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Reckless States and Realism

John J. Mearsheimer

Abstract

Kenneth Waltz opted to reject the rational actor assumption in developing his theory of international politics. That choice, I argue in this article, creates three problems for his theory. First, it means that it is unsuited for explaining state behavior, which means it is of limited utility for explaining the workings of the international system. Second, Waltz's claim that his theory is well suited to explaining international outcomes – as opposed to state behavior – is unconvincing. Those outcomes are heavily influenced by the actions of the great powers, but if his theory cannot predict their behavior, it is unlikely to reliably predict the outcomes of their behavior. Third, Waltz's assumption that states often behave recklessly leads to a more competitive world than described in his theory. I conclude with the suggestion that the theory's greatest virtue is its normative value – its ability to explain how the world should work, not how it works.

Keywords: balancing, international outcomes, normative theory, rational actor assumption, realism, state behavior, status-quo bias, suboptimal behavior, theory of foreign policy, theory of international relations

Kenneth Waltz is the most important international relations theorist of the past half-century. He has written a handful of seminal works, a feat that few scholars achieve. He is best known for *Theory of International Politics*, which explains how systemic forces influence the interactions among states. In the preface to that book, he emphasizes that 'a theory is never completed', which is another way of saying that his theory – like all others – is not perfect and should therefore be open to criticism and refinement.¹ In keeping with that spirit, I will examine Waltz's decision to reject the rational actor assumption, and raise some questions about how that move affects his theoretical claims.

It is sometimes said that realists axiomatically assume that states are rational agents. In particular, there are a number of scholars who insist that Waltz employs a rational actor assumption.² But these claims are not true. Some realists assume that states behave strategically, but others do not. The choice, of course, has significant implications for one's theory. Waltz has repeatedly stated that his theory of international politics rejects the rational actor assumption. 'Since making foreign policy is such a complicated business', he writes, 'one cannot expect of political leaders the nicely calculated decisions that the word "rationality" suggests.' He puts the point even more bluntly when he writes, 'The theory requires no assumptions of rationality.' Or, as he said when pressed on the issue at the September 2008 Aberystwyth conference honoring him, 'I don't like the word rationality. I'll admit it.'³



Instead, Waltz relies on 'the process of selection', which means that 'those who conform to accepted and successful practices more often rise to the top', while those who do not 'fall by the wayside'.⁴ In essence, Waltz's theory is predicated on the assumption that states often ignore balance-of-power logic and act in non-strategic ways; when they do, the system punishes them. On the other hand, states that act rationally are usually rewarded for their smart behavior.

Waltz's decision to eschew the rational actor assumption is an important matter to which scholars have paid little attention. Although I focus mainly on what that decision means for his theory, I also discuss how his thinking about state rationality is reflected in the works of other prominent defensive realists. Moreover, I consider how Waltz's theory differs from realist theories which are built on a rational actor assumption. However, I make no effort to evaluate those other theories, much less compare their explanatory power with his theory. I am interested in simply assessing Waltz's theory on its own terms.

The article begins with a synopsis of Waltz's theory of international politics. I then make the case that his decision to allow for considerable non-strategic behavior among the great powers creates three problems for his theory. First, it means that he has little choice but to say that his theory is ill-suited to explaining state behavior, and that its principal virtue is that it can explain 'international outcomes'. However, a theory that cannot account for the behavior of the most important actors in the system is of limited utility for understanding international relations. Second, Waltz's claim that his theory is well suited to explaining international outcomes is not persuasive. Those outcomes, after all, are determined largely by the actions of the great powers, but if his theory cannot predict their behavior, it is difficult to see how it can reliably predict the outcomes of their behavior. Third, Waltz's assumption that states often behave foolishly leads to a more competitive world than pictured in his theory. Finally, I conclude by suggesting that the theory's strong suit is its normative value – its ability to explain how the world should work, not how it actually works, at least not how it has worked up to now.

The Waltzian baseline

Waltz states clearly that his theory is built on two simple assumptions. First, he assumes that states are the key actors in international politics and they operate in an anarchic system, which is to say that no higher authority sits above them. Second, he assumes that the primary motive of states is to survive, which means that they seek to guard their sovereignty.⁵ From these assumptions, Waltz deduces that states will care greatly about their position in the balance of power. Specifically, they will aim to be somewhat more powerful than their potential rivals, because that advantage would maximize, although not guarantee, their prospects for survival.

While Waltz recognizes that states will attempt to gain power at the expense of their rivals, nowhere in his work does he suggest that going to war is a smart way to achieve that goal.⁶ In fact, he seems to think that offensive wars are a bad idea. For example, he writes, 'Force is more useful than ever for upholding the status quo, though not

for changing it.' Indeed, he maintains that, 'Before 1789, war may have been "good business"; it has seldom paid thereafter.'⁷ Not surprisingly, I cannot find evidence of Waltz endorsing the initiation of any past war. Although he admires Bismarck, he praises his behavior after 1870, when he was committed to maintaining the European balance of power.⁸ He says nothing, however, about Bismarck's behavior between 1862 and 1870, when he launched three wars that transformed Prussia into Germany and caused a fundamental shift in the European balance of power.

