



# An Approach To Analyse And Understand Neorealism Theory In The Light Of Kenneth Waltz's Thoughts

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**Abstract:** The book Theory of International Politics without a doubt is a pillar in the field of international relations. Kenneth Waltz is considered as the founder of Neorealist theory or what is known "Structural Realism". His book was published at a time when Neo-liberalism was dominant. Indeed, he opened a huge debate in IR and challenged the consensus that prevailed at the time. The concepts of anarchy and power are at the center of Waltz's theory of international politics where he tried to explain how the structure of the international system is, and how this system affects the behavior of states, which they are considered as the main players in the international system. Thus, the current study's aim is to analyze and identify the main arguments and concepts of the book and the critics directed to it. To do so, in the first section, the intellectual background of the author and introduction to the book has been mentioned. Second, the arrangement of the chapters of the book is illustrated. Following are the main arguments and concepts of the book. Then critics directed to the book are presented, and finally, the conclusion is discussed

**Key words** - Kenneth Waltz, structure of system, anarchy, balance of power, reductionist theories

## I. INTRODUCTION

The book Theory of International Politics without a doubt is a pillar in the field of international relations and one of the main classical books of political science. It was written by Kenneth N. Waltz in 1979. He was an American scholar at the University of California, the University of Berkeley, and Columbia University. He was born in Michigan in 1924 and was among the most famous theorists of international relations, and he died in 2013. Kenneth Waltz was promoted to a master's level at the age of thirty. He taught as a professor in political science and international relations at Berkeley, Swarthmore, Brandeis, and Columbia universities. Waltz received his doctorate from Columbia University in 1957. He wrote two other important books, Man, the State, and War in 1959 and Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics in 1967. By publishing his third book in 1979, he was considered as the founder of Neorealist theory or what is known "Structural Realism". His book was published at a time when Neo-liberalism was dominant. Indeed, he opened a huge debate in IR and challenged the consensus that prevailed at the time. The theory of international politics must be considered a work in a longer path of studies, since he argued that the cause of war is not related to human nature because if human nature is the cause of the war, the cause of cease is also the human nature (first level of analysis). Nor it is related to the role of institutional systems of the states (second level of analysis), because if the institutional structure of a state is the cause of the war, why all types of institutional states have made wars in history? For these reasons, still, the question remains: what is the cause of war and cease? In his book, Waltz argues that war exists not because of the internal system of some states, but due to the anarchic structure of the international system. Unlike the hierarchy in a domestic system where it has the monopoly of force and guarantees order, anarchy persists in the international system. Consequently, to survive, states are seeking to increase or maintain their power. The concepts of anarchy and power are at the center of Waltz's theory of

international politics where he tried to explain how the structure of the international system is, and how this system affects the behavior of states, which they are considered as the main players in the international system. The title of the book, *Theory of International Politics*, is the reflection of this perspective, knowing that, Waltz is not trying to explain the foreign policy of the state, as this is affected by many variables, but his attempt is to create a theory for international politics that can explain the behaviors of state at a systemic level.

## Laws and Theories

Waltz argues that international politics students often use the term “theory” to refer to anything that is purely phrasal, and rarely refers to it just to meet the philosophy of science standard. The goals I seek are that the definitions of the keywords of theory and law are carefully selected. While two almost definable definitions of theory can be presented, a simple definition of law is widely accepted. Rules govern relationships between variables. Variables are concepts that can take different values. The statement of law is as follows: If (a) then (b), where (a) the representative of one or more independent variables and (b) the representative of the dependent variable. If (a) and (b) have an invariant relation, then the law is absolute. If the relation has a high degree of stability without being completely immutable, although it is not constant, the law will be in this form: if (a) then (b) with probability  $x$ . A law is not based solely on the one that has been found once but on the basis of a connection that has been continually discovered. It repeats the expectation that if a person finds (a) in the future, then he will also find with a certain probability (b). In the natural sciences, even the laws of probability strongly recognize the necessity. In social science, saying that certain people with certain incomes are likely to vote for the Democrats is to make a statement similar to the law.

