

Waltz – A Theory of International Politics

Chapter 5 – Political Structures

Waltz defines structure as an abstraction from the attributes of both units and relations. Structure defines how the parts of a given system are arranged. He argues that structures are capable of wide application across fields with a similar arrangement of parts (Waltz p.80). In a sense, structure bears the same relationship to events that grammar bears to the content of sentences. Structure is defined on the basis of a system's organizing principle, the specification of functions of differentiated units, and the distribution of capabilities across those units (Waltz p.101). Waltz discusses the structures confronted by executives in the United States and Britain, concluding that the structures in place in the United Kingdom militate in favor of caution and consensus-building, resulting in the elevation of strong party managers but weak national leaders, concluding that similar structures produce similar effects.

With a satisfactory definition of structure established, Waltz turns to the international system. He concludes that international systems are decentralized and anarchic (Waltz p.88). He believes that states are fundamental to the international system, and that the force of states undergirds international organizations. Waltz draws an extended analogy between market economics and international politics, arguing that the same feedback mechanisms produce a kind of homeostasis. Writing that "structures emerge from the coexistence of states" (Waltz p.91), he justifies the market analogy by arguing that the international system is fundamentally a "self-help" system, with the implication that states will seek to ensure their own survival.

Waltz differentiates between two different organization principles: hierarchy and anarchy. Hierarchy is said to involve relations of super- and sub-ordination, implying differentiation, while anarchy entails coordination among a system's units, implying their sameness. National politics is hierarchic, with differentiated units performing particular functions, while international politics consists of like units performing the same activities (Waltz p.97). Fundamental to the structure of the system is the distribution of capabilities across the system's units. Waltz is careful to distinguish between individual capabilities (unit attributes) and the distribution of capabilities (a systemic attribute).

Chapter 6 – Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power

Recalling Hobbes, Waltz writes that "[a]mong states, the state of nature is a state of war", associating anarchy with violence. Since both national and international politics are characterized by force, Waltz argues that the difference lies in their different modes of organization for addressing the use of force. (Waltz p.103). In the international system, states are forced to rely on "self-help". Waltz stresses the functional similarity of units in anarchy, arguing that anarchic systems lack opportunities for differentiation because participants wish to avoid dependency (Waltz p.106). States are thus "denied the advantages that a full division of labor, political as well as economic, would provide (Waltz p.107). This is a zero-sum situation, and "[e]ven the prospect of large absolute gains for both parties does not elicit their cooperation so long as each fears how the other will use its increased capabilities" (Waltz p.105). He writes that as a result "[t]he division of labor across nations...is slight in comparison with the highly articulated division of labor within them.

When states act within the anarchic structure of the international system, Waltz argues that the structure will cause actions to have unintended consequences. Rational behavior, given structural constraints, does not lead to the desired result. States are thus in a prisoners' dilemma vis-à-vis their rivals. Structure thus dominates intentions. As Waltz puts it, "[t]he only remedy for a strong structural effect is a structural change." He further points out that while macrotheories of the national economy make sense because

there is a unitary actor with responsibility for the system, macrotheories of international politics lack the same practical implications because there is no such overarching actor with systemic responsibility (Waltz p.110).

Since the anarchic “self-help” position is characterized by a great deal of risk, Waltz explores how this risk might be limited. He proposes that by enmeshing states in a hierarchical order, states could (at some cost) reduce the risk imposed by anarchy (Waltz p.111). However, he argues that this possibility is foreclosed by the difficulty of mobilizing the resources needed to create and maintain the unity of the system (Waltz p.112). As the incipient central authority grows in power, Waltz argues that it will become an ever-more attractive target for states to control. As a result, “[n]o appeal can be made to a higher entity clothed with the authority and equipped with the ability to act on its own initiative” and attempts at world government are doomed to founder (Waltz p.113). The persistence of the use of force in the international system is explained by a credibility argument – threats, to be credible, must sometimes be acted on (Waltz p.114).

Waltz introduces the concept of balance-of-power, arguing that this system will prevail in anarchic orders populated by units wishing to survive (Waltz p.121). He argues that the falsifiability criterion is overly strict, and proposes testing his theory instead by presenting “hard cases” and looking for confirmation. Balance-of-power theory predicts that states will seek to maintain their own power through imitation of successful states, and that the military power of relatively weaker states will increase more quickly (or shrink more slowly) than the power of stronger and larger ones (Waltz p.124). However, as state actions are motivated both by structures and by internal political reasons, Waltz is pessimistic about attributing particular actions to balance-of-power theory. Instead, he proposes that we confront the theory with ever-more-difficult tests.

As a feature of anarchy, balancing will diminish to the extent that hierarchical structures prevail. The alternative behavior, bandwagoning, emerges when gains are possible for the losers and when losing does not jeopardize their security (Waltz p.126). In an anarchic context where these facts do not prevail, states will seek to ensure their survival by joining weaker coalitions. This means that “states balance power rather than maximize it” (Waltz p.127). The resulting competition forces states to imitate their competitors’ successful practices, producing “a tendency to sameness” among the competitors. Even nonconformist states are socialized over time by mere involvement in the system (Waltz p.128).

Chapter 7 – Structural Causes and Economic Effects

Waltz argues that state power is unitary, and that states rely on their combined capabilities to survive. It is thus nonsensical to speak of “economic superpowers” or to otherwise differentiate state capacity (Waltz p.131). Given the inequality of nations, Waltz concludes that the number of consequential states will be small. He further argues that inequality is a spur to peace, because extreme equality is associated with instability (Waltz p.132). Waltz compares small states to “price-takers” in the economic system, and large states to “price makers” who must worry about the systemic consequences of their actions. To these large states, “relative gains may be more important than absolute ones” (Waltz p.134) because such gains have greater survival implications. To put the point slightly differently, great powers are in a situation of strategic complementarity vis-à-vis their rivals, and must take their decisions into account.

Waltz thinks that as the number of major powers increases there is a concomitant increase in the cost of bargaining among them. As a result, structural factors militate in favor of a small number of major powers at any given time. He concludes that smaller systems are more stable, and that major powers in small systems are better able to coordinate their actions to achieve mutual gains (Waltz, p.136). Waltz argues that interdependence (mutual dependence) among states can make conflict more likely unless the

acceleration in interdependence is matched by an increase in central control (Waltz p.138). He argues that the world of 1979 is considerably less interdependent than the world of 1914, and that this makes war less likely.

For Waltz, the study of international politics grapples primarily with differences of national capability (Waltz p.143). This will be true, runs the argument, as long as inequalities across nations are greater than inequalities within them. An implication of this theory is that as national economies converge and Gini coefficients soar, there may come a time where differences of national capability recede into the background and the inequalities within states become salient factors for international political analysis.