

## Neo-Realism and Neo-Liberalism in Global Politics: Towards Assessing the Intellectual Siblings

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**Abstract.** In international relations (IR) there are many perspectives or ways of looking at a phenomenon. Realism, Liberalism, Marxism, Behaviouralism are some of the major perspectives in international relations (IR). And in this perspective it also has derivatives that can be said to perfect previous perspectives. This is because the phenomenon of international relations (IR) is increasingly diverse and needs new perspectives that are able to provide choices for scholars to view the phenomenon. Perspectives that experience these derivatives are neo-realism which is a derivative of realism and neo-liberalism derived from liberalism. This paper reviews the core assumptions of neo-realism and neo-liberalism and explores the debate between these intellectual siblings that have dominated mainstream academic scholarship in international relations (IR). It emphasizes that in light of the demise of the Soviet Union and the subsequent withdrawal of Soviet forces from Central Europe, the debate between neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism has taken on a new relevance. Realism and neo-realism, and to some extent neo-liberalism, have also had a profound impact on US foreign policy. Neo-realists dominate the world of security studies and neo-liberals focus on political economy and more recently on issues like human rights and the environment. These theories do not offer starkly contrasting images of the world. Neo-realists state that they are concerned with issues of survival. They claim that neo-liberals are too optimistic about the possibilities for cooperation among states. Neo-liberals counter with claims that all states have mutual interests and can gain from cooperation. Both are normative theories of a sort, biased towards the state, the capitalist market, and the status quo. The processes of globalization have forced neo-realists and neo-liberals to consider similar issues and address new challenges to

international order. This paper discusses the various versions of neo-liberalism and neo-realism and asks the reader to consider how theory shapes our image of the world. Each theory represents an attempt by scholars to offer a better explanation for the behaviour of states and describe the nature of international politics. Similarly, the more policy-relevant versions of these theories prescribe competing policy agendas. This paper reviews three versions of neo-realism: Waltz's structural Realism; Grieco's neo-realism or modern Realism, with its focus on absolute and relative gains; and what security scholars call offensive and defensive Realism or neo-realism. It considers Waltz's argument that neo-realism is not only different from realism but an advance upon it. It compares neo-realist arguments about the stability of the bipolar world with some recent analyses of the changing nature of state structures and emerging patterns of closer co-operation. The argument of this paper is that neo-realism underestimates the extent to which state structures are changing in the industrialized parts of the world. It further highlights three respects in which neo-realism is being superseded by critical theories of international relations (IR) which, it is argued, contain a superior account of the relationship between the units and the international system, a deeper grasp of the significance of the cultural dimensions of world politics and a clearer recognition that the main challenge of the post-bipolar world is to create new forms of political community. This paper also reviews the assumptions of neo-liberal and neo-liberal institutionalist perspectives. It later focuses on the 'neo-neo-debate'. This is a debate that many US scholars think is the most important intellectual issue in international relations (IR) today. Many other scholars see it as not much of a debate at all. It is a debate about refining common assumptions and about the future role and effectiveness of

international institutions and the possibilities of cooperation. However, it is not a debate between mainstream and critical perspectives. It is a debate between 'rule-makers' and it leaves out the voices on the margins or the 'rule-takers'. This paper undertakes a review on how neo-realists and neo-liberal thinkers react to the processes of globalization. It concludes with a suggestion that we are only seeing part of the world if we limit our studies to the neo perspectives and the neo-neo debate.

**Keywords:** Neo-Realism, Neo-Liberalism, Critical Theory, Global Politics, Globalization, Neo-Neo Debate, International Relations, Bipolarity, Political Community

### 1. Introduction

The argument that neo-realism and neo-liberalism are flawed in theory and stultifying in practice has been explored at length in critical circles in recent years. Scholars have argued that global political structures are mutable, and the future need not be like the past. Two claims which are robustly defended by Kenneth Waltz have been challenged as a result. The first is that the international system, which has been remarkably similar across whole millennia, will endure indefinitely. The second is that the anarchic system will thwart projects of reform as in the past. The neo-realist riposte has been that advancing the moral case for a different world order will not prevent the recurrence of old patterns of inter-state rivalry and war.

With the demise of the Cold War era, the differences between neo-realist and neo-liberal theories of international politics should acquire even greater importance. The debate between neo-realists and neo-liberals had dominated mainstream international relations (IR) scholarship since the mid-1980s. Two of the major US journals in the field, *International Organization* and *International Security* are dominated by articles that address the relative merits of each theory and its value in explaining the world of international politics. Neo-realism and neo-liberalism are the progeny of Realism and Liberalism respectively. They are more than theories; they are paradigms or conceptual frameworks that define a field of study, and define an agenda for research and policy making. There are many versions and interpretations of each paradigm or theory. Some Realists are more 'hard-line' on issues such as defence or participation in international agreements, while other Realists take more accommodating positions on these same issues.

For most academics, neo-realism refers to Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (1979). Waltz's theory emphasizes the importance of the structure of the international system and its role as the primary determinant of state behaviour. Yet, most scholars and policy-makers use neo-realism to describe a recent or updated version of Realism. Recently, in the area of security studies, some scholars use the terms offensive and defensive realism when discussing the current version of Realism; or neo-realism.

In the academic world, neo-liberal generally refers to neo-liberal Institutionalism or what is now called Institutional theory by those writing in this theoretical domain. However, in the policy world, neo-liberalism means something different. A neo-liberal foreign policy promotes free trade or open markets and Western democratic values and institutions. Most of the leading Western states have joined the US-led chorus, calling for the 'enlargement' of the community of democratic and capitalist nation-states. There is no other game in town, the financial and political institutions created after the Second World War have survived and these provide the foundation for current political and economic power arrangements.

In reality, neo-liberal foreign policies tend not to be as wedded to the ideals of democratic peace, free trade, and open borders. National interests take precedence over morality and universal ideals and, much to the dismay of traditional Realists, economic interests are given priority over geopolitical ones.

