

# The Past, Present and Future of Realism

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## The Past, Present and Future of Realism

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Structural realism or neorealism seeks to explain International Relations on the basis of the structural pressures induced by anarchy. Structural realists, however, differ in their assessment of how much power states require under these conditions. For this reason, neorealism is often divided into two sub branches: defensive and offensive realism. Defensive realism contends that states should acquire an appropriate amount of power necessary for them to thrive. They should however not maximise their relative power in a quest to become hegemons.<sup>[1]</sup> Such a behaviour is deemed counterproductive as it will provoke the formation of an opposing coalition that will undermine their position (Grieco 1988; Mastanduno 1997, 79 n. 13; Waltz 1988; Waltz 2008, 79). In contrast, offensive realism maintains that states should maximise their relative power to become hegemons, if they have the opportunity to do so. In this view, power preponderance is the best safeguard for states' survival (Labs 1997; Layne 2000, 106; Mearsheimer 2010, 78).

The leading proponent of defensive realism, Kenneth Waltz, and the most influential advocate of offensive realism, John Mearsheimer, both maintain that their respective theories continue to be the most powerful lenses for understanding international politics in the post-Cold War world (Waltz 1997, 916; Waltz 2004, 6; Mearsheimer 2001, 168, 361). The present chapter will put this proposition to test by evaluating the merits of Waltz's defensive realism and Mearsheimer's offensive realism in this new order where the United States has clearly emerged as the leading power (Pashakhanlou 2009; Pashakhanlou 2013; Pashakhanlou 2014; Pashakhanlou 2016).<sup>[2]</sup> Specifically, this chapter will examine the theories of Waltz and Mearsheimer against their own empirical analysis of the post-Cold War era to verify whether they can account for contemporary international relations.

The result of this inquiry indicates that none of these theories could have had any explanatory power in the post-Cold War world, if assessed on their own terms. This is because neither Waltz's defensive realism nor Mearsheimer's offensive realism is equipped to account for interstate relations under hegemony<sup>[3]</sup> and unipolarity<sup>[4]</sup>, a condition which both scholars argue has characterised the international system with the ascendancy of the United States after the end of the Cold War in their later writings.

This argument is advanced over the remainder of this chapter. The first section explains how the theories of Waltz and Mearsheimer will be assessed and highlights the utility of this approach. The second section is dedicated to the defensive realism of Waltz. Here, his theory is outlined along with his empirical analysis of the post-Cold War world. The inability of Waltz's defensive realism to account for international politics under hegemony and unipolarity are also highlighted here. The ensuing section is devoted to the offensive realism of Mearsheimer. This segment provides an overview of his offensive realism, empirical assessment of the post-Cold War era and an explanation of why hegemony and unipolarity invariably create anomalies for his theory. A conclusion that briefly summarises the preceding points and argues for the need of new theories of international politics brings this chapter to a closure. At this point, it is however appropriate to take a closer look at how the defensive and offensive realism of Waltz and

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Mearsheimer will be assessed.

## Theory Assessment

First, as has already been mentioned, this investigation puts to test what Waltz and Mearsheimer themselves claim for their theory – that their theories still retain their explanatory power in the post-Cold War era. The great advantage of this approach is that it can no longer be claimed that the criteria for evaluation is not suitable for the theories in question as could have been the case if the theories would have been examined against externally derived criteria from the works of Karl Popper, Imre Lakatos, Thomas Kuhn, etc. (see Jackson and Nexon 2009; Moravcsik 2003 and Waltz 1997).

Second, the current investigation examines defensive and offensive realism as presented by Waltz and Mearsheimer and does not treat these two distinct realist theories as a monolithic block under the broad banner of 'realism' or 'neorealism' under the illusion that they are somehow equivalent to one another, which is a rather common practice in the discipline of IR. As William Wohlforth (2008, 131 and 143) rightly points out, to reduce the realist school of thought 'to a single, internally consistent, and logically coherent theory is the taproot of the greatest misunderstanding'; studies that do so generate 'profoundly misleading' results.

Third, the explanatory power of both theories are evaluated against Waltz's and Mearsheimer's own empirical analysis of the post-Cold War World rather than my own interpretation of this era or that of others. Altogether, this evaluation of the explanatory power of Waltz's defensive realism and Mearsheimer's offensive realism presents an easy test for their theories. This is evident as they are evaluated against the principles of the theorists themselves and their own empirical analysis of the post-Cold War era. If the theories cannot pass such an easy test, their validity is seriously called into question (George and Bennett 2005, 122). With that said, we can now turn our attention to the theories themselves, starting with Waltz's defensive realism.

