

**Disclaimer:** *Theory of International Politics* is a deceptively complex and nuanced work – demonstrated best by its enduring legacy. That being said, no ‘outline’ captures everything important contained in the book so please do not take this as the ‘end-all, be-all’ of Waltz’s theories. Nothing substitutes for having read this book carefully, preferably more than once.

**Quick summary:** *Structural constraints, particularly the relative distribution of power in the system, determine international politics (rather than the behavior of individual units); bipolar systems are more stable than multipolar ones; interdependence is conducive to war, not peace. ‘The enduring anarchic character of international politics accounts for the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia.’ (p. 66)*

### **Reductionist vs. Systemic Theories**

Waltz differentiates reductionist theories from systemic ones. The difference is not what they deal with but how they arrange their materials and causes. Reductionist or ‘inside-out’ theories concentrate causes at the national or subnational (including individual and internal characteristics of actors/states) level; the whole is understood by knowing the attributes and interactions of its parts. According to Waltz, such theories allow variables to proliferate wildly and fail to deliver a logically sound and traceable process by which effects that derive from the system can be attributed to units. Although the actions and politics of states are decided according to internal processes, those outcomes are shaped by the very presence of other states and interactions with them. Reductionist theories, most importantly, fail to explain continuity over time; the variety of actors and variations in their actions are not matched by a variety of outcomes. System theories, on the other hand, conceive of causes operating at the international level. Structure does not directly affect behavior in the system but does so indirectly through socialization of actor interaction and competition among them. (see p. 75-76 for more)

### **Political Structures**

Structure is defined by the *arrangement* of parts, not the characteristics of behavior of units. Only changes of arrangement, therefore, are structural changes. A system is composed of a structure and of interacting parts. Political structures are defined by ordering principles (decentralized and anarchic in the international arena and therefore primarily concerned with survival), the character of units (functionally undifferentiated), and the distribution of capabilities (*relative* distribution; system-wide concept, not a unit attribute).

### **Anarchy and all that**

Because states may at any time use force, all states must be prepared to do so. In international relations, the state of nature is a state of war. The structure of international politics limits cooperation in two ways: inequality in expected distributions (relative instead of absolute gains) and dependency. Since states are uncertain about the future intentions of others, they will avoid situations in which the expected distribution of cooperation benefits others relatively more (when it threatens to upset the status quo distribution of capabilities). Anarchy has many virtues, however. Because the threat of force always looms in the background states limit manipulations, moderate demands, and seek the settlement of disputes before escalation. The anarchic structure of the system explains the *Realpolitik* observed by Machiavelli and others. *Realpolitik* refers to the methods by which foreign policy is conducted and provides the rationale for them. Structural constraints explain why such methods are used repeatedly despite differences in the persons and states that use them.

Balance-of-power theory exists when the order is anarchic and units primarily striving to survive populate the system. Unitary (self-help) actors in such a system seek self-preservation at a minimum and expansion/domination at a maximum. The can balance against others via *internal* efforts (increase in military capabilities, etc) and *external* efforts (alliances with others and/or weakening alliances of adversaries). Power is a means and not an end; security/survival is the highest end. The first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their relative position in the system. States therefore prefer to join the weaker of two coalitions and we do not expect to see the strong combining with the strong (balancing instead of bandwagoning – not in the ‘free-rider’ sense).

### **Structural Causes and Effects (Economic and Military)**

Three quick and somewhat unrelated points:

1. Economic, military, and other capabilities cannot be sectorized and separately weighted. Power/capabilities derive from size of population, territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, and political stability and competence.
2. Imbalances of power feed the ambitions of some states to extend their control (and hence increase their relative position in the system). The safety of all states depends therefore on maintenance of balance between them.
3. The *myth of interdependence* obscures the realities of international politics and asserts a false belief about the conditions that promote peace (WWI is a perfect example). Interdependence is really mutual vulnerability. What matters is each state’s relative dependence or independence. Interdependence tends to decrease as the number of great powers diminishes

### **Why bipolarity is best**

Balancing is done differently in multi- and bipolar systems. With two powers, imbalances between them can only be righted by internal efforts. With greater than two powers, shifts in alignment provide an additional means of adjustment, adding flexibility to the system. Three powers is bad; it is too easy for two powers to gang up on the third, divide spoils, and pull the system to bipolarity. Four is the lowest acceptable number for multipolarity. Five is the lowest that provides stability while providing a role for a balancer.

There are advantages of two, and only two, great powers. Multipolar systems rely on external efforts to balance. Uncertainties about who threatens whom, who will oppose whom, and who will gain or lose from the actions of other states accelerate as the number of states increases. There are too many powers for any to draw clear and fixed lines between allies and adversaries, too few to keep effects of defection low.

In a bipolar world, military and economic interdependence is low. Internal balancing is important, external balancing is not (adding allies does not help any one power balance the other; NATO and the Warsaw Pact and China are marginal). Realignment is fairly insignificant which allows the powers flexibility of strategy; they need not worry about the preferences of allies. Internal balancing is more reliable and precise than a reliance on allies; states are less likely to misjudge the strength and resolve of their adversary (uncertainty is low). There are no peripheries in a bipolar world. The relative position of two states extends the geographic scope of both powers' concerns and broadens the range of factors included in their competition. In contrast, in a multipolar world dangers are diffused, responsibilities are unclear, and definitions of vital interests are easily observed. Although tension is high in a bipolar world, there is heavy pressure to moderate and it is not possible to appeal to their parties.

Note: A multipolar world with two blocs is *not* the same as a bipolar system! Military cooperation in such a system is vital and military interdependence is high. Bipolarity is dynamically stable; a multipolar world with two blocs is not.

### **A final note on power**

Again, power is a means, not an ends (important difference with Classical Realism). Power is also not simply control. If it is defined as such there is no difference between the questions 'How is power distributed?' and 'What are the effects of a given distribution of power?' Power does four things. It provides a means of maintaining one's autonomy in the face of others' force. It permits a wider range of action while leaving outcomes of actions uncertain. The more powerful enjoy wider margins of safety and have more to say about which games will be played and how. Finally, great power means a state has a big stake in the system and the ability to act for its sake.