

What are the principle advantages and limitations of Waltz's third, or systemic, image over the first and second?

Realism is the dominant theory of International Relations (IR).¹ The theory supplies much of the discourse of IR, and contributes a powerful explanation for the endemic nature of war within the international arena. An effective methodology to explore the nature of the system is the levels of analysis approach. This approach has three main levels or images: man (human nature), the state, and the international system.² Neorealism is a theory built on the third, or systemic, image.

Kenneth Waltz asserts Neorealism represents a break with classical realism. His emphasis on the systemic image identifies the anarchical and reproductive nature of IR. The anarchical system consigns units, or states, to use force as the *ultima ratio* in their pursuit of security and survival. The absence of an overarching authority and lack of mutual trust within the system requires states to rely on self-help. Morgenthau characterises the international political arena as 'a struggle for power.'³ A systemic image approach suggests it is more a struggle for security.

The Neorealist paradigm provides a general theoretical approach or explanation of IR. However, this approach is not short of detractors. Rosenberg asks, 'what's the matter with realism?'⁴ Buzan, Jones and Little recommend the need to 'rethink neorealism',⁵ and Ashley outlines the 'poverty of neorealism.'⁶ The use of the levels of analysis methodology may afford insight into this criticism. Certainly, such an approach provides a clearer more replete understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the third, or systemic, image. This essay analyses the essential advantages and limitations of the third image approach.

¹ Timothy Dunne, 'Realism', in Centre for Defence & Strategic Studies 1.2.1. Theories of International Relations *Reader*, Deakin University, Geelong, p. 109. Realism developed from dissatisfaction with the idealism and utopianism evident during the inter-war years of the 1920s and 1930s. Early adherents of the theory include E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, and George Kennan. The theory contains several subsets including traditional or classical realism, historical realism, structural realism, neorealism, and liberal realism. This essay uses Realism to describe the whole field, and employs the subsets when required.

² Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War, A Theoretical Analysis*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1959, first highlighted the three distinct levels of analysis. Daniel Papp, *Contemporary International Relations Frameworks for Understanding*, Allyn & Bacon, Needham Heights, USA, 1997, pp.18-21, identifies six levels of analysis. These include the individual, position of the individual, bureaucratic structure of actors, nation-states and other actors, regional systems, global systems.

³ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1985, first published 1948, p.31.

⁴ Justin Rosenberg, 'What's the matter with realism?', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 16, 1990, pp.285-303.

⁵ Barry Buzan, Charles Jones & Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Rethinking Neorealism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993.

⁶ Richard Ashley, 'The Poverty of Neorealism', *International Organisation*, Vol. 38, Spring 1984, pp.255-286.

Waltz's systemic approach derives from his views on the nature of theory.⁷ He claims theories, unlike laws, show the operation of associations within a system. Therefore, a theory provides an explanation of a law. A theory for objects with a high degree of variables demands a systemic approach.⁸ Consequently, the 'organised complexity' of IR requires a systemic approach.⁹ This methodology concentrates on the system level variables at the expense of unit level variables. This positivism theoretically permits the identification of the essential 'reality' about sovereign states and their conduct within an anarchical international system.¹⁰ Such an approach captures the eternal verities of international politics 'through all the centuries we can contemplate.'¹¹

There is a range of criticism of both the explanative nature of the theory, and the theoretical approach. Criticisms include the approach is not constitutive, too conservative, and ahistorical.¹² However, this essay focuses on other concerns. For example, what are these 'truths' about the international system? In addition, what positives does the systemic approach contain for the study of IR?

Within an anarchical system, security is the *sine qua non* for all other pursuits. Survival is the *raison d'être* for states.¹³ For Waltz, 'in anarchy, security is the highest end.'¹⁴ The absence of authority defines an anarchical system. Anarchy lacks order and causes uncertainty amongst states. States mitigate against uncertainty, and achieve survival through self-reliance. A self-help system does not remove uncertainty and, therefore, reproduces insecurity within other states. Waltz argues a balance of power emerges as a structural effect to regulate this security dilemma. Rousseau's parable of the stag hunt supports this determinism.¹⁵ In this story, the immediate interest of the individual hunter overcomes the common good.