A word resembles a senseless than necessity. However, a statement cannot be likened to law unless this relationship has been found to be very frequent and credible in the past, with the expectation that it will be credible in the future with high relative probability. According to a definition, theories are collections or categories of rules related to a particular situation or phenomenon. For example, in addition to income, there may be a relationship between voter education and the political commitment of their parents on the one hand and the vote they give on the other hand. If the laws of probability are considered together, a greater correlation is found between the characteristics of the voters (independent variables) and the choice of the party (dependent variable). Therefore, theories are more complicated than the rules. But only in terms of quantity, there is no difference between the laws and the theories. This definition of theory is the call of many social scientists that can connect theory through the collection of carefully considered hypotheses. Based on the above argument, we can come to the point that, this distinction between laws and theories is important, given that, a theory can explain and interpret phenomenon, while the law only can describe them.

## The Waltz's Critiques of Reductionist Theories

Waltz constructed the model of his theory on the basis of the systemic analysis, and, in order to strengthen this approach, he criticized the existing theory of international relations as a method of reductionist theories. Waltz says that he is referring to the reductionist approach, which is to understand the whole understanding of the features and the interrelationship of its components. Theories of international politics that are seeking to find factors and causes of war at the individual and national level are reductionist theories, and theories that are looking to determine the causes and factors of war on the level of the international system are systemic theories. Therefore, Waltz sees the essential characteristics of reductionist theories from their partial knowledge of the study. Theories can be distinguished by their dependent variable, but levels of analysis are always characterized by phenomenon or independent variable. Where one determines the independent variable—whether at the international, national, bureaucratic, or decision-making level—the level of analysis is determined.

According to Waltz, reductionist theories in international relations include imperialist economic theories, which emphasized the importance of economic elements and factors, ultimately, the reasons for the emergence of imperialism in the behavior of units; they do not use the system level. Reductionist theories cannot explain international politics by themselves. Reductionist theories are explaining international politics by observing the characteristics of a state such as national leader, its economy, and the political system of state and they argue that the effects of those variables produce international outcomes. Waltz in order to show the deficient of reductionist theories took the best of these theories. He admits that those theories are powerful, and they can explain a lot of phenomenon such as imperialism, war, and peace, but they include few elements (variables), so they are not complex. Waltz says that in contrast to their theories, the export of capital in order to find enough consumers depends on the internal and external economic and political conditions of the state; it cannot be explained only by economic

### **The Meaning of Structure**

After criticizing the reductionist theories, Waltz emphasizes the importance of systemic theory and systematic structures. In his view, the systemic theory of international politics deals with forces that play a role internationally, not at the national level. In his theory, units do not play a major role in determining the structure of a system, and the change in the level of units does not lead to a change in the level of systemic structures. On the contrary, the international system and its structures influence the behavior of states and, with its' constraints on the behavior of states; it forms international relations between them and shapes the behavior of the states in the same way. Structures determine the behavior of the states and changes that occur at the level of the units. Such as the disappearance of a state and the emergence of other states, does not create a change in the international system in terms of structure.

In Waltz's theory, the system is considered as a whole with related components. In addition, the best element defining the system in his point of view is the structure of the system. There is a structure that affects the operation of the units within the system and shapes their behaviors. The existence of this structure makes the internal system more distinct from the international system. In his view, a political structure, domestic or international, has three main elements, which are structural characteristics .

1. Organizer principle.
2. Units and different components and the characteristics of their functionality.
3. Distribution of capabilities between and along the lines of units .

Thus, in order to explain the decisive and constraining characteristic of the structures of the international system and to show the distinction between them, Waltz by analogy applies these characteristics of the domestic structure to the international structure, and he argues that the international system also has a well-defined structure that has three important characteristics:

1. The organizer principle of the international system.
2. The characteristics of the units inside the international system
3. The distribution of capabilities of units in the international system

The major difference between the internal system and the international system is that, unlike the domestic system of countries, which is hierarchical and has a central authority, the international system lacks a fashion hierarchy and centralized power. Given this fundamental difference, Waltz believes that the principle of the ordering of the international system is the lack of a central government, in other words, the existence of anarchy. Therefore, the scene of the international system is anarchic. In the discussion of the second element of the definer of the structure of the international system, it means units; states should be considered, while states are different from each other, they are behaving quite similarly. Consequently, here



a question will come up and Waltz tried to answer it, which is how the system can be changed? Waltz explicitly argues that structural change does not arise from the principal or second element, the behavior of units and states. In other words, he differentiates the change in unit-level from a change in the structural; it means a change in system level. Waltz regarding this case explains that:

1. The first determinant element of the structures is the ordering principle of the system. If an ordering principle is a successor to another ordering principle, moving from an anarchical system to a hierarchical one, is a systematic change, from one system to another.
2. The second element is the characteristics and performances of different units to each other. In anarchical systems, the behavior of the states is the same, so there is no criterion for systemic change in the second element, and since the system is in anarchy, the behaviors of states remain intact.
3. The third element is the distribution of capabilities along with the units. If changes are made in the distribution of capabilities, the system will change, whether it is anarchical or hierarchical. Therefore, the only part of the structure that changes is the third component, the capabilities of states. Capabilities are the character of the structure because the capabilities of a state determine its position in regard to relations to other states. As a result, the structure of the international system can be equated with the distribution of. From Waltz's remarks, a fundamental outcome is achievable, which is that a change of system is very difficult. The second element in his view also essentially has no role to play in the change of the system, given that, anarchy is dominant, and this leads the behavior of the state to be similar. Therefore, only the third element "distribution of capabilities" plays a crucial role in the change of the system. In other words, in the case of a major change in the distribution of capabilities, it would end up in system change.

### **The Concept of Anarchy**

The order is reproduced without the need for a moderator, as adaptation occurs without the need for an adaptor. From Waltz's view, this whole organic system acts as an autonomous system of self-help. The meaning of self-help is that the units of the system are together and act according to the existing structural necessities. If the units do not function in accordance with structural requirements, they will be destroyed. In other words, as Waltz has stated, self-help is a system in which members who do not help themselves, or who are less likely to help themselves than others, do not meet their goals, and endanger themselves which can ultimately hurt them. Fearing such results would make states act in a way that would ultimately lead to a balance of power. In other words, anarchy forces states to develop their power in order to survive, and as a result, assuring the internal security against external forces appears to be the most important policy of states. The anarchy in the international system has important implications for states and international politics. In general, anarchy requires three patterns of behavior for states in international politics. First, states are distrustful and suspicious of each other. In other words, since the international system is self-help, each state alone must secure its own, and alliances and protocols are temporary and varied. Third, states in the international system are trying to maximize their relative strength. The reason for this is simple. The greater the relative strength and military advantage of one state over others, the higher the security rate will be. It is a good idea for any state to be the supreme military power in the international system because it is the best way to survive in the system, which can be very dangerous. This logic creates powerful incentives for states to exploit each other. Based on this, we can say that it is the anarchy that causes the international system to become an autonomous system of self-help. In an anarchic order, there is no kind of mechanism for protecting itself against external threats. The survival of any state as an independent political and territorial power is ultimately the responsibility of the state itself, which is the very principle of self-help.

## The Balance of Power Theory

The significance of the balance of power for Waltz is so important that he argues, if there is to be a distinct theory for international politics, this theory is the balance of power theory. Waltz proposes his balance of power concept as a central element in the synthesis of his structural realism. Two issues are important about the theory of balance of power. First, although the theory of the balance of power provides some predictions, however, these predictions are uncertain given that only a poorly defined and unstable condition is predicted from balance. Thus, it is difficult to say that any unbalance of power would invalidate this theory. Secondly, however, it is possible that states are prone to take new actions regarding the international incentives and constraints in line with the expectations of this theory. However, the policies and actions of states are shaped by their internal conditions. Failure of the balance of power that took place and the failure of some states to adopt policies compared to the successes of other states can be explained easily and separately by emphasizing the effects of forces outside of the subject matter of this theory. Balance of power forces the international community to model the behaviors of the most successful actors, which leads to the creation of identical units and symbiosis among actors, and on the other hand, the rapid increase in the power of an actor provokes other actors to increase their power and, if not enough, it creates an alliance between them to prevent the emergence of a potential hegemony, and when the balance of power is established, the hegemonic calling goes away.. Waltz goes on to argue that the balance of power theory will rule when there are two prerequisites: one is that the order of the system is anarchic, and the other is that the system is full of units seeking to survive .On the other hand, if a country does not regard the other country as a threat to its survival in any direction, the strategy of balancing the power will not typically move, even if the negotiating country has a tangible superiority and strength. Waltz, after thoroughly examining the alliance between South-East Asia and Uruguay in the 1930s, came to the results: First, countries turn to threats and not just power to a balance of power strategy. Secondly, in the international political scene, the adoption of a balance-of-power strategy has been far less consistent with the number of strategies..The point to be noted is that there is a relationship between the system theory of structure, which means the international anarchical system and the balance of power. This suggests that the principle of the authority of the force prevents disturbing the distribution of capabilities in a profound way along with the units. Put it in other words, the balance of power is the main factor behind the stability of the international anarchical system. If there were no munitions, then the international anarchical system would become hierarchical.