Waltz also stresses that great powers should not attempt to gain hegemony, either in their own region of the world or around the globe.⁹ States should not attempt to maximize their share of world power, because the other great powers in the system will join together in a balancing coalition and stop them in their tracks. 'In international politics', he writes, 'success leads to failure. The excessive accumulation of power by one state or coalition of states elicits the opposition of others.' Therefore, 'states can seldom afford to make maximizing power their goal. International politics is too serious a business for that.'¹⁰ Smart states, Waltz maintains, will not be overly ambitious and will seek to gain an 'appropriate amount of power'.¹¹ He does not discuss the wisdom of Imperial Germany's attempt to dominate Europe in the early twentieth century or the later attempts by Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany to dominate Asia and Europe respectively. There is little doubt, however, that these three aspiring hegemon acted in ways that contradict how his theory expects rational states to behave.

Although states seek additional increments of power in Waltz's world, they have a much more important goal: to ensure that other states do not gain power at their expense. 'The first concern of states', he emphasizes, 'is not to maximize power, but to maintain their positions in the system.'¹² Balancing is the key strategy that states employ when a rival takes steps to increase its share of world power. Those states that feel threatened can build up their own capabilities – internal balancing – or they can join together and form a balancing coalition – external balancing. Waltz emphasizes that 'balances of power recurrently form', clearly implying that especially aggressive states should expect to be checked by their potential victims.¹³ Of course, this is why it is a fool's errand to pursue hegemony, as Germany and Japan learned at great cost in the last century.

Waltz contrasts balancing with bandwagoning, which is an ill-advised strategy. Bandwagoning is where a threatened state joins forces with the threatening state to exploit other states, but allows its dangerous rival to gain a disproportionate share of the spoils that they conquer together. In essence, the bandwagoner permits its new-found 'friend' to improve its position in the balance of power, which is unacceptable in a realist world, because it puts the bandwagoning state's survival at risk. Thus, Waltz concludes, 'Balancing, not bandwagoning, is the behavior induced by the system.'¹⁴

In sum, there are few incentives for states to act offensively in Waltz's world, mainly because threatened states are likely to balance effectively against aggressors, especially those bent on dominating the system. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Waltz does not think war has much utility as a strategy for gaining power, and that

he believes states seeking hegemony are doomed to fail. The structure of the international system does not simply discourage aggressive behavior; it pushes states to concentrate on maintaining their position in the balance of power. This is why Waltz is sometimes labeled a defensive realist, and why some say – to quote Randall Schweller – that his theory has a ‘status-quo bias’.¹⁵

This rather benign realist world is based on the assumption that states behave rationally. In effect, Waltz is saying that there would be little conflict in the international system if great powers acted strategically almost all of the time.¹⁶ Smart states simply would not cause much trouble. I believe that it is this part of his theory – let us call it the baseline – that leads some scholars to think that Waltz employs a rational actor assumption. But it is not the whole theory. Indeed, it is just a starting point, because Waltz ultimately assumes that states are not rational agents most of the time. In fact, he allows for considerable reckless behavior by the great powers, which naturally leads to a more competitive and dangerous world, and which ultimately causes problems for his theory.¹⁷

The rational actor assumption and state behavior

What exactly does it mean to say that Waltz rejects the rational actor assumption? And how does that move affect the explanatory scope of his theory of international politics?

To assume that states are rational is to say that they are aware of their external environment and they think intelligently about how to maximize their prospects for survival. In particular, they try to gauge the preferences of other states and how their own behavior is likely to affect the actions of those other states, as well as how the behavior of those other states is likely to affect their own strategy. When they look at the different strategies that they have to choose between, they assess the likelihood of success as well as the costs and benefits of each one. Finally, states pay attention not only to the immediate consequences of their actions, but to the long-term effects as well.

Nevertheless, rational states miscalculate from time to time because they invariably make important decisions on the basis of imperfect information. They hardly ever have complete information about any situation they confront, which forces them to make educated guesses. This is due in part to the fact that potential adversaries have incentives to misrepresent their own strength or weakness, and to conceal their true aims. But even if disinformation were not a problem, states are often unsure about the resolve of opposing forces as well as their allies, and it is often hard to know beforehand how one’s own military forces, as well as those of adversaries, will perform on the battlefield. Therefore, rational states sometimes guess wrong and end up doing themselves serious harm.

By assuming that states do not act rationally, Waltz is effectively saying that it is clear to him from the sweep of history that the great powers have frequently behaved in ways that make no strategic sense. These are not cases of states miscalculating because of imperfect information. These are cases of states acting foolishly by ignoring

relevant information or paying serious attention to largely irrelevant information. 'Historically', he writes, 'dominant powers have behaved badly.'¹⁸ Consequently, they 'lead troubled lives'.¹⁹ Consider, for example, that Napoleonic France, Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany all made a run at achieving regional hegemony, which contradicts his theory. Waltz also believes that US foreign policy during the Cold War was often misguided.²⁰ Finally, history is littered with wars involving the great powers; 'historians know', he writes, that 'war is normal'.²¹ Yet he maintains that initiating a war to gain power is usually not a smart idea. Given this rich history of foolish state behavior, Waltz cannot build his theory on the assumption that states are strategic calculators.²²

States often pursue misguided foreign policies because domestic politics intrude into the policy-making process and trump sound strategic logic. For example, a powerful interest group or an individual with an ill-advised agenda might have undue influence on a country's foreign policy. When states act in non-strategic ways, according to Waltz, they usually pay a price – sometimes an enormous price – because the international system itself tends to act in predictable ways and it has a way of punishing foolish behavior. The cost of pursuing misguided policies creates powerful incentives for states to act rationally, and certainly some do, which is why Waltz believes that the system ultimately acts in foreseeable ways. But apparently not enough states act strategically to justify employing a rational actor assumption.