For students beginning their study of International Relations (IR), these labels and contending definitions can be confusing and frustrating. Yet, understanding these perspectives and theories is the only way you can hope to understand and explain how leaders and citizens alike see the world and respond to issues and events. This understanding may be more important when discussing neo-realism and neo-liberalism because they represent dominant perspectives in the policy world and in the US academic community.

There are clear differences between neo-realism and neo-liberalism; however, these differences should not be exaggerated. Robert Keohane (in Baldwin 2003), a neo-liberal institutionalist, has stated that neo-liberal Institutionalism borrows equally from Realism and Liberalism. Both theories represent status-quo perspectives and are what Robert Cox (1999) calls problem-solving theories. This means that both neo-

realism and neo-liberalism address issues and problems that could disrupt the status quo, namely the issues of security, conflict, and cooperation.

Neither theory advances prescriptions for major reform or radical transformation of the international system. Rather, they are system maintainer theories, meaning that adherents are generally satisfied with the current international system and its actors, values and power arrangements. These theories address different sets of issues. In general, neo-realist theory focuses on issues of military security and war. Neo-liberal theorists focus on issues of cooperation, international political economy, and, most recently, the environment. For neo-liberal Institutionalists, the core question for research is how to promote and support cooperation in an anarchic and competitive international system. For neo-realists, the core research question is how to survive in this system.

## 2. Neo-Realism

Kenneth Waltz's theory of structural realism is only one version of neo-realism. A second group of neo-realists, represented by the scholarly contributions of Joseph Grieco (1988), have integrated Waltz's ideas with the ideas of more traditional Realists, such as Hans Morgenthau, Raymond Aron, Stanley Hoffmann, and Robert Gilpin, to construct a contemporary or modern realist profile. A third version of neo-realism is found in security studies. Here scholars talk about offensive and defensive realists. These versions of neo-realism are briefly reviewed in the next few pages.

### 2.1 Structural Realism

Waltz's neo-realism is distinctive from traditional or classical Realism in a number of ways. First, Realism is primarily an inductive theory. For example Hans Morgenthau would explain international politics by looking at the actions and interactions of the states in the system. Thus, the decision by Pakistan and India to test nuclear weapons would be explained by looking at the influence of military leaders in both states and the long-standing differences compounded by their geographic proximity. All of these explanations are unit or bottom-up explanations. Neo-realists, such as Waltz, do not deny the importance of unit-level explanations; however, they believe that the effects of structure must be considered. According to Waltz, structure is defined by the ordering principle of the international system, which is anarchy, and the distribution of capabilities across units, which are states. Waltz also assumes

that there is no differentiation of function between different units.

The structure of the international system shapes all foreign policy choices. For a neo-realist, a better explanation for India and Pakistan's nuclear testing would be anarchy or the lack of a common power or central authority to enforce rules and maintain order in the system. In a competitive system, this condition creates a need for weapons to survive. Additionally, in an anarchic system, states with greater power tend to have greater influence.

A second difference between traditional Realists and Waltz's neo-realism is found in their view of power. To Realists, power is an end in itself. States use power to gain more power and thus increase their influence and ability to secure their national interests. Although traditional Realists recognize different elements of power (for example, economic resources and technology), military power is considered the most obvious element of a state's power. Waltz would not agree with those who say that military force is not as essential as it once was as a tool of statecraft. As recent conflicts in Russia, Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon, and Sri Lanka suggest, many leaders still believe that they can resolve their differences with force.

For neo-realists, power is more than the accumulation of military resources and the ability to use this power to coerce and control other states in the system. Waltz and other neo-realists see power as the combined capabilities of a state. States are differentiated in the system by their power and not by their function. Power gives a state a place or position in the international system and that shapes the state's behaviour. During the Cold War, the USA and the USSR were positioned as the only two superpowers. Neo-realists would say that such positioning explains the similarities in their behaviour. The distribution of power and any dramatic changes in that distribution of power help to explain the structure of the international system. Specifically, states will seek to maintain their position or placement in the system. The end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet empire upset the balance of power and, in the eyes of many neo-realist, increased uncertainty and instability in the international system. Waltz concurs with traditional Realists when he states that the central mechanism for order in the system is balance of power. The renewed emphasis on the importance of the United Nations and NATO and their intervention in crisis areas around the world may be indicative of the major powers' current search for order in the international system. Waltz would

challenge neo-liberal Institutionalists who believe that we can manage the processes of globalization merely by building effective international institutions. He would argue that their effectiveness depends on the support of major powers.

A third difference between Realism and Waltz's neo-realism is each one's view on how states react to the condition of anarchy. To Realists, anarchy is a condition of the system, and states react to it according to their size, location, domestic politics, and leadership qualities. In contrast, neo-realists suggest that anarchy defines the system. Further, all states are functionally similar units, meaning that they all experience the same constraints presented by anarchy and strive to maintain their position in the system. Neo-realists explain any differences in policy by differences in power or capabilities. Both Belgium and China recognize that one of the constraints of anarchy is the need for security to protect their national interests. Leaders in these countries may select different policy paths to achieve that security. A small country such as Belgium, with limited resources, responds to anarchy and the resulting security dilemma by joining alliances and taking an activist role in regional and international organizations, seeking to control the arms race. China, a major power and a large country, would most likely pursue a unilateral strategy of increasing military strength to protect and secure its interests.

## 2.2 Relative and Absolute Gains

Joseph Grieco (1988) is one of several Realist/neo-realist scholars who focus on the concepts of relative and absolute gains. Grieco claims that states are interested in increasing their power and influence (absolute gains) and, thus, will cooperate with other states or actors in the system to increase their capabilities. However, Grieco claims that states are also concerned with how much power and influence other states might achieve (relative gains) in any cooperative endeavor. This situation can be used to show a key difference between neo-liberals and neo-realists. Neo-liberals claim that cooperation does not work when states fail to follow the rules and 'cheat' to secure their national interests. Neo-realists claim that there are two barriers to international cooperation: cheating and the relative gains of other actors. Further, when states fail to comply with rules that encourage cooperation, other states may abandon multilateral activity and act unilaterally.