⁷ Ewan Harrison, 'Waltz, Kant and systemic approaches to international relations', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, January 2002, pp.143-162, controversially argues Kant and Waltz advocate a similar systemic mode of analysis despite their representation of different theoretical traditions.

⁸ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1979, p.12. All of chapter 1 deals with the meaning and construction of theory.

⁹ loc.cit. Waltz uses but does not reference Warren Weaver's term.

¹⁰ Georg Sorenson, 'IR theory after the Cold War', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 24, Special Issue, December 1998, p.84.

¹¹ Kenneth Waltz, 'The Emerging Structure of International Politics', *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall), 1993, p.77.

¹² Sorenson, op.cit., pp.84-85.

¹³ This view concords with Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

¹⁴ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p.126.

¹⁵ Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War, A Theoretical Analysis*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1959, pp.167-168.

Similarly, in a self-help system, the logic of self-interest mitigates against collective action such as mutual security. Waltz contends modern pacts such as the Concert of Europe and the Allied powers of World War II demonstrate the transient nature of alliances. Eventually, the alliance dissolves and states must face uncertainty and rely on themselves. Consequently, states seek security through independent action such as Nazi Germany in 1939, the Soviet Union in 1956 or American actions throughout the Cold War. A third image analysis of Waltz contains a persuasive explanation of the world as it is.

Liberalism provides an alternative third image analysis. Booth sees 'security in anarchy.'¹⁶ Bull believes an 'anarchical society' regulates the mistrust and material myopia of Waltz's proposition.¹⁷ The international society creates a form of global governance through the construction of laws, institutions, and procedures. Such a perspective acknowledges greater interdependence and trust than exhibited through the taxonomy of Waltz's structuralism. Liberalism highlights the various voices, or variables, suppressed by Waltz's systemic analysis.

A systemic analysis suppresses the voice of the state in three main ways.¹⁸ First, Waltz's view provides a stunted ontology of the state. Waltz asserts states perform the same function regardless of their ideological leanings. Essentially, states pursue their own security with force, if necessary. In other words, Waltz denies the internal, or domestic, organisation of the state impacts on the system. Second, a tight Westphalian definition binds the state to, 'the monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a given territory.'¹⁹ Third, the focus on the state excludes the role of Non-State Actors (NSA) and issues not directly related to state security. A second image analysis illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to the state.

Halliday asserts the definition of state requires revision.²⁰ He claims most IR theorists accept Northedge's contention without question.²¹ The state is an abstraction wedded to territory, and the ability of the state to enforce authority and sovereignty within that space is paramount. A sociological approach posits the state is more administrative than territorial.²² Paul believes the concentration on survivalist notions of state produces a Westphalian blind alley, and neglects overlapping political authorities within a given territory. Paul derides the binary life/death Westphalian ontology, and

¹⁶ Ken Booth, 'Security in anarchy: utopian realism in theory and practice', *International Affairs*, Vol. 67, No. 3, July 1991, pp. 527-545.

¹⁷ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society A Study of Order in World Politics*, Macmillan, London, 1977.

¹⁸ Timothy Dunne, op.cit., pp.114-116, argues statism is central to Realism Paul Viotti & Mark Kauppi, *International Relations Theory Realism, Pluralism, Globalism, and Beyond*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, 1999, pp.84-85, claims the state is the centrepiece of Realism.

¹⁹ Max Weber in *ibid.*, p.114.

²⁰ Fred Halliday, *Rethinking International Relations*, Macmillan, London, 1994, p.78.

²¹ *loc.cit.*

²² Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979, p.29 in *ibid.*, p.79.

favours a more polyphonic approach.²³ Hobson also encourages a more sociological agenda. He turns IR theory upside-down to generate a better understanding of the state's international agential power.²⁴ Buzan questions the notion of Westphalian relevance in the post Cold War era.²⁵ Each of these definitions provide an alternative to the third image assumption of state meaning. However, what is happening in the 'real' world?

A third image analysis views states as billiard balls. The faster and harder balls often collide with smaller balls and knock them out of the way. Similarly, the balance of power eventually allows the balls to come to rest until the balance is upset again. However, a second image reading posits states have softer and more permeable borders than a billiard ball. Indeed, globalisation and increasing economic interdependence impede and undercut state sovereignty.