Given that states often behave in ways that contradict how his theory of international politics says that they should act, Waltz has little choice but to argue that it cannot explain state behavior. For that purpose, he says that we need a separate theory of foreign policy, which focuses mainly on the domestic political factors – or what are sometimes called unit-level variables – that often drive state behavior. Of course, that theory will also have to pay attention to the systemic imperatives that shape state behavior, even though they are frequently overwhelmed by domestic political considerations. 'A theory about foreign policy', Waltz writes, 'is a theory at the national level. It leads to expectations about the responses that dissimilar polities will make to external policies.'²³ In essence, it is a theory of domestic politics.²⁴

Waltz has not laid out his own theory of foreign policy. In fact, he seems to think that it is not possible to develop a theory of foreign policy. He writes, for example,

If the aims, policies, and actions of states become matters of exclusive attention or even of central concern, then we are forced back to the descriptive level; and from simple descriptions no valid generalizations can logically be drawn ... If the situation of actors affects their behavior and influences their interactions, then attempted explanation at the unit level will lead to the infinite proliferation of variables, because at that level no one variable, or set of variables, is sufficient to produce the observed result.²⁵

Waltz's theory of international politics, on the other hand, is a systemic theory that is designed to explain international outcomes, not state behavior. 'It can describe the range of likely outcomes of the actions and interactions of states within a given

system and show how the range of expectations varies as systems change.' It can 'account for similarities of outcome that persist or recur even as actors vary', such as the formation of balancing coalitions against especially aggressive states. 'We find states forming balances of power', he writes, 'whether or not they wish to.' Moreover, it can 'indicate some of the conditions that make war more or less likely'. In particular, it can show why bipolar systems are more stable than multipolar ones. 'But it will not predict the outbreak of particular wars', because that requires a theory of foreign policy.²⁶

In contrast to Waltz, realists who build their theories on a rational actor assumption do not need separate theories of foreign policy and international politics.²⁷ For these realists, great powers are expected to act in strategically smart ways most of the time. For sure, there will be occasional cases where great powers behave foolishly, but not like in Waltz's world where they often behave that way. For theorists who assume that states are rational agents, misguided policies are the exception, not the rule. Thus, their theories should do a good job of accounting for state behavior as well as international outcomes. Unfortunately, it is not possible to come up with precise numbers that show how much suboptimal behavior we should expect in Waltz's theory or in rival theories that employ a rational actor assumption.

Realists who assume that states act rationally recognize that domestic political considerations almost always influence a state's foreign policy. Unlike Waltz, however, these theorists maintain that unit-level factors usually do not have much effect on foreign policy-making, and when they do, they do so in ways that are consistent with balance-of-power logic. In other words, domestic political calculations are not likely to undermine sound strategic thinking, which often happens in Waltz's world. A case in point is Bismarck's foreign policy between 1862 and 1870. He was motivated in good part by nationalism – a unit-level ideology – to start three wars (1864, 1866, and 1870) that transformed Prussia into Germany. Bismarck's actions, however, made good strategic sense, as the German state that emerged in 1871 was more powerful than the Prussian state it replaced.

Still, there will always be a few instances where domestic pathologies lead states to act in suboptimal ways, thus contradicting any realist theory that is built on a rational actor assumption. No social science theory can account for every case; all theories face anomalies. But that cannot happen often if the theory is to be useful for explaining state behavior. Colin Elman succinctly makes this point: 'Insofar as the number of inaccurate predictions does not grow too large ... there is no problem with using neorealist theories to make foreign policy predictions.'²⁸ It is worth noting that instances where great powers act recklessly do not contradict Waltz's theory, because it does not claim to explain state behavior.

As emphasized, Waltz's theory has a baseline embedded in it that explains how states would act if they were rational agents. But he ultimately chooses not to assume that states act strategically, because he sees too much evidence of suboptimal behavior. This decision leads him to argue for a theory of foreign policy that can account for state behavior and a separate theory of international politics that can explain outcomes. Let us now explore some consequences of this decision for his theory.

A slender explanatory construct²⁹

The first consequence of Waltz's decision to build his theory of international politics without a rational actor assumption follows from the previous discussion. It significantly limits the theory's explanatory power, as it cannot explain state behavior – to include the outbreak of specific wars like World Wars I and II – which is a truly important part of world politics. For that purpose, he needs help from a theory of domestic politics, which is not a realist theory. Thus, to provide a reasonably comprehensive explanation of the workings of the international system, Waltz would need to combine his realist theory of international politics with a theory of domestic politics.