The likelihood of states abandoning international cooperative efforts is increased if participants see other states gaining more from the arrangement. If

states agree to a ban on the production and use of landmines, all of the signatories to the treaty will be concerned about compliance. Institutions will be established to enforce the treaty. Neo-realists argue that leaders must be vigilant for cheaters and must focus on those states that could gain a military advantage when this weapon system is removed. In some security situations, landmines may be the only effective deterrent against a neighbouring state with superior land forces. In this situation, the relative gains issue is one of survival. In a world of uncertainty and competition, the fundamental question, according to Grieco and others who share his view of neo-realism, is not whether all parties gain from the cooperation, but who will gain more if we cooperate?

## 2.3 Security Studies and Neo-Realism

Recently, security studies scholars, primarily in the USA, have suggested a more nuanced version of a Realism that reflects their interests in understanding the nature of the security threats presented by the international system and the strategy options states must pursue to survive and prosper in the system. These two versions of neo-realism, offensive and defensive realism (many scholars in this area prefer to be called modern realists and not neo-realists), are more policy relevant than Waltz and Grieco's version of neo-realism and, thus, may be seen as more prescriptive than the other versions (Jervis 2009).

Offensive neo-realists appear to accept most of Waltz's ideas and a good portion of the assumptions of the traditional Realism. Defensive neo-realists suggest that our assumptions of relations with other states depend on whether they are friends or enemies. When dealing with friends such as the European Union (EU), the assumptions governing US leaders are more akin to those promoted by neo-liberals. However, there is little difference between defensive and offensive neo-realists when they are dealing with expansionary or pariah states, or traditional enemies.

John Mearsheimer (1990, 1994/1995), an offensive realist in security studies, suggests that relative power and not absolute power is most important to states. He would suggest that leaders of countries should pursue security policies that weaken their potential enemies and increase their power relative to all others. In this era of globalization, the incompatibility of states' goals and interests enhances the competitive nature of an anarchic system and makes conflict as inevitable as cooperation. Thus, talk of reducing military budgets at the end of the Cold War was considered by offensive neo-realists to be pure

folly. Leaders must always be prepared for an expansionary state that will challenge the global order. Moreover, if the major powers begin a campaign of disarmament and reduce their power relative to other states, they are simply inviting these expansionary states to attack.

John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt (2013) were critical of the decision by George W. Bush to go to war in Iraq. They argue that the Bush administration 'inflated the threat' by misleading the world about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and its link to terrorists who might attack the USA in the future.

More importantly for security neo-realists, this war was unnecessary because the containment of Iraq was working effectively and there was no 'compelling strategic rationale' for this war. The war with Iraq will cost the USA billions of dollars and it has already required a tremendous commitment of US military forces. With Iraq, Afghanistan, and the global war on terrorism, the US military is over-extended (Walt 2016). The unilateralism of the Bush administration concerns both offensive and defensive neo-realists because it hurts the absolute and relative power of the USA.

Defensive neo-realists Robert Jervis (2009) and Jack Snyder (2011) claim that most leaders understand that the costs of war clearly outweigh the benefits. The use of military force for conquest and expansion is a security strategy that most leaders reject in this age of complex interdependence and globalization. War remains a tool of statecraft for some; however, most wars are seen by citizens and leaders alike to be caused by irrational or dysfunctional forces within a society, such as excessive militarism ethno-nationalism.

Defensive neo-realists are often confused with neo-liberals. Although they have some sympathy for the neo-liberal argument that war can be avoided by creating security institutions (for example, alliances or arms control treaties) that diminish the security dilemma and provide mutual security for participating states, they do not see institutions as the most effective way to prevent all wars. Most believe that conflict is simply unavoidable in some situations. First, aggressive and expansionary states do exist and they challenge world order and, second simply in pursuit of their national interests, some states may make conflict with others unavoidable.

Defensive neo-realists are more optimistic than are offensive neo-realists. However, they are considerably less optimistic than neo-liberals for

several reasons (Jervis 2009). First, defensive neo-realists see conflict as unnecessary only in a subset of situations (for example, economic relations). Second, leaders can never be certain that an aggressive move by a state (for example, support for a revolutionary movement in a neighbouring state) is an expansionary action intended to challenge the existing order or simply a preventive policy aimed at protecting their security. Third, defensive realists challenge the neo-liberal view that it is relatively easy to find areas where national interests might converge and become the basis for cooperation and institution building. Although they recognize that areas of common or mutual interests exist, defensive neo-realists are concerned about non-compliance or cheating by states, especially in security policy area.

#### **2.4 Realism and Neo-Realism: Primary Differences**

Waltz has long been critical of the idea that war will be eradicated by tapping the best in human nature or by creating legitimate domestic political systems. In *Man, the State and War* (1959), he argued that the international system had dashed liberal and socialist hopes that the rise of legitimate regimes would bring an end to war. In *Theory of International Politics* (1979), Waltz restates the argument that non-conformist regimes have been socialized into the dominant ways of the anarchical system when criticizing the reductionist belief that the system can be explained by understanding the sovereign parts.

What reductionism cannot explain, in Waltz's view, is why states behave in very similar ways despite their diverse political systems and contrasting ideologies. The problem is solved, according to neo-realism, by assuming that systemic constraints are interposed between states and their foreign policy behaviour. Neo-realism endeavours to demonstrate that these systemic forces are responsible for the remarkable similarities of foreign policy behaviour.

Reductionism underpins classical liberal and socialist writings about international relations (**IR**), but realists often commit the same error, according to Waltz. Classical realism understood the constraints inherent in anarchy but failed to develop a serious account of its structure. Realists often focused on national foreign policies in the belief that they held the key to the dominant forces in world politics. Exemplifying this position, Raymond Aron maintained that the realm of international politics was impossible to theorize because it was shaped by diverse economic, political and ideological forces (Waltz 1990: 25). The realist error was to suppose

that no clear distinction between the system of states and the nature of the sovereign units could be drawn. As we shall see, the relationship between the units and the system remains a deeply contested theme in Waltz's thought.