International trade increased roughly 31 times between 1960 and 1994.²⁶ The World Trade Organisation works collaboratively to promote free trade and agricultural liberalisation. China and Taiwan, despite ideological enmity, benefit from closer economic relations. Taiwan is the largest foreign investor in China. Arguably, this interdependence promotes mutual understanding and contributes to a debordering of the state.

NSA challenge the traditional notion of state sovereignty. NSA include Multi-National Corporations (MNC), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO), and International Governmental Organisations (IGO). MNCs, such as Nike and Microsoft, operate world-wide and are financially better off than many states. IGOs such as the European Union operate their own currency and promote a supranational view of politics within Europe. Finally, NGOs such as Amnesty International and the Greenpeace contribute to the rise of a global civil society through the promotion of 'common' values and norms such as human rights, democracy and justice. NSA change the billiard table into a cobweb of interdependence where actions and ideas intersect and overlap. Consequently, this has led Buzan to speculate there is not just a change within the dominant unit but a change of it.²⁷

The third challenge to the third image analysis rests on the domestic organisation of states. The liberal democratic peace thesis contends liberal democratic states do not fight each other. Russett offers it is impossible to identify unambiguously any wars

²³ Paul, D.E., 'Sovereignty, survival and the Westphalian blind alley in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2, April 1999, pp.217-231.

²⁴ Hobson, J.M., 'The "second state debate" in International Relations: theory turned upside-down', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, July 2001, pp.395-414.

²⁵ Buzan, B. & Little, R., 'Beyond Westphalia? Capitalism after the Fall', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, December 1999, pp.89-104 in *The End of the World As We Know It Reader*, Deakin University, Geelong.

²⁶ Papp, op.cit., p.51.

²⁷ Buzan, B. & Little, R., 'Beyond Westphalia', pp.93-94. He labels the new unit a post-modern state. This is a state superseding the Westphalian model.

between democratic states since 1815.²⁸ Doyle claims liberal democratic states when forced to choose sides elect to fight against non liberal democratic states.²⁹ Levy alleges this statement is, 'as close as anything we have to an empirical law in IR.'³⁰ Law or not, the thesis is a potent argument for the influence of internal organisation on the system. If the theory is correct then a world without war is possible. A liberal democratic world is one where war is obsolescent, and the anarchical system is transformed. Even Waltz admits, 'if the democratic peace thesis is right, structuralist realist theory is wrong.'³¹ However, one of the strengths of the systemic analysis is its ability to negate or deflect challenges to its dominance.

Waltz avers three concerns with the liberal democratic peace thesis. First, he notes utopianism and a trend toward peace appear at the conclusion of wars. Doyle, Russett, and Levy merely reflect the discredited Wilsonian idealism of the post World War I era. Second, Waltz highlights the monolithic definition of democracy. Was not Wilhelme Germany a democracy? Clearly, post 1914 Britain and France did not think so! Therefore, a democracy is more about perception, a perception defined by powerful states. After World War II, the United States consistently intervened in other states affairs such as Chile and the Dominican Republic. Yet, both these states were democracies. Third, liberal states still conduct war against non democratic states. American actions against Korea (1950s), Vietnam (1960s) and Iraq (1991) bear testament to this statement. Therefore, perhaps power, not democracy, represents the basis for this liberal democratic peace thesis. In the last two centuries democracies, such as Britain and the United States, have been among the most powerful states. Power does not automatically lead to war or the use of force. Often less violent means but no less influential means achieve the desired result.

Economic influence and interdependence symbolise these less violent means. Economic competition becomes a modern form of gunboat diplomacy. Embargoes, tariffs, sanctions underscore this approach. Likewise, interdependence affords influence for more powerful states. Interdependence is unequal, and reflects a dominance-dependence relationship. The latter becomes uncertain and vulnerable to the former. Thus,

²⁸ Bruce Russett, 'The Fact of Liberal democratic Peace' & 'Why the Liberal Peace?' in Brown, M. Lynn-Jones, S.M. & Miller, S (eds), *Debating the Democratic Peace*, MIT, 1996. Information from Richard Shapcott, 'The World As We Know It: A War System?', in *The End of the World As We Know It Study Guide*, Deakin University, Geelong, p.6.