## Waltz's Defensive Realism in the Post-Cold War World

Waltz's defensive realism<sup>[5]</sup> offers a systemic and state-centric theory of international politics. The structural components of Waltz's defensive realism consist of anarchy defined as the absence of government and the distribution of capabilities across the system. In doing so, Waltz strips away other features of the international order and every attribute of states except their capabilities from his theory (Waltz 1979, 99). Moreover, Waltz (1979, 91–2, 118–9) only makes two explicit assumptions regarding states: that they are unitary actors and that they, at minimum, pursue policies to ensure their own survival.

Since Waltz (1979, 105, 118) assumes that states are unitary actors that only differ in their capabilities and have to take care of themselves in the anarchic system, the balance of power becomes an 'iron law' as states can only assure their survival by making sure that none of their rivals grow too powerful. The balance of power is the dynamic part of Waltz's otherwise static theoretical model as he contends that the number of great powers, who possess the greatest capabilities, makes up the balance or the poles of the international system and shape its character (1979, 129–130, 144). In this regard, differentiations between a bipolar system where the balance is maintained by two great powers and a multipolar system in which the anarchic system is inhabited by three or more great powers Waltz (1979, 161). In Waltz's view, a bipolar world is more stable than a multipolar world since 'uncertainties about who threatens whom, about who will oppose whom, and about who will gain or lose from the actions of other states accelerate as the number of states increases' (1979, 165).

Interestingly, Waltz makes no mention of unipolarity in his highly influential 1979 monograph, *Theory of International Politics*. In his empirical writings and his publications after 1993, Waltz has however consistently maintained that the post-Cold War world is unipolar with the United States as the reigning hegemon (see e.g. Waltz 1997, 914; Waltz 2000a, 27; Waltz 2000b, 23; Waltz 2004, 4–6). In his article *Structural Realism after the Cold War* published at the dawn of the new millennium, Waltz for instance writes that '[u]pon the demise of the Soviet Union, the international political system became unipolar' (2000b, 27). Although Waltz has constantly claimed that the post-Cold War era has been characterised by unipolarity and global American hegemony in his publications published after 'The Emerging

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Structure of International Politics', he has insisted that the unipolar moment will be brief and that the world will eventually become multipolar (Waltz 2000b, 29–41; Waltz 2000a, 25–36).

It is not hard to see why Waltz consistently points out that unipolarity will be short-lived and that the world will become multipolar in the future. His theory does, after all, assume that states will balance against a preponderant power no matter how benign the hegemon might be (Waltz 2000b, 30). Consequently, Waltz (2000b, 30, 36–8) maintains that American power will be checked in the blink of an eye, historically speaking. Waltz (2000b, 36–8) is also careful to point out that the United States cannot do anything to solidify its hegemony, as a new balancing coalition will be formed against it, no matter what measures the US takes to prevent such an outcome.<sup>[6]</sup> Waltz himself specifically acknowledges that the balancing principle that his theory is based on suggests that American hegemony and unipolarity will be replaced by a multipolar system (2000b, 30). Waltz asserts that the European Union or a German-led coalition, China, Japan, and in a more distant future Russia will be the most likely balancers in this new constellation.

At this point, many eyebrows may be raised concerning Waltz's treatment of unipolarity and multipolarity. As Richard Little (2007, 189) puts it: '[g]iven the significance that Waltz attaches to the economics analogy and the importance that economists attach to monopoly, the failure to open up the issue of unipolarity in *Theory of International Politics* is surprising, while the focus on multipolarity in the post-Cold War era becomes distinctly odd.' This omission of unipolarity and emphasis on multipolarity is however fully understandable once one realises that unipolarity is a condition that Waltz's theory is inherently unable to deal with.