Waltz acknowledges that economics, politics and culture are intertwined, but adds that a theory of international relations can be developed by abstracting the international system from other domains. Failing to disentangle the international system in this way, realists such as Aron were confined to developing crude generalizations about foreign policy (Waltz 1990: 33). Neo-realism begins with the premise that a theory of international relations and a theory of foreign policy are not the same.

Waltz maintains that neo-realism advances beyond realism just as the physiocrats progressed beyond earlier analyses of different national levels of economic prosperity and uneven rates of growth. What gave the physiocrats the advantage over earlier economic thinkers was the boldness of their decision to abstract the economy from society and politics when, in reality, no firm boundaries separated these realms. Recognizing the need for abstraction, the physiocrats proceeded to develop a superior understanding of the primary determinants of economic growth. The neo-realist abstraction of the international system from the wider socio-political domain equally distorts reality, but it has similar utility. It ensures that the propelling forces in international politics are properly identified while future probabilities are more clearly ascertained (1990: 22–31).

To achieve its aim of explaining the uniform behaviour of different nation-states and the constancy of international political life across whole centuries, neo-realism omits many of the factors which were important in realism (Waltz 1979:66). It resists the temptation, to which realists invariably succumbed, of being waylaid by the contingent, the transitory and the unforeseen. Neo-realism assumes that the 'regularities and repetitions' in international politics are clues to the operation of deep structural constraints. Its greatest advance beyond realism, it is argued, is the decision to conceptualize international politics 'as a system with a precisely defined structure' (Waltz 1990: 29–30).

Several analysts observe that the continuities between realism and neo-realism are more striking than the ruptures and breaks (Gilpin 1984; Little 2015). They are right to stress differences of emphasis. Neo-

realism highlights the uniformities of foreign policy and the long-term reproduction of the anarchical system, but realism also emphasized these themes, and it is unhelpful to make too much of the differences between Waltz and Morgenthau. However, differences exist. Waltz's neo-realism seeks to emulate developments in the philosophy of science and structuralist modes of social-scientific explanation which are absent from classical realism. This quest for methodological rigour is central to the principal neo-realist endeavour, which is to delineate the main structural features of the system of states.

For Waltz, the structure of the international system is distinguished from the structure of domestic political systems according to three criteria: the ordering principle of the system, the character of the units and the distribution of their capabilities. In domestic political systems the organizing principle is hierarchy; in the international system the operative principle is anarchy. In hierarchic domestic systems, relations of command and obedience exist, and individuals are free to specialize within a complex social division of labour; in anarchic systems, where there are no relations of super- and subordination, the basic units tend towards functional similarity. Individuals within hierarchic orders are functionally alike and endowed with unequal capabilities whereas states in the anarchic realm have an unequal ability to perform exactly the same functions (Waltz 1979: 104).

The ordering principle of international relations (IR) has remained unchanged over several centuries, and states have relied on the principle of self-help when faced with the security dilemma which is inherent in anarchy (Waltz 1979: 187-188). States such as the former Soviet Union, which believed that the structure of international relations (IR) was malleable, failed to break the mould. Economic interdependence exists, but it is low compared with the level of economic and social integration found within states. In the context of anarchy, each states tries to avoid dependence on others, and each is afraid of receiving a lesser share of the economic gains of interdependence (105-106; Grieco 1988). The organizing principle of international relations (IR) has forced states to become like units (Waltz 1979: 93).

Neo-realism stresses continuities but it does not deny the existence of change. Change within the international system has occurred because there have been alterations in the configuration of military power, but no change of its organizing principle has occurred, nor has it ever seemed probable or

imminent (Waltz 1979: 100). Anarchy may give way to hierarchy at some future date but, Waltz argues, no logic of economic and political change powerful enough to transform the condition and consequences of anarchy currently exists. Alterations in the balance of power will continue to occur, but no rearrangement of the configuration of military forces will alter the basic structure of international relations (IR) or radically modify the behaviour of its sovereign parts. For neo-realism, however, the current reconfiguration of the global balance of power is no minor matter.

### 3. Bipolarity, Nuclear Weapons and International Stability

Waltz wrote that in the nuclear age it became necessary to reject the conventional wisdom that bipolarity is less stable than multi-polarity: the bipolar world was a world of unusual stability (1988: 620). Because the barriers to acquiring superpower status had never been so insurmountable, and the continued survival of the Soviet Union seemed assured, Waltz argued that the bipolar system was not only stable but likely to persist (1979: 95 and 183).

The bipolar world turned out to be more precarious than most analysts had realized. But, as previously noted, Waltz does not think that a breakdown of the balance of power transforms the international system. The prediction is 'not that a balance, once achieved, will be maintained, but that a balance, once disrupted, will be restored' in some other way (1979: 128). Following the demise of the Soviet Union, neo-realists such as John Mearsheimer have argued that the end of bipolarity is a reason for concern rather than celebration.

Four reasons have been offered by neo-realists in support of the claim that the bipolar world was more stable than the multipolar world which it replaced. First, the bipolar world was free of war between the great powers because the main threat to their security and survival stood out in bold relief. Caution in foreign policy and a keen sense of the dangers of over-reaction underpinned the long peace. By contrast, dangers were much less specific, responsibilities were confused and definitions of vital interests were unclear in the multipolar age (Waltz 1964: 881 – 890). The attendant anger was that states would miscalculate the power of their rivals or underestimate the exact strength of their resolve, so unleashing a sequence of events which culminated in major war (Mearsheimer 1990: 14). Ambiguities prevail in multipolar systems because shared

understandings of national rights and obligations are notoriously difficult to achieve (1990: 17).