A number of prominent realist scholars – all of whom have been deeply influenced by Waltz – have written important books which combine realist and unit-level variables. Barry Posen, for example, maintains that states act according to the dictates of realist logic when other states seriously threaten them, mainly because their survival is at stake. But when states are operating in a relatively benign threat environment, the organizational pathologies of militaries take over and cause states to pursue suboptimal policies, which get them into trouble. Jack Snyder, on the other hand, maintains that whether or not states behave strategically is largely a function of interest group politics on the home front. Selfish interest groups, he argues, can usually sell their bad ideas in cartelized political systems, but have trouble doing so in democracies, which tend to pursue smart strategies. Finally, Stephen Van Evera argues that great powers often pursue misguided policies when their militaries have inordinate influence in the decision-making process. Professional militaries, he argues, purvey dangerous ideas as a means of protecting their organizational welfare.³⁰

There is nothing wrong with advancing theories that include both a realist and a domestic politics component. Indeed, one could argue that such compound theories are better at explaining how the world works than straightforward realist theories. Whether that is true or not is irrelevant here; the key point for the issue at hand is that scholars who employ compound theories are effectively saying that there are serious limits to what realism can tell us about international politics. Realism needs considerable help from other bodies of theories if it hopes to explain state behavior as well as international outcomes.³¹ This point, of course, is at the core of Waltz's work.

There is an interesting paradox here. In *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz devotes considerable space to criticizing various international relations scholars for developing reductionist theories, which 'concentrate causes at the individual or national level', rather than systemic theories, which 'conceive of causes operating at the international level'.³² His aim, of course, is to develop a systemic theory, and there is no question that his theory of international politics fits that bill. Nevertheless, it can only hope to explain a narrow slice of the story, which means that Waltz has to rely on reductionist theories if he hopes to explain other key parts of the story, such as state behavior.³³ Indeed, he noted in response to a critic that, 'Any theory of international politics requires also a theory of domestic politics, since states affect the system's structure even as it affects them.'³⁴ Given all the brickbats Waltz hurls at

reductionist theories in *Theory*, it is striking how important he believes they ultimately are for understanding international politics.

The influence of behavior on outcomes

Waltz would surely respond to this first criticism by acknowledging his theory's limited explanatory power, while emphasizing that it nevertheless tells us a great deal about an important set of phenomena: international outcomes. He writes, for example, 'Structures never tell us all that we want to know. Instead they tell us a small number of big and important things.'³⁵ In particular, he maintains that his theory is well-suited for explaining when the international system is likely to be more or less prone to war and that when states become especially aggressive, balancing coalitions will form to check them.

There is reason to think, however, that omitting the rational actor assumption limits Waltz's theory's ability to explain even international outcomes. After all, these outcomes are largely the result of the collective behavior of the world's great powers, and if those states frequently act in strategically foolish ways, how can we be confident that the theory will work as advertised?³⁶

For example, why should we expect balancing to work effectively if states time and again do not act rationally? Why should we expect states in Waltz's world to take the necessary measures – either individually or collectively – to deter a potential aggressor and then defeat it if deterrence fails? He correctly points out that 'balancing is hard to do' under any circumstances, because it 'is costly, and the right time to balance is hard to calculate. Moreover, to jump on the bandwagon of an emerging power is tempting.' Waltz also notes that 'In the great-power politics of multipolar worlds, who is a danger to whom, and who can be expected to deal with threats and problems, are matters of uncertainty.' Of course, these considerations explain why balancing sometimes does not work even when all the great powers are acting rationally. But the likelihood of balancing failures is even greater – maybe much greater – in a world where the great powers are prone to behave in misguided ways.³⁷

After all, is it not likely in Waltz's world that at least some states will misread the balance of power and either fail to balance or balance slowly against a serious threat? And is it not reasonable to expect some threatened states to bandwagon with an especially formidable adversary, thus undermining the efforts of the other great powers to check that dangerous foe? In short, how can we be confident that an effective balancing coalition will form against an aggressor when we cannot be confident that almost all of the threatened states will recognize the threat and act wisely?³⁸

To illustrate the point, consider that the great powers failed to balance effectively against Prussia between 1862 and 1870, which allowed Bismarck to win three wars and markedly shift the European balance of power in Berlin's favor. More importantly, given the consequences, consider the failure of Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States to balance effectively against Germany during the 1930s, which allowed Hitler to conquer much of Europe. Waltz would surely concede that the balancing process before World War II was ineffective, but point out that a balancing

coalition eventually formed and Nazi Germany was defeated.³⁹ That is true, but what if Hitler had not invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941? Germany would have still ended up controlling much of Europe, including France. Furthermore, Hitler came close to knocking the Soviet Union out of the war in the fall of 1941, in which case Germany would have gained hegemony in Europe.

Waltz would probably respond that it was not a near miss; Hitler was doomed from the start, because balance-of-power logic rules out any state becoming a hegemon. There is no question that it is difficult to achieve hegemony, for the reasons Waltz identifies, but it is possible. Stephen Van Evera notes that there are at least three cases where the preponderant actor in the system achieved hegemony because 'effective defending coalitions failed to form'.⁴⁰ They include the Roman Empire, the Ch'in dynasty in ancient China, and the United States in the western hemisphere during the nineteenth century. 'Balancing', Van Evera notes, 'can break down if appropriate conditions are absent.' One would think that an appropriate condition for balancing to work is that threatened states must act strategically in the face of reckless aggressors. But that is not always the case in Waltz's world.

