more than they desire gains. They calculate the risks of competing to defend a position against the risks of cooperating to defend it. In the story just recounted, they saw the risks of intervening to break up the Soviet Union to be greater than the risks of preserving the Soviet Union and the status quo. Offensive

realists value gains more than they fear losses. They calculate the risks of competing to expand a position, weakening the Soviet Union, against the risks of cooperating to preserve the status quo. Whereas defensive realists see danger and less security in power shifts away from equilibrium, offensive realists see opportunity and more security in greater relative power.

Where Realism Ends

None of the four theories of realism we have examined is deeply flawed, as advocates of one theory over another like to suggest. Each has its limits to be sure but so do all theories, realist or not. And each realist theory has unique strengths. Moreover, realist approaches have evolved not just in response to academic studies and theoretical inquiries; they have also developed in response to real-world events.

Classical realism developed out of the failures of idealist and institutional approaches during the interwar years. It is the approach most sensitive to domestic values and cultural variations. To understand a single country's foreign policy, it is indispensable. All realists are reluctant to promote specific values or cultures at the international level, but classical realists recognize that differences in cultural and ideological perspectives at the international level matter. As Morgenthau (1985) noted, the balance of power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was more moderate than the balance of power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the reason was the closer-knit community of Christian, monarchic republics in Europe before the French Revolution. Thereafter, except for a brief interlude under the Concert of Europe, which essentially ended in the 1840s, cultural and ideological differences widened, and the balance of power became more unstable and conflict-prone.

With the advent of nuclear weapons, realism encountered the challenges of how to manage a balance of power when war might mean the annihilation of civilization? The need to manage cultural and ideological differences became more urgent, and for all realists the levels of common trust in the world were inadequate to forego national defenses. Through theories of deterrence, realism found a way to sublimate conflicts to the level of crises to determine winners and losers by a contest of resolve rather than by actual conflicts on the battlefield that might entail the use of nuclear weapons. Since deterrence depended on credible threats however, the prospect of nuclear war was always there. For that reason and others, neo-realists tried to temper conflicts even more by removing ideational and institutional factors from calculations of security. Better to keep ideological factors out of international politics altogether, and work to develop the reliable institutional means to implement deterrence (timely and reliable intelligence, fail-safe weapons procedures, etc.). Neo-realism emerged not just out of theoretical interests but also to meet a practical need to rationalize crisis management of nuclear weapons.

Defensive realism picked up on one of these processes in particular, namely arms control. It is most concerned with finding ways to deal with the security dilemma through arms control rather than arms races. To do this, it has to assume that the security goals of states are limited to deterrence and defense rather than seeking dominance. In the new world of nuclear weapons, that seems a reasonable assumption. Today, it's hard to believe that anyone would risk war that might become nuclear. But that's just the point. Offensive realism is not so sure; nor can anyone be sure when the world is still riddled with ideological and political chasms among states.

Whatever states signal to one another about their intentions, those intentions may be read by recipients in radically different ways depending on the philosophical or religious lens through which they are looking. President John F. Kennedy was aware of this disturbing reality even before the Cuban missile crisis, in which superpower intentions almost led to nuclear war.

In a letter to Nikita Khrushchev in September 1961, Kennedy (quoted in Haas 2005: 13) wrote: “Neither of us will convince the other about our respective social systems and general philosophies of life. These differences create a great gulf in communications because language cannot mean the same thing on both sides unless it is related to some underlying purpose.” Kennedy is reminding us that rational faculties for sending and reading signals do not exist in a vacuum. They are circumscribed by varying and often diverging cultures, philosophies, and institutions. Power realities are filtered through languages, social discourses, information gaps, and emotional and personality characteristics.

Now, we are leaving the realm of realism and entering the world of liberal, critical, and constructivist studies of foreign policy. We need not explore these studies here because they are covered in other chapters in this volume. But recognizing where any theoretical approach ends reminds us of just how much it excludes. We should stop searching for theoretical silver bullets either within or among foreign policy perspectives. We need to understand them all and be explicit in our studies why we individually choose to apply one or the other in any given situation.

Notes

- 1 Theoretically, of course, studies could bracket reality in this manner continuously, examining the impact of the three primary variables from the different levels of analysis in one period, adjusting starting conditions, and then examining the impact of the new variables in the next period. But they would have to treat all independent variables equally, and bracketing continuously amounts in the end to description rather than analysis of events.
- 2 For realist explanations that divert to ideational (cult of the offensive) and bureaucratic (formative experiences) variables at the domestic level of analysis, see Christensen and Snyder (1990).
- 3 On foreign policy making as a two-level game, see Putnam (1988). On neoclassical realism, a revival of classical realism’s focus on foreign policy, see Rose (1998) and Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (2009).
- 4 For example, the balance of forces before World War I between the two principal alliances, the Triple Entente and Triple Alliance, was almost perfect, and war still occurred. See Mearsheimer (2001: 71, 301–304).
- 5 Interwar Japan may be the exception here.
- 6 It is often not clear, for example, if security-seeking states can seek territorial expansion for security reasons all the way up to achieving hegemony. If so, the distinction between security and greedy becomes mute. Both seek hegemony but one for security reasons, the other for non-security (ideology) reasons.
- 7 Despite this logic, Mearsheimer (2001: 44) insists that equilibrium is still the most stable situation. “The configuration of power that generates the most fear is a multipolar system that contains a potential hegemon.” If that is the case, however, the pursuit of security by maximizing power and seeking dominance, which lies at the heart of offensive realism, is illogical since more power would not ensure more security (stability) but more insecurity (instability).

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