Second, the dangers of miscalculation are compounded in multipolar systems by the existence of military alliances comprising approximately equal powers. In the multipolar context, the defection of any one state immediately jeopardizes the security of the rest. In the modern bipolar world, the unequal military capabilities of partners meant the superpowers were largely unaffected by acts of defection. The superpowers could concentrate on preserving the central strategic balance untroubled by 'free floaters' (Mearsheimer 1990: 14).

Third, because crisis might have embroiled the superpowers in war, the long peace could not have rested on bipolarity alone. Had both superpowers been armed with conventional weapons, they might have been tempted to attack their principal adversary whenever military success looked probable. Nuclear weapons were a crucial source of stability in the bipolar world because neither superpower could suppose that victory was possible or derive any comfort from thinking that the consequences of military defeat would be bearable (Waltz 1988: 624–627; Mearsheimer 1990: 19–20).

Waltz has argued that the controlled spread of nuclear weapons to other societies could have equally stabilizing effects, in which case nuclear proliferation is to be welcomed rather than feared (1981: 30). Mearsheimer has argued that the 'limited, managed proliferation' of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War world, and the admission of Germany into the ranks of the nuclear powers, could preserve stability in Europe, although the future will be more dangerous than the past (1990: 8). But problems arise for neo-realism at this stage. If an orderly transition to stable nuclear multi-polarity occurs, the number of powers must be less significant than the nature of their destructive military power and their willingness to collaborate. And if the ability to act in concert is an important variable, Stanley Hoffmann is right to deny that the anarchic character of the international system is more important than the nature of sovereign states in determining the level of war or peace (Mearsheimer 1990: 12; Hoffmann 1990: 192). This is a crucial issue to return to later.

Fourth, mutuality of dependence, which is a feature of multipolar systems, compels each state to observe others with suspicion (Waltz 1979: 209). If interdependence is high, there are many occasions in which states can come into conflict (Mearsheimer 1990: 45). Unusual levels of economic self-

sufficiency in the years since the Second World War reduced the prospects for war between the superpowers (Waltz 1979: 138 and 144).

Neo-realism will remain central to analyses of long-term trends in international relations (IR) if Mearsheimer (1990: 56) is correct that the stability of the last forty-five years is unlikely to be repeated in the next few decades. However, the relationship between the units and the system remains unclear. It has been argued that realism is less useful for understanding international politics between the core industrial powers than for explaining relations between peripheral states where military competition remains paramount (Goldgeier and McFaul 1992). If this is correct, states in the industrial core are capable of overriding the systemic logic which neo-realism regards as an unavoidable consequence of anarchy. Richard Rosecrance (2016) has argued that instability may result unless a new concert of great powers emerges quickly, but a strong domestic commitment to liberal-democratic and free-market thinking on their part could smooth the path ahead. Even Waltz nods in the direction of liberalism. Unbalanced US power is a matter for concern in the post-Cold War era, but there is some truth in the liberal claim that peace usually exists between liberal-democratic societies, and the spread of liberal democracy should be welcomed for external and internal reasons as a result (Waltz 1991: 670).

Waltz argues that the relative importance of the units and the systems changes over time. The 'international system is more likely to dominate' the units in a bipolar world whereas, with multi-polarity, states possess greater flexibility regarding military alignments (1964: 901). Yet there is no meaningful discussion of how states can display flexibility or virtuosity in other respects – by institutionalizing norms which pacify relations between the great powers for example. The whole tenor of neo-realism discourages the analysis of unit-driven change. It stresses how non-conformist powers such as the Soviet Union were forced to comply with the dominant patterns of international behaviour, and suggests that civilian powers and reformist states will succumb to a similar fate or face irrelevance in the future (Waltz 1979: 128 and 152). In Waltz's view, Morgenthau's claim that superpower détente would be more secure if it rested on a common moral framework committed the reductionist fallacy of assuming that the main contours of international relations (IR) are moulded by the domestic characteristics of states. Morgenthau's attendant error was to believe it was important to 'do something to change the internal dispositions of the internationally

important ones' (Waltz 1979: 62). Waltz's own remarks about the positive, if qualified achievements of liberal democracies point towards a different and less bizarre conclusion which raises further difficulties for neo-realism. If nothing prevents liberal democracies from behaving peacefully in their relations with one another, the neo-realist distinction between the unit and the system, and its denial that fundamental international reform is possible, are immediately suspect. International stability may come to depend less on the number of great powers, or on the nature of their destructive capabilities, than on the principles of international relations (IR) they espouse and the moral constraints which they recognize.

#### 4. The Declining Relevance of Neo-Realism?

The belief that the spread of liberal democracy could help refashion the international system (Doyle 1986) is a minor theme in Waltz's writings but a major point for some of his critics. Francis Fukuyama (1991) refers to deep currents of global change in which relations between the liberal-democratic, industrial powers have come to rest on consensus rather than force. Fukuyama argues that Michael Doyle's thesis that liberal-democratic societies form a unique zone of peace was bolstered by the zeal for democratization which transformed the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. John Mueller (2009) maintains that modern warfare has become increasingly repulsive in the industrialized world, just as the duel fell into disrepute in nineteenth-century Europe. Ray (2009) has observed that just as moral development led to the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, contemporary moral progress proclaims the obsolescence of force. Are these writers correct that cultural change within nation-states has already checked the neo-realist logic of anarchy? Are they right that 'anarchy is what states make it' (Wendt 2012)?

Although the neo-Kantian thesis remains controversial, there is a significant consensus that the spread of liberal democracy is an encouraging development which supplements other patterns of change in the industrialized world. Unquestionably, the major powers are less inclined than their predecessors to rely on force to resolve their political differences. The nuclear revolution not only helped to maintain the peace but ended the reliance on 'mass armies' which has been a crucial linchpin of modern nationalism (Mearsheimer 1990: 21). In industrialized societies more pacific cultures are the result. Although the struggle for territory continues in world politics, none of the great powers is gripped by

past assumptions that the conquest of territory is necessary for economic growth (Gilpin 1981:138; Rosecrance 2016). What Rosecrance calls the rise of the trading state represents a watershed in the evolution of international society in this regard. Not only have the great powers replaced military conflict with peaceful economic competition but, contra neo-realism, they may be more willing as a result to perform specialized roles within an international division of economic and political responsibilities (Rosecrance 2016: 24 and 101). Developing a similar theme, Robert Cox (1999: 827-828) has argued that the prospects for multilateralism and middlepowermanship have improved with the decline of US hegemony: the same is true of the world after bipolarity.