As has been mentioned, his defensive realism is a state-centric systemic theory of international politics based on the anarchic structure of the international system and the distribution of capabilities across the system that revolves around balance of power which can be either bipolar or multipolar, according to Waltz's writings in *Theory of International Politics*. In an anarchic unipolar world, there are however no longer any systemic constraints to shove and shape the hegemon's behaviour in the international system. After all, Waltz maintains that states are judges in their own cases in an anarchic system (1959, 159). This means that even though anarchy may still persist in Waltz's post-Cold War world, it can by itself not constrain the behaviour of the hegemon. Indeed, the hegemon can do as it pleases in the absence of a global Leviathan. This is because there is by definition no other greater power to balance against the hegemon in a unipolar world in order to constrain its behaviour. Hence, the necessary structural constraints that Waltz relies upon to explain state behaviour are no longer at play concerning the hegemon in unipolarity (2000b, 27).

Even Waltz implicitly acknowledges this fact in a passage when he writes that: '[t]hrough the long years of the Cold War the might of each superpower balanced the might of the other and moderated the behaviour of both of them. Now the only superpower left in the field is free to act on its whims and follow its fancies' (2004, 5). Waltz goes on to postulate that in a unipolar world there are no longer any checks and balances on the hegemon. Its behaviour is instead determined by its own internal policies rather than external structural pressures (Waltz 2003, 5).

This revelation suggests that Waltz's (2004, 3) theory that 'explains how external forces shape states' behaviour, but says nothing about the effects of internal forces' as he himself points out, cannot account for the hegemon in unipolarity. If we consider Waltz's own arguments – that a) there are hardly any external forces on the hegemon in a unipolarity and that its behaviour is instead determined by its own internal forces and b) that his defensive realism can only explain how external forces affect state behaviour and have nothing to say about the effects of internal forces, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that his theory is inherently unequipped to account for the behaviour of the hegemon.

It is also important to note that it is not only the behaviour of the sole great power in the international system – the hegemon – that becomes an anomaly to Waltz's defensive realism under unipolarity but the entire system as a whole. This is evident when Waltz maintains that: '[i]n systems theory, structure is a generative notion; and the structure of a system is generated by the interactions of its principal parts [the great power(s)]' as the 'fates of all the states ... are affected much more by the acts and the interactions of the major ones than of the minor ones' (1979, 72). For this reason, Waltz claims that his general theory of international politics is based on the great powers but applies to lesser

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states 'insofar as their interactions are insulated from the intervention of the great powers of a system' (Waltz 1979, 73).

Hence, since Waltz's theory is admittedly based on the great powers and can only account for the behaviour of other states in so far as they can be induced from that of the great power(s), it must consequently mean that his defensive realism cannot account for smaller states either in unipolarity as it is incapable of explaining the behaviour of the only great power in the system under these conditions. As such, Waltz's state-centric theory of international politics becomes inherently unable to account for any state behaviour under unipolarity. This is why the entire system becomes unexplainable by his theory. Indeed, since Waltz has argued that the international system has in fact been characterised by American hegemony since the end of the Cold War in his writings after 1993, this must mean that his theory cannot have had any explanatory power in the post-Cold War world, if assessed on its own terms.

In sum, the entire post-Cold War period has thus far been anomalous to Waltz's defensive realism and it has been unable to account for what it is designed to do: explain 'international outcomes' or 'a small number of big and important things' (Waltz 1986, 329; Waltz 1996, 54-7).

## Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism in the Post-Cold War World

Mearsheimer's offensive realism<sup>[7]</sup> is also a structural theory of international politics that affords special attention to great powers, but claims to have relevance for other states as well to varying degrees (Mearsheimer 2001, 17-22, 403 n. 5). Just like Waltz's defensive realism, the offensive realism of Mearsheimer also assumes that the international system is anarchic where survival is the main objective of states (2001, 29-32). Mearsheimer however adds three additional assumptions to his theory that are not among Waltz's explicit assumptions. Mearsheimer's three additional explicit assumptions are as follows:

- States always possess an offensive capability, which enables them to hurt and potentially destroy one another.
- International relations take place in the existential condition of uncertainty, making assessments regarding others' intentions with absolute certainty impossible. Consequently, no state can be fully assured that its rivals will not turn their military apparatus against it at any given time.
- States are rational actors (Mearsheimer 2001, 30-1).

Mearsheimer contends that the combination of all his five assumptions pushes states to maximise their relative power as opposed to seeking an 'appropriate' amount of power as in Waltz's defensive realism (Waltz 1979; Waltz 1988, 616-7; Mearsheimer 2001, 30-1). As such, all great powers aspire to reach the pinnacle of power, hegemony. In stark contrast to Waltz's defensive realism, which only considers global hegemony, Mearsheimer's offensive realism however makes a distinction between global hegemons and regional hegemons (2001, 40). The former dominates the entire planet while the latter rules over a continent. Offensive realism maintains that a state has to enjoy military superiority and be the only great power in the international system to qualify as a hegemon (Mearsheimer 2001, 40).