²⁹ Michael Doyle, 'Liberalism and World Politics', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 80, No. 4, 1986, pp.1152 in loc.cit. See also John Orme, 'The Utility of Force in a World of Scarcity', *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 1997/98 and Carl Kaysen, 'Is War Obsolete: A Review Essay', *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Spring 1990, pp.81-103 in *The End of the World As We Know It Reader*, Deakin University, Geelong for analysis of war and the use of force within the post Cold War era.

³⁰ Jack Levy, 'The Causes of War: A Review of Theories and Evidence', in Philip Tetlock et al (eds), *Behaviour, Society, and Nuclear War*, Vol. 1, Oxford University Press, New York, 1989, p.270. Information from Charles Kegley, *Controversies in International Realitions Theory: Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge*, St Martins Press, New York, 1995, p.10.

³¹ Kenneth Waltz, 'Structural Realism after the Cold War', *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer), 2000, p.13.

uncertainty + vulnerability = less security + more conflict.

Consequently, less violent means still promote opportunities for conflict as states struggle to maintain their security in the face of their more powerful neighbours. Ironically, a third image analysis exposes the culturally loaded use of these terms. Democracy and interdependence become a modern form of cultural imperialism, ideological camouflage for the strong to subdue the weak, and relativistic notions not universal truths. Nonetheless, second image analysis exposes some of the limitations of the third image analysis mainly with respect to statism. A first image analysis may yield similar insights.

A first image analysis claims human nature is the cause of war. Mortal flaws become the source of conflict. Thucydides Athenians assert, 'it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can.'³² Power becomes a tenet of human behaviour. Morgenthau agrees power, and the absence of morality, characterises international politics. For Morgenthau, war is unavoidable as human nature is fixed.³³ Conversely, Wilson contends humans are capable of reason, and, therefore capable of overcoming self-interest. Carr debunks this utopianism in *The Twenty Years Crisis*.³⁴ The key to the first image is the role of the individual within IR.

The systemic image dismisses the role of statesmen, individuals, and human nature within IR. Waltz argues, 'the balance of power is not so much imposed by statesmen on events as it is imposed by events on statesmen.'³⁵ Waltz views first image analysis as overly metaphysical. The broad nature of human behaviour substantiates any human action. This provides a theory too general to be of any use. A third image locks human action into a groundhog day game of power politics. A more complete picture recognises the influence of statesmen. The balance of power becomes a foreign policy construct of individuals rather than a systemic creation. This allows the evaluation of the impact of President Carter's strong Christian beliefs and values on American human rights policies. Wendt intimates, 'if self-interest is not sustained by practice, it will die out.'³⁶ A first image analysis reveals the sterile determinism of the third image. Oscar Wilde illustrates a mix of individuality and structure provides a better vision, 'a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at.'³⁷

³² Thucydides, *The Melian Dialogue* in Dunne, op.cit., p.111.

³³ Morgenthau, op.cit., chapter 1 and 3.

³⁴ E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis*, Macmillan, London, 1939. Booth, op.cit., pp.530-531, suggests Carr's language contains a 'fatal dualism' of realism and utopianism. This ambiguity undermines realism. Consequently, realists normally ignore this message.

³⁵ Waltz, *Man, The State, and War*, p.209.

³⁶ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p.369 in Dale Copeland, 'The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism: A Review Essay', *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Fall), 2000, p.196.

³⁷ Oscar Wilde in Booth, op.cit., p.527.

A levels of analysis approach renders a less prescriptive more complex version of IR than available through the astigmatism of a single image. The investigation of all three images reveals the principle limitations and advantages of the systemic image. The systemic image, or Waltzian Neorealism, produces a general explanation of IR. However, the suppression of key variables, especially at unit level, leaves the analysis vulnerable to criticism. A key limitation of the third image is its conception of the state. The third image denies the domestic organisation of the state contains any international agential power. Consequently, the third image eschews change, and envisages a reproductive and deterministic international system. Similarly, a first image analysis highlights the role of the individual within IR. The third image posits the structure operates regardless of human statecraft and reinforces the limitations the second image analysis reveals. A final strength of the third image is its ability to counter criticism and retain relevance despite considerable changes evident within the post Cold War era. Jaques claims,

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players³⁸

The question for the levels of analysis problem is to decide what impact the stage has on the players and the players have on the stage.

³⁸ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2.7.139-140, in Stanley Wells & Gary Taylor (eds), *William Shakespeare The Complete Works*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988, p.638.

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