A related argument concerns the impact of international interdependence upon the sovereign state and its willingness to cooperate with others and comply with the rules established within international organizations. Robert Keohane (1989) accepts the neo-realist postulate that states are rational egoists but employs game-theoretical resources to explain how states can widen their conception of self-interest through their involvement in international institutions. There are parallels between this approach and English rationalism in that both think the concept of anarchy is of limited explanatory value (Keohane 1990). The international system is anarchic but it is normatively regulated too. From the vantage point of these perspectives, neo-realism has underestimated the role of normative constraints upon states in the past and the potential for further development in the future.

Greater opportunities for moving towards multilateral forms of global governance exist in the post-bipolar world, but it is clear that the transfer of power and authority from states to global institutions is not the only challenge to lie ahead. The nation-state is under pressure on two fronts – because globalization has seriously reduced its scope for independent action and because subnational groups demand greater representation and autonomy. As Aron (1968) noted many years ago, nationalism and globalization travel in tandem: inequalities of progress fragment the human race. The rapid demise of bipolarity is the most dramatic shift in world politics in forty years but the collapse of state socialist societies must be understood in conjunction with these dual patterns of change – the subnational revolt and the process of globalization – which are eroding the foundations of the Westphalian system.

The above-mentioned perspectives differ from neo-realism in four fundamental respects. First, neo-realism argues that strategic factors are still the primary determinants of the shape of great power relations. Strategic relations are susceptible to change, and pacification may prove to be temporary. The opposing perspectives deny that the redistribution of power is the only significant change in world politics; each claims that the pacification of great power relations is a dominant logic in contemporary world politics (Richardson 2012, 2013). Second, neo-realism and its critics disagree about the relative importance of cultural forces in world politics. Waltz argues that a systemic theory of recurrent patterns should ignore beliefs and traditions (1979: 81-82). The critics point to a revolution in statecraft which systemic explanation neither registers nor explains – this is the transformation of values in world politics (Morse 2016). Third, the critics argue that neo-realism is an inadequate guide to the dominant forces in world politics precisely because it analyses the state-system in isolation from the sovereign units and the complex processes of economic and cultural change to which states are now subject. Not only is the international system far more dependent on the character of the units than Waltz suggests, but states have the ability to initiate radical change in world politics. Fourth, neo-realism argues that its concern with the question of power and security should remain paramount since idealist visions will fail to leave any impression on the system of states. The critics argue that neo-realism is too quick to endorse prevailing realities, and its legitimation of the status quo should come to an end. The approaches outlined above often share a normative commitment to understanding the alternative paths of historical development which are immanent within contemporary global structures.

## 5. The Supersession of Neo-Realism

Three criticisms of neo-realism remain for discussion as we turn to the issue of what the debates above imply for future directions in international theory. First, neo-realism lacks an adequate account of the relationship between the units and the system, and underestimates the capacity of states to promote international political change. Second, by lifting the system of states out of the cultural practices in which it is embedded, neo-realism fails to grasp the immense significance of contemporary moral and cultural change. Third, neo-realism has set its normative sights too low and devalues the contribution which critical approaches are making to the study of international relations (IR).

### 5.1 Competing Perspectives on Unit and System

Waltz argues that realists failed to take account of the effects of structure. Neo-realism differs from realism by explaining how structural constraints force states to become functionally alike, but neo-realism does not deny that some of the ‘causes of international outcomes are located at the level of individual units’ (Waltz 1990: 34-36). Three reasons are preferred for taking unit-level phenomena seriously.

First, the analysis of unit-level characteristics is essential to explain ‘why different units behave differently despite their similar placement in a system’ (Waltz 1979: 72). Second, states are not powerless to influence the system; the causal flow runs two ways, from the structural level to the units and from the units back again to the system (Waltz 1990: 34). Third, unit-level analysis is necessary because ‘the proportionate causal weight of unit-level and of systems-level factors’ varies over time (Waltz 1979: 49). (The neo-realist observation that the units had more influence in a multipolar system than in the bipolar world exemplifies the basic point). Extending this theme, Waltz argues that a theory which explains the relative importance of unit and system in different epochs is unattainable at present, although one might be developed in future. Current limitations are no reason for abandoning the quest for theory, however. The most sophisticated approach available should therefore consider the international system in isolation from the units, set out its unique structure and explain how its constraining influence produces similar behaviour among states.

Waltz argues that systemic theory can ignore the domestic nature of the units because while they are able to influence the system they are powerless to change it. This portrayal of the relationship between the units and the system is precisely what is at stake in the debates between neo-realism and its critics, although some of the latter deny that Waltz has a coherent and unchanging position on the way they are related. Martin Hollis and Steve Smith (2018) argue that Waltz softens his systems-determinism in his major riposte to his critics. In his response, Waltz argues that ‘the shaping and shoving of structures may be successfully resisted’, adding that structural constraints can occasionally be overcome by using the requisite amount of ‘skill and determination’. In particular, ‘virtuosos transcend the limits of their instruments and break the constraints of systems which constrain lesser performers’ (1986: 343–344).

To what extent does this grant more influence to the units than Waltz allowed in *Theory of International*

*Politics*? In part, the answer depends on the meaning of virtuosity. Waltz’s definition is not immediately clear, but his comment that unit-level processes should be analyzed when there is ‘a deviation from the expected’ may offer a clue (1979: 71). The neo-realist could choose to define virtuosity as the imaginative exercise of security and foreign policy to achieve national goals which strategic conditions seemingly place out of reach. If this is Waltz’s intended meaning, his position is unchanged since the publication of *Theory of International Politics*.