Offensive realism can, however, not explain international politics under the condition of hegemony. Mearsheimer makes this point clear when he writes that; '[i]f one state achieves hegemony, the system ceases to be anarchic and becomes hierarchic. Offensive realism, which assumes international anarchy, has little to say about politics under hierarchy. Thus, realism is likely to provide important insights about world politics for the foreseeable future, save for what goes on inside in a region that is dominated by a hegemon' (Mearsheimer 2001, 415 n. 13).<sup>[8]</sup> In his earlier empirical assessments, Mearsheimer only contends that the Western Hemisphere and Western Europe have been hierarchic. Indeed, Mearsheimer (2001, 40-1, 239) asserts that the United States has been the regional hegemon of a hierarchic Western Hemisphere since at least 1900. Concerning Western Europe, Mearsheimer (2001, 529 n. 63) insists that the large American presence in this area since World War II has made the region hierarchic rather than anarchic.

If we add up Mearsheimer's own two assertions; (1) that offensive realism is unable to account for international

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politics under hegemony since it makes the relationship within that region hierarchic and (2) that the Western Hemisphere has been hierarchic since at least 1900 and Western Europe from 1945 and onwards, this must consequently mean that offensive realism has been unable to explain foreign policy behaviour and international outcomes within these regions from these dates onwards. These anomalies will also persist as long as they remain hierarchic.

In his earlier work prior to 2012, Mearsheimer does however not acknowledge that the United States has been the global hegemon. It can thus not be argued that offensive realism has been unable to explain the entire world on basis of these writings. In these publications, Mearsheimer (2001, 40, 141, 381) maintains that the post-Cold War era has been multipolar rather than unipolar, with the United States, China and Russia as the great powers. This assertion however creates major inconsistencies between Mearsheimer's theoretical and empirical analysis of international politics.

First, Mearsheimer posits that a state must have the military might 'to put up a serious fight against' the most formidable power in the international system to qualify as a great power (2001, 40, 528 n. 60). Mearsheimer however claims that the main competitor of the United States in the post-Cold World, China, 'does not possess a formidable military today and it is certainly in no position to pick a fight with the United States ... even in the Asia-Pacific region' (2010, 384–5, emphasis added). As such, Mearsheimer's own empirical analysis suggests that China does not satisfy offensive realism's defining criterion of a great power. If China cannot be regarded as a great power, then neither can Russia, since Mearsheimer considers Russia as the weaker of the two (2006, 119–120).

Second, if the United States is merely a regional rather than a global hegemon, then it should essentially behave as a status-quo power and an offshore balancer in other parts of the world, unless its exalted position becomes threatened by an aspiring potential hegemon, according to the offensive realism of Mearsheimer (2001, 141). In his 2011 article 'Imperial by Design', Mearsheimer himself however makes it clear that this is not the way the United States has behaved in the post-Cold War era. Instead of acting as an offshore balancer in other parts of the world, Mearsheimer contends that America has adopted 'a flawed grand strategy' aimed at global domination (2011, 18). Under such conditions, Mearsheimer's offensive realism also expects the other great powers in the system, China and Russia, to balance against the aggressor (2001, 45). Yet, Mearsheimer (2001, 528 n. 62) explicitly contends that no serious balancing coalition has been formed or is likely to be formed against the United States.

The only explanation that could account for these major discrepancies between Mearsheimer's theoretical and empirical analysis of international politics is that the United States is the sole great power in the international system and that the post-Cold War world has been unipolar rather than multipolar. This could explain why the US has managed to dominate the world and the reason why China and Russia have not balanced against the United States. For these reasons, it is not hard to see why even Mearsheimer has endorsed the view that America is the global hegemon on numerous occasions from 2012 and onwards. This is apparent when Mearsheimer (2012, 5–6, emphasis added) suggests that

[w]hat's happened over the past 23 years [after the end of the Cold War in 1989] is that the distribution of power—call it *unipolarity*, American primacy, or whatever you want—has left the US free to misbehave... A world with the Soviet Union or its equivalent is fundamentally different from the post-Cold War world. As I said before, the architecture of the system doesn't discipline the US anymore. So, it's free to run around the world doing all sorts of foolish things.