It also seems reasonable to expect Waltz's theory to have trouble explaining when the international system is more or less prone to experience major wars, since wars are the result of decisions and actions taken by individual states and his theory cannot explain state behavior. It could be the case, for example, that the main reason that the system is especially war-prone in a particular period is not because of its structure, but because of the presence of a handful of powerful states that are bent on pursuing reckless and dangerous foreign policies. If those same states were headed by smart strategists, peace would prevail.

To illustrate this point, consider Europe in the first half of the twentieth century, which was consumed by two of the deadliest wars in recorded history – World Wars I and II. One might argue that Waltz's theory – which holds that multipolar systems are more war-prone than bipolar systems – can account for this outcome. After all, Europe was multipolar between 1914 and 1945. In contrast, it is hardly surprising that the United States and the Soviet Union did not fight each other during the Cold War, since their competition took place in a bipolar system. Of course, Waltz would also argue that nuclear weapons played a key role in preventing a shooting war between the superpowers.

One problem with this line of argument is that Europe was multipolar between 1815 and 1914, and yet there were only four wars between the European great powers during this hundred-year period, and none was anywhere near as deadly as either of the World Wars. Plus there was no war between the European great powers from 1815 to 1853, and from 1871 to 1914. Those lengthy periods of relative stability, which occurred in multipolar Europe, compare favorably with the 'long peace' of the Cold War. But this criticism is not important for the discussion at hand.

The more relevant criticism is that according to Waltz's perspective neither of those bloodbaths was the result of the initiating states acting in strategically smart ways. Imperial Germany and later Nazi Germany were both pursuing regional hegemony, which he says is a boneheaded policy that is doomed to fail. Their misguided behavior

must have been the result of poisonous domestic politics or delusional leadership, or both. Presumably, if Bismarck or some other savvy leader had been running German foreign policy in 1914 or 1939, there would have been peace, not the outbreak of cataclysmic wars, and Europe would have been at least as peaceful in the first half of the twentieth century as it was in the second half. Remember, Waltz believes that war hardly ever pays, which effectively means that in a world of rational states there should be no great-power wars in either bipolarity or multipolarity. Given this perspective, it is difficult for Waltz to argue that the multipolar structure of the system was the main reason why the first half of the twentieth century was consumed by two deadly wars. Instead, it appears that domestic politics accounts for this outcome.

In sum, the best way for Waltz to explain international outcomes is with his baseline, where states act like rational calculators to maximize their prospects for survival. His decision to move beyond that baseline and allow for substantial amounts of non-strategic state behavior raises doubts about whether his theory can account for international outcomes, which is supposed to be its strong suit.

Reckless states and defensive realism

Finally, there is reason to think that omitting the rational actor assumption creates incentives for all the great powers – including the strategic calculators – to act more aggressively than Waltz's theory seems to indicate. As noted, if every major state behaved rationally, which is to say, if every state acted according to the dictates of his defensively oriented baseline, there would be little great-power conflict and there certainly would not be any hegemonic wars in his world. Instead, states would mainly be interested in maintaining their position in the balance of power, which would not be an especially difficult task given that their rivals would not have much opportunity to gain power at their expense.

Of course, Waltz allows that there will be misguided states that adopt highly aggressive policies; the especially powerful ones might even attempt to gain hegemony. But how does he think the strategic calculators in the system should deal with these reckless states? Although Waltz does not directly answer this question, it seems clear that he would advise the threatened states not to pursue aggressive policies, even if they attempted to do so in intelligent ways. The smart strategy would presumably be to balance against the troublemakers and make sure that they do not become more powerful and thus even more dangerous. In some cases, particularly those involving a potential hegemon, containment probably will not work and the strategic calculators will have to decisively defeat their imprudent foe. That draconian outcome, however, would be the result of a war initiated by the misguided great power, not the result of a preventive war launched by one or more of the threatened states.

Waltz's views on how the rational agents in the system should act in the face of danger are not persuasive. Specifically, in a world that allows for considerable non-strategic behavior by the great powers, those states that are rational have strong incentives not just to balance against potential aggressors, but also to take concrete steps to increase their own share of world power for purposes of self-protection.

When confronting reckless aggressors, all the power a state can possibly get is 'an appropriate amount of power'. States in such a dangerous situation also have strong incentives to pursue risky – which is not to say foolish – strategies to gain additional increments of power. In fact, aggression may sometimes be the smart strategy for states simply worried about their survival in Waltz's world. Let me explain.

A rational state operating in a system where there might be powerful but misguided adversaries runs the risk that one or more of those reckless adversaries might attack it, possibly with the aim of annihilating it. Even if no rival great power seems to fit that profile at the moment, a state can never be certain that will always be the case, especially since reckless states are commonplace in Waltz's world. A savvy state will therefore be constantly thinking about how best to prepare itself for the possible appearance of a dangerous opponent.

Waltz would surely advise a threatened state to build a balancing coalition in the event that an aggressive adversary appears on the scene. However, there are two major obstacles to designing an effective balancing policy in his world. First, it is more difficult to make deterrence work when dealing with powerful and reckless states rather than strategic calculators. By definition, misguided states will sometimes pursue policies that violate strategic logic. That means that they might initiate a war in circumstances where a rational state would sit tight and not start a fight. This is because domestic political considerations are likely to push them to pursue strategies that are unnecessarily risky. They are also likely to have more than the usual amount of trouble that states face when they assess the balance of power as well as the systemic constraints and incentives facing them. After all, they are not strategic calculators.