## The Concepts of Bipolarity and Multi-Polarity

The polarity of the system is defined by the distribution of power among the states within them, and the most common basis for calculating the polarity, the number and size of large powers in a system, and different polarities affect the strategic behavior of each state. In addition, stability in an international political system remains anarchic, and the number of great powers does not change this fact, whether it's bipolar or multipolar because there is a close link between the survival of the system and the survival of its great powers. Waltz goes on and explains conventional wisdom is that in a system with more than two great powers, a balance-of-power system is unstable; at least four were needed and fifth even better to act as a balancer. However, he notes it is quite difficult to act as a balancer because there should be negative interests, in other words, be afraid of what can be most concerned about what could be achieved. Moreover, the balancer needs to be powerful enough to be decisive when throwing a lot in with the weaker side. Thus, no other state can be too powerful. In addition, balancer needs flexibility.

Therefore, a willingness to ditch states one feels ideologically close to or with which one has important ties, is quite difficult. In addition, flexibility requires a larger number, which entails multiplying complexity and uncertainty, and does not make one thinks that's safer. In addition, multiple players joining two camps do not make a multipolar system bipolar anymore. In a multipolar system, there are many actors, which makes it quite difficult in the guess of anyone to predict what is happening, very limited possibilities to make what is taking place is important. Put it simply, alliances must remain fluid, so trust is difficult because the possibility to leave the alliance and join the opposing side is high. At the same time, there are very limited

options for alliances, because joining a state to the alliance is difficult, so each player is forced to worry about its alliance member, because if one layer leaves the alliance, the other could be in big trouble, due to high interdependence. Furthermore, in a bipolar system, the superpower has more room to act freely because its alliances must worry about losing the protection of the superpower not in the other way around. In a bipolar system, the source of the threat is clear, which is the other superpower. Moreover, responsibilities and interests are easier to discern. Superpowers must get a response because no one else will do and overreaction by either or both powers is dangerous. In addition, in a bipolar system, competitors get used to each other over time and begin to resemble each other. So we can compare the bipolar and multipolar systems based on the view of Waltz, in the multipolar system, the threat is uncertain because one of the alliance partners can turn to the alliance and become a threat while in the bipolar system it is completely clear the opposing pole, that is where the threat is coming from, the others are militarily insignificant. In the multipolar system, dangers are defusing, the responsibilities are unclear, and interests are obscure while in the bipolar system, the dangers are clear because the opposing side is known, responsibilities are clear since only the two superpowers can and are willing to take action, and interests are easier to discern, in another word, it is easy to figure out what is at stake. In the multipolar system, others can respond to advances by other alliances, while in the bipolar system, superpowers must respond because no one else will do. In the multipolar system, a miscalculation by some or all powers is the source of danger while in the bipolar system, miscalculation is not a source of danger because the risk of miscalculation is reduced, but overreaction by one or both of them is dangerous.

## Conclusion

Doubtlessly the work of Waltz is a milestone in the literature of international relations “international politics” and political sciences. The reality of events strongly corresponds with his findings, and via his proposed lenses to look through, the structural realist or generally known neorealist, can, without doubt, provide a helpful instrument to read and comprehend international politics. However, his theory was more correct at that time “during the Cold War” compared to nowadays, but still to a good extent is a valid theory. Indeed, the critics directed to his work show different outcomes than what the theory is predicting at the first place. For example, European integration and the end of the Cold War were not in line with the theory’s expectations. However, it is possible to be argued whether the choices of units have shaped the change of the structure or the units’ behaviors have been shaped by the structure, but the aim of the review is not this. I came to a conclusion that with careful application, even today Waltz’s theory of international politics is a vital instrument to look at international relations. The developments and uncertainties that are expected in the international system will defiantly require an update in the international relations theories including Waltz’s theory of international politics.

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