In his 2013 piece, co-authored with Stephen Walt, Mearsheimer again reaffirms that he considers the current international system unipolar. This is evident when Mearsheimer and Walt write that the 'advent of *unipolarity* requires us to devise new theories to explain how this new configuration of power will affect world politics' (2013, 437, emphasis added). At another passage of the paper, they contend that: 'one cannot be sure that a new grand theory or a powerful middle-range theory will not be created, especially given the emergence of new political conditions (e.g. *unipolarity*, globalisation, etc.) that we want to understand' (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013, 445, emphasis added). Mearsheimer expresses the same view in his 2014 article *America Unhinged*. Here, he persists that the 'United States is a remarkably safe country, which is what allows it to behave foolishly without jeopardising

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its security. The '*unipolar moment*,' coupled with America's geographical location and nuclear arsenal, creates a permissive environment for irresponsible behaviour, which its leaders have been quick to exploit' (Mearsheimer 2014, 23, emphasis added).

As has been demonstrated, unipolarity means that the entire world becomes hierarchic by the standards of offensive realism, which is a condition that Mearsheimer himself acknowledges that his theory is unable to explain. This means that the offensive realism of Mearsheimer cannot have had any explanatory power at all in the post-Cold War world, if evaluated on its own terms.

## Conclusion

This chapter has evaluated the explanatory power of the two main theories of structural realism, Waltz's defensive realism and Mearsheimer's offensive realism, in the post-Cold War world. The findings of this inquiry suggest that neither Waltz's defensive realism nor Mearsheimer's offensive realism could have had any explanatory power in the post-Cold War era, if assessed on their own terms. Indeed, both of these scholars have themselves acknowledged that the post-Cold War environment has been characterised by American hegemony and unipolarity, a condition which their structural realist theories are admittedly incapable to account for. It is thus clear that although both of these realist statements purport to focus on great power politics, they are ironically unable to explain international politics once a state reaches the pinnacle of power, hegemony, as the United States managed to do after the end of the Cold War according to both Waltz and Mearsheimer. The inability of these structural realist theories to shed light on international relations will also continue as long as unipolarity ensues. For these reasons, new general realist theories of international politics need to be developed that can succeed where the defensive realism of Waltz and the offensive realism of Mearsheimer have failed.

## Notes

[1] Kenneth Waltz's defensive realism only considers global hegemony where there is only one great power in the international system. Under such conditions, the international system is said to be unipolar as there are no other 'poles' or states that can balance the power of the hegemon. John Mearsheimer's offensive realism however makes a distinction between global and regional hegemons. The former dominate the entire planet while the latter rules over a continent (Mearsheimer 2001, 40).

[2] Although there has been a debate on whether the post-Cold War world has been unipolar, multipolar or something else, there is a widespread agreement that the United States has been the most powerful state in the international system ever since the fall of the Soviet Union.

[3] As has been noted, Mearsheimer's offensive realism makes a distinction between regional and global hegemony. In the former case, only the region dominated by a hegemon becomes an anomaly to Mearsheimer's theory. In the presence of a global hegemon, the entire world however becomes incomprehensible to his offensive realism. Since Waltz's defensive realism only considers global hegemony, the entire international system becomes an anomaly to his theory in the presence of a hegemon.

[4] As will be demonstrated, the enduring features of the international system (such as anarchy) is not enough to save either Waltz's defensive realism or Mearsheimer's offensive realism. This is because hegemony and unipolarity pose inherent difficulties for both theories that make them defunct irrespective of other structural features of the system.

[5] For other influential defensive realist statements, see for example Jervis 1976; Walt 1987; Snyder 1991.

[6] In this regard, Waltz writes: 'the task will exceed America's economic, military, demographic, and political resources; and the very effort to maintain a hegemonic position is the surest way to undermine it. The effort to maintain dominance stimulates some countries to work to overcome it (2000b, 38).' Waltz also notes that '[t]he United States cannot prevent a new balance of power from forming. It can hasten its coming as it has been earnestly doing. (2000b, 36-7)'

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[7] For other offensive realist publications, see for example Elman 2004; Labs 1997; Layne 2000.

[8] For a different conception of anarchy and hierarchy than that offered by Mearsheimer's offensive realism, see for example Donnelly 2006; Lake 2009.

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