Second, a threatened state cannot be confident that its potential balancing partners will be there for them in the crunch. There is always the possibility in Waltz's world that they might behave foolishly, in which case the balancing coalition would not come together in time to deter the dangerous aggressor. Again, one might concede that balancing is not always efficient and that war sometimes results, but argue that a balancing coalition would eventually come together and the threat would be contained or eliminated in the end. That is possible, maybe even likely, but not guaranteed. Moreover, the rational state would still have to fight a war to check the aggressor, and that undertaking would surely involve huge costs, which a prudent state would want to avoid.

Given the difficulties of making containment work effectively in a world where there might be a number of misguided great powers, the optimum way for a rational state to protect itself is to be especially powerful. Striving to be the preponderant power in the system would appear to be a wise policy, although going so far as to pursue hegemony would be self-defeating according to Waltz's theory. Furthermore, that calculating state should be willing to pursue risky strategies to gain more power or retain the power advantage it has over other states. And there should be opportunities, even in Waltz's world, because he acknowledges that balancing is difficult under any circumstances. In particular, preventive war should be a serious option for a rational state facing a rising power that might one day foolishly aspire to be a hegemon.

The logic here is straightforward. The more powerful a rational state is relative to the other states in the system, the less likely it is that a reckless state would attack it. There is no guarantee that a state prone to foolish behavior would not start a losing war, but it is less likely if that potential aggressor is badly outgunned. Plus, if deterrence fails and there is a war, the rational state would be well positioned to win it quickly and decisively. Finally, a rational state that is the preponderant power in the system is likely to be able to contain a misguided aggressor by itself and not need a balancing coalition to do the job. This takes the problem of inefficient balancing off the table, as the rational state no longer has to worry about unreliable allies.

To illustrate how this logic applies in the real world, consider the problem of balancing against Imperial Germany and Nazi Germany. According to Waltz, these two powerful states should not have started the two World Wars; but their leaders foolishly thought that they could gain hegemony in Europe. Britain, France, and Russia (later the Soviet Union) were all committed to containing Germany before 1914 and again before 1939. But their efforts to form a tightly knit balancing coalition against Germany failed both times and the result was World Wars I and II.

Given the difficulty of containing a misguided Germany and preventing two cataclysmic wars, would it not have been smart for each of those threatened states to search assiduously for clever ways to increase their share of world power? Would they not have been more secure if each had been significantly more powerful than Germany in 1914 and 1939? Would that power advantage not have helped Germany understand that it was likely to lose a war it started with any of them, much less all of them? And would it not have freed each of them up from having to rely on the others to form a balancing coalition against Germany? Finally, would it not have been better for those threatened states if one or more of them had launched a preventive war against Nazi Germany in 1936? This would not have been an ideal outcome, as occupying Germany would have been difficult and costly. But it was certainly better than allowing Hitler to become much more powerful and eventually launch World War II.

This same logic applies to an important contemporary case: how the United States should deal with a rising China. According to Waltz, the United States would have little to fear from an increasingly powerful China if Washington could be assured that a China would act like a rational calculator that understood that aggression rarely pays and that it definitely makes no sense to pursue hegemony. Unfortunately, there is a good chance – according to his theory – that China will pursue a misguided foreign policy as it becomes more powerful, much the way Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany did in the first half of the twentieth century. The consequences for the United States, not to mention China's neighbors, would be disastrous if that happened. Therefore, it makes good sense in Waltz's world for the United States to pursue risky policies to maintain its present power advantage over China. The alternative – allowing China to continue growing and relying on a balancing coalition to contain it down the road – might have dire consequences.

There is another reason why the great powers are likely to act more aggressively than Waltz's theory allows. If a savvy state acts more offensively to protect itself from a reckless adversary, there is a good chance that the reckless state will feel

more threatened and respond even more aggressively. For sure, a rational state bent on defending itself will try not to needlessly provoke the reckless state. But that is not easy to do, because of the security dilemma, the essence of which is that the measures a state takes to increase its own security usually decrease the security of other states. Nevertheless, rational states will sometimes go on the offensive anyway because they believe that they can gain power at the expense of their reckless foes and thus increase their likelihood of survival.

The bottom line is that Waltz's decision to omit the rational actor assumption creates a more competitive world than he describes in his theory. He certainly allows for the presence of misguided great powers that might pursue reckless foreign policies. But he misses the fact that their presence – or possible presence – will push rational states bent on survival to adopt risky and aggressive foreign policies, which, in turn, will encourage the reckless states to behave even more aggressively. In short, while there is a status quo bias in Waltz's baseline, there is no such bias in his broader theory of international politics.

Conclusion

Waltz readily admits that his theory does not explain state behavior, but maintains that it can account for international outcomes. I have attempted to show that behavior and outcomes are closely linked and that because his theory cannot account for state behavior, it is not well suited to explaining international outcomes either. Given these limits, one might argue that its greatest value is as a normative theory, not an explanatory one. In other words, Waltz's theory is best suited to serve as a set of prescriptions for how states should behave so as to maximize their prospects for survival. As such, the focus would be on his baseline, which emphasizes that the world would be a much more peaceful place if states acted rationally. After all, savvy leaders would recognize that conquest does not pay, and that states usually pay a steep price when they allow domestic political consideration to overwhelm sound strategic considerations. Thus, there would be little incentive for states to cause trouble if they were sold on Waltz's baseline.