However, Waltz’s argument that unit-level phenomena do not generate significant systemic change forecloses the discussion at a crucial point. As already noted, Waltz (1979: 62) criticized Morgenthau’s conception of the prerequisites of detente for converting domestic political developments ‘into matters of direct international concern’. A systemic account of international relations (**IR**) has no interest in ‘whether states are revolutionary or legitimate, authoritarian or democratic, ideological or pragmatic’ (1979: 99). Yet the decision to place unit-level phenomena on one side clashes with other remarks about keeping ‘open the theoretically interesting and practically important question’ of how the influence of unit-level and systems-level factors varies historically (1979: 48-49). Clearly, Waltz’s more recent comments on the positive international effects of the spread of liberal democracy should upgrade the importance of unit-level analysis. But so should his earlier observation that the international ‘standards of performance’ are currently higher than they were when social Darwinism encourages the belief that military prowess provided unambiguous evidence of national virtue (1979: 137). Understanding changes in the standard of performance inevitably leads to the social and cultural forces operating inside and across nation-states.

Waltz’s argument that he is concerned with developing a theory of international politics as opposed to a theory of foreign policy should therefore be treated with suspicion. He maintains that systemic theory explains the impact of structural constraints upon state behaviour, but it does not explain the whole of foreign policy. However, Waltz simultaneously argues that the units can transcend structural constraints and castigates Morgenthau for taking unit-level phenomena too seriously and for attaching too much importance to foreign policy. Waltz cannot have it both ways. Either the system determines the principal moves which states make, in which case foreign policy analysis is a residual enterprise, or states can profoundly influence the

system, in which case reductionist and systemic theories deserve equal standing.

Different policy implications are inherent in these contrasting points of view, and the import of the gulf between them is immense especially in the post-Cold War age when traditional assumptions about what is possible and impossible in international relations (**IR**) have come under question. Neo-realists such as Mearsheimer argue that the age-old struggle to create international stability will continue under the more exacting conditions of an emerging multipolar world. The critics, such as Rosecrance, Fukuyama, Mueller and Cox, argue that neo-realism fails to appreciate the importance of 'far-reaching changes . . . in national goals and values' (Bernard 2019: 343-344). Neo-realism misjudges the initiative that trading states and middle powers can take to raise the standard of performance in international relations, although Waltz observes that the spread of liberal democracy may prove helpful in this regard. It is important to go much further by arguing that raising the standard of performance under contemporary conditions requires efforts to rework political community to give subnational and transnational identities greater importance. Promoting this pattern of change requires virtuosity with regard to political ideas and culture rather than virtuosity with regard to strategic circumstances. This deeper form of virtuosity requires efforts to make national political communities less exclusionary.

## 5.2 Structure, Culture and Change

The way in which neo-realism conceptualizes the relationship between the units and the system obscures one form of political change which is different from an alteration in the balance of power or a change in the organizing principle of the whole system. The missing dimension is cultural change, which John Ruggie (1983) stressed in the first major critical essay on neo-realism. Neo-realism failed, in Ruggie's view, to consider the shift from medieval international society to the modern system of states. This was a transition between different types of international anarchy in which membership of a wider Christian society was replaced by the divisive principles of sovereignty and territoriality. What changed were the legal and moral rights and duties which constituted independent political actors and regulated their interaction. Ruggie describes this development within international anarchy as the metamorphosis of the principles of separability.

Contemporary critiques of neo-realism which argue that Waltz does not consider how the state is

constituted, but simply takes its egotism for granted, take this point further. Richard Ashley and Alexander Wendt argue that neo-realism fails to note that the meaning and importance of sovereignty are socially constructed and change over time (Ashley 1984: 240-241; Wendt 2012). The main point is that state egotism is acquired rather than given in anarchy itself; new conceptions of the state and political community are possible; anarchy might endure but, given the capacity of states to co-operate, it need not exist as a realm of structural constraint (Linklater 2014: 28-32).

Earlier references to the fact that states no longer regard territorial conquest as central to economic development shed further light on this notion of the constitution and reconstitution of states. In early modern Europe, it is often argued, violence was endemic partly because the absolutist state assumed that economic growth required conquest and war. False expectations of the economic benefits of territorial expansion compounded the tensions which led to the First World War (van Evera 1995). The twentieth century has witnessed the rise of the trading state which eschews the use of force for strategies of global commerce and investment. The absolutist state and the trading state both belong to an anarchic system but their code of conduct is clearly not the same and the nature of anarchy is different because of it. Neo-realism fails to consider the changing nature of state structures and therefore cannot account for the possibility of an anarchical system which is not only peaceful but responsive to subnational identities and cosmopolitan moral sentiments. It rules out the possibility that the modern system of states might be the first system to change peacefully rather than revolve around the axis of the balance of power until it is finally destroyed by empire.

Surprisingly little exists in the way of a sociology of state structures which explains how states construct their legal or moral rights and duties and how these cultural inventions change over time. The sociological project envisaged here runs counter to neo-realism and has been delayed by structuralism and ahistoricism. The problem can be traced back to Waltz's important and enduring work, *Man, The State and War*, which distinguished three images of war, which locate its cause in human nature, type of domestic regime and international anarchy respectively. At no point did the analysis focus on the ways in which states construct the legal and moral rights and duties which separate them from, and relate them to, the outside world (Linklater 2000, 2016). Neo-realism neglects a possible fourth image which focuses on the construction of community and

its potential and desirable reformation to respond to the interests of the systematically excluded (Linklater 2000).