Charles Glaser, another prominent defensive realist, thinks about the theory he has developed in his forthcoming book in just this way. Surveying the historical record, he concludes that 'we have strong grounds for believing that states often do not act rationally', and if 'states often fail to choose optimal policies, then a rationalist theory will not do well at explaining strategic behavior'. Simply put, he sees too much suboptimal state behavior to think that his theory can do a satisfactory job of explaining how the international system has worked up to now. Thus, he has opted to develop 'a normative theory – a theory of what states should do to achieve their goals, given the constraints they face – not a positive or explanatory theory of what states actually do'.⁴¹

Some might think that normative theories are inferior to explanatory theories and thus my suggestion is a backhanded way of damning Waltz's theory. But that conclusion would be wrong. Normative theories can be valuable tools for

understanding the constraints imposed on states by the international system, whether or not states actually heed them, and they can affect how states interact with each other. The potential significance of normative theories is evident in the enormously influential writings of Adam Smith, especially his magnum opus, *The Wealth of Nations*. He made the case for free trade at a time when states around the world were wedded to mercantilist economic policies and showed little interest in pursuing free trade. Smith's theory was obviously not designed to explain how the world worked in his day, but instead was prescribing a smarter way for states to do business with each other, and ultimately make a better world.

One might make a similar case for Waltz's theory.

Notes

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- 1 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).
- 2 For examples of scholars arguing that realists assume states to be rational actors, see Jack Donnelly, *Realism and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 64–5; Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 7, 167; Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, 'Is Anybody Still a Realist?' *International Security*, 24(2), 1999, pp. 6–7, 12–13, 18. For examples of scholars arguing that Waltz assumes that states are rational agents, see Colin Elman, 'Horses for Courses: Why *Not* Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?' *Security Studies*, 6(1), 1996, p. 43; Charles L. Glaser, 'Theory of Rational International Politics', unpublished book manuscript, University of Chicago, 3 April 2008, ch. 5, p. 4; Keohane, *Neorealism and its Critics*, p. 173. On realism's complicated relationship with the rational actor assumption, see Miles Kahler, 'Rationality in International Relations', *International Organization*, 52(4), 1998, pp. 919–25; Randall L. Schweller and William C. Wohlforth, 'Power Test: Evaluating Realism in Response to the End of the Cold War', *Security Studies*, 9(3), 2000, p. 70.
- 3 Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Reflections on *Theory of International Politics*: A Response to My Critics', in Keohane, *Neorealism and its Critics*, p. 330; Waltz, *Theory*, p. 118; comment made by Kenneth Waltz at 'The King of Thought' conference, Aberystwyth, 17 September 2008. It is worth noting that Waltz maintains that, 'deterrence does not depend on rationality. It depends on fear.' Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: Norton, 2003), p. 154.
- 4 Waltz, 'Reflections', p. 330; Waltz, *Theory*, pp. 92, 118.
- 5 Waltz, *Theory*, p. 121. For Waltz's theory to work, he also needs to assume that states can never be certain about the intentions of other states. See 'Conversations in International Relations – Interview with John J. Mearsheimer (Part II)', *International Relations*, 20(2), 2006, pp. 231, 240–1.
- 6 I cannot find any place in Waltz's work where he explicitly argues that states should seek to gain power at the expense of other states. I do think, however, that it is implicit in his work that states should seek to improve their position in the balance of power, although he makes clear that they should not attempt to gain too much power. The best discussion of his thinking about war is Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory', in Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb (eds), *The Origins and Prevention of Major Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 39–52. Waltz sometimes argues that wars are the result of uncertainty and miscalculation, which seems to imply that starting wars is a mistake. 'Origins of War', p. 47; Waltz, *Theory*, p. 168.
- 7 Waltz, *Theory*, pp. 190–1.
- 8 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Realism and International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 54.
- 9 Waltz, *Theory*, p. 126.
- 10 Waltz, 'Origins of War', p. 49; Waltz, *Theory*, p. 127. Also see Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, p. 79.

- 11 Waltz, 'Origins of War', p. 40.
- 12 Waltz, *Theory*, p. 126.
- 13 Waltz, *Theory*, pp. 124, 128.
- 14 Waltz, *Theory*, p. 126. On balancing and bandwagoning more generally, see *Theory*, pp. 124–8.
- 15 Randall L. Schweller, 'Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?' *Security Studies*, 5(3), 1996, pp. 90–121. Although Schweller was the first person to describe Waltz's theory as having a 'status-quo bias', he does not argue it is due to balancing behavior, as I do. Instead, he argues that it is because Waltz focuses exclusively on security-seeking states and ignores revisionist or greedy states. Also see Deborah Boucoyannis, 'The International Wanderings of a Liberal Idea, or Why Liberals Can Learn to Stop Worrying and Love the Balance of Power', *Perspectives on Politics*, 5(4), 2007, pp. 710–11, 719; Elman, 'Horses for Courses'; Keith L. Shimko, 'Realism, Neorealism, and American Liberalism', *Review of Politics*, 54(2), 1992, pp. 281–301.
- 16 I disagree with Waltz on this important point. I argue that the international system would be competitive and dangerous even if all the states were rational agents. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001). As discussed below, Waltz's world becomes competitive and dangerous once he takes away the rational actor assumption and allows that great powers often act recklessly. Indeed, I maintain that states become even more aggressive than he appears to recognize. I do not explore our difference, however, because the focus here is on examining Waltz's theory on its own terms.
- 17 Recklessness is not simply misguided aggressiveness. A reckless state can also fail to take the necessary steps to defend itself against a dangerous adversary.
- 18 Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, p. xii.
- 19 Comment made by Waltz at 'The King of Thought' conference.
- 20 Waltz told Fred Halliday and Justin Rosenberg in May 1993, 'I've been a fierce critic of American military policy and spending and strategy, at least since the 1970s.' See 'Interview with Ken Waltz', *Review of International Studies*, 24(3), 1998, p. 373. He elaborates his criticisms throughout this interview. Also see Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, ch. 23.
- 21 Waltz, 'Origins of War', p. 44.
- 22 In *Theory*, Waltz emphasizes that socialization and competition are important processes that tend to produce 'sameness' among states. 'Competition', he argues, 'spurs the actors to accommodate their ways to the socially most acceptable and successful practices. Socialization and competition are two aspects of a process by which the variety of behaviors and of outcomes is reduced.' *Theory*, pp. 74–7, 127–8. One might think that socialization and competition lead states to become increasingly rational over time in Waltz's world. But he does not make that argument; there is no evidence from his writings that he believes that states have learned to act more strategically over time. As he remarked at the 'King of Thought' conference, 'state learning is not impressive'. Of course, in a world where reckless states are commonplace, socialization might very well perpetuate the presence of reckless states, and undermine smart learning.
- 23 Waltz, *Theory*, p. 72. Also see pp. 67–73, 121–3.
- 24 Waltz, 'Reflections', p. 340.
- 25 Waltz, *Theory*, p. 65.
- 26 Waltz, *Theory*, pp. 65, 69, 71, 125.
- 27 Elman, 'Horses for Courses', pp. 7–53. Also see Kenneth N. Waltz, 'International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy', and Colin Elman, 'A Response to Kenneth Waltz', in *Security Studies*, 6(1), 1996, pp. 54–61.
- 28 Elman, 'Horses for Courses', pp. 33, 37, 40.
- 29 This subheading is based on Waltz's comment that, 'A theory is not a statement about everything that is important in international–political life, but rather a necessarily slender explanatory construct.' Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, p. 76.
- 30 Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). Neoclassical realists also combine realist and unit-level variables in ways that are consistent with Waltz's thinking. See Brian Rathbun, 'A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism', *Security Studies*, 17(2), 2008, pp. 294–321.
- 31 The fact that realists like Posen, Snyder, and Van Evera incorporate domestic political factors into their theories leads Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik to question whether they should be categorized as realists. 'Is Anybody Still a Realist?' There is no question that these scholars have

- developed compound theories, not straightforward realist theories, and thus one can legitimately raise questions about whether they should be categorized as realists. But this is simply a labeling issue, which is of little consequence.
- 32 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 18. Also see p. 60.
- 33 Nevertheless, Waltz does appear to make some policy predictions, as Colin Elman points out in 'Horses for Courses', pp. 10–11. Of course, Waltz's theory allows for rational as well as misguided states. He is not saying that all great powers behave foolishly all of the time. Indeed, there have to be some savvy states if balancing coalitions are to form against especially aggressive great powers. His theory should be able to predict how those rational states will act, and he says as much when he writes: 'The theory leads us to expect states to behave in ways that result in balances forming.' *Theory*, p. 125. Also see pp. 71–2, 128; Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, p. 167. It is the behavior of reckless states that his theory cannot explain. And given how commonplace they are in his world, he has little choice but to concentrate on explaining outcomes, while maintaining that 'the behavior of states and of statesmen . . . is indeterminate'. *Theory*, p. 68.
- 34 Waltz, 'Reflections on *Theory*', p. 331.
- 35 Waltz, 'Reflections on *Theory*', p. 329. Also see Waltz, *Theory*, p. 70.
- 36 Two other studies which emphasize the connection between behavior and outcomes in Waltz's work are Elman, 'Horses for Courses', and James D. Fearon, 'Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Theories of International Relations', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, 1998, pp. 289–313.
- 37 Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, pp. xii–xiii; Waltz, *Theory*, p. 170.
- 38 Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), develops this line of argument.
- 39 Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, p. xiii.
- 40 Stephen Van Evera, 'Primed for Peace: Europe After the Cold War', *International Security*, 15(3), 1990/1, p. 36.
- 41 Glaser, 'Theory of Rational International Politics', ch. 1, p. 24; ch. 2, p. 1; ch. 6, p. 1. Another option is to view Waltz's theory as a Weberian 'ideal type' that helps to make the workings of the international system intelligible, but does not explain how it works in practice. Stephen Turner, 'The Importance of Social Philosophy to Morgenthau and Waltz', in G. O. Mazur (ed.), *Twenty-Five Year Memorial Commemoration to the Life of Hans Morgenthau (1904–2005)* (New York: Semenkeno Foundation, 2006), pp. 174–93. Also see Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 141.