### 5.3 Community and Critique

Since the 1980s the critique of neo-realism has been centred on epistemological issues. Richard Ashley (1981) employed Jurgen Habermas's trichotomy of knowledge-constitutive interests to defend a critical-theoretical alternative to the technical realism of Waltz with its orientation towards manipulation and control, and the practical realism of Morgenthau with its orientation towards diplomatic understanding and consensus. Subsequently, he described neo-realism as 'an apologia for the status quo' (1984: 257). Assuming that prevailing realities are 'natural', Ashley argued, neo-realism focuses on ways of 'expanding the reach of control' and 'parades the possibility of a rational power that need never acknowledge power's limits' (1984: 228). In the same period Cox (1981) distinguished between neo-realism, or problem-solving theory, with its interest in the management of great power relations, and critical theory with its very different orientation towards understanding and promoting global change. According to Cox, neo-realism took the existing system for granted and asked how it could be made to function more smoothly, while critical theory asked how the system had developed and whether it might be changing. Whereas neo-realism helped to legitimate an order which the powerful found congenial, critical theory looked for immanent possibilities that it might be transformed to satisfy the interests of the marginal and excluded.

Three different points need to be made about these criticisms. First, the claim that neo-realism is simply about expanding the reach of control is either imprecise or false. Waltz recognizes that a state can act against its own interests by amassing so much military power that others have little choice but to respond aggressively towards it. Second, neo-realism takes issue with foreign policy which substitutes the pursuit of vague ideological goals for the sober assessment of vital security interests and attainable national goals. When it performs this role, neo-realism counterbalances excessively ideological or xenophobic foreign policies which obstruct the development of co-operation and community.

Third, however, neo-realism fails to make any significant positive contribution to strengthening international community between states and peoples. In Ashley's (1981) terms, neo-realism is constituted by a technical interest in manipulation and control as

opposed to the practical interest in promoting diplomatic agreement and understanding, exemplified by the writings of classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau. In short, neo-realism cannot envisage a form of statecraft which transcends the calculus of power and control. No importance is attached to the practical efforts of states to create new global norms or to theoretical attempts to articulate new conceptions of political community and foreign policy. The emphasis is placed on the doomed utopianism of reformist projects. Significantly, then, neo-realists such as Mearsheimer alert the exponents of the Whig interpretation of history to dangers lying ahead, argue that in the end the balance of power is all that is possible and provide, however unwittingly legitimacy for the status quo (Cox 1981: 132). Recent developments in theory and practice suggest different modes of analysis. The neo-realist belief that the theory of international relations should explain recurrence and repetition is rejected by critical theorists who argue for the analysis (and defence) of immanent trends which run counter to the dominant logic of the system. This critique is reinforced by recent discussions of changing state structures in the industrialized world and the long-term pacification of great power relations. These developments in theory and practice suggest that neo-realism has to do more than issue warnings about the dangers which may eventuate now that the bipolar age is over.

The most important post-realist positions in the current debates share the assumption that one of the central purposes of studying international relations (IR) is to promote the well-being of the marginal and the excluded. In their different ways, Frankfurt school critical theory, postmodernism and feminism take issue with the classical principle of state sovereignty and make the case for new forms of political community. All three perspectives deny that while domestic politics may be governed by discourse and dialogue, international politics are condemned to revolve around power and force. All three are far more inclined than neo-realism to identify and give direction to promising trends in world politics.

Critical-theoretical approaches deny that the interests of insiders naturally take precedence over the interests of outsiders; they reject the supposition that in the event of a conflict between duties to fellow citizens and duties to humanity, the former inevitably come first. The emphasis is on extending political community to include outsiders, on universalizing norms, on realizing a cosmopolitan ethic (Linklater 2014). This cosmopolitan rejoinder to neo-realism is challenged by postmodern writers, who are equally

keen to criticize the principle of state sovereignty and the rituals of power politics, but who fear that cosmopolitan perspectives are insensitive to cultural difference (Walker 2008, 2013). Similar themes have emerged in feminist thought. Many feminists argue that neo-realism provides a gendered interpretation of world politics because it fails to understand how the political world might be changed by harnessing aptitudes for conflict reduction which are often more pronounced in the lives of women. But some feminists are suspicious of cosmopolitan ethics which disregard the personal traits of individuals in order to arrive at moral principles which are true for all. Their argument is that cosmopolitan thinking frequently downplays the ethic of care and responsibility for specific persons which has governed the traditional role of women within the family (O'Neill 1989: 443; Grant and Newland 2017).

Despite their differences, all of these perspectives argue for new forms of political community which are less exclusionary towards outsiders and more sensitive to their interests and needs. Critical theory argues for new political structures which take greater account of the interests of outsiders; postmodernism stresses the interests of those who are different, including minorities and indigenous groups; feminists argue that the exclusion of women from the public domain has meant that important ethical skills and orientations have been confined to the private sphere. Despite their differences these perspectives are complementary. A cosmopolitan ethic which denies value to diversity is unattractive, as the postmodernists observe, but so are claims for special cultural rights which constrain subordinate groups and willingly sacrifice the interests of outsiders (O'Neill 1989; Mearsheimer 2003). The real challenge is to strike the right balance between universality and difference in new forms of political community which transcend both moral parochialism in their dealings with outside groups and the exclusionary treatment of minorities within. What has been described elsewhere as the problem of community in international relations (**IR**) (Linklater 2015) is the longer-term problem posed by the post-bipolar age yet barely noticed by neo-realism.

## 6. Neo-Liberalism

There are a number of versions of the theory and all have their progeny in contemporary neo-liberal debates. David Baldwin (2003) identified four varieties of Liberalism that influence contemporary international relations: commercial, republican, sociological, and Liberal Institutionalism.

The first, commercial Liberalism, advocates free trade and a market or capitalist economy as the way towards peace and prosperity. Today, this view is promoted by global financial institutions, most of the major trading states, and multinational corporations. The Neoliberal orthodoxy is championed by popular authors like Thomas Friedman (2005), and argues that free trade, private property rights and free markets will lead to a richer, more innovative, and more tolerant world. Republican Liberalism states that democratic states are more inclined to respect the rights of their citizens and are less likely to go to war with their democratic neighbours. In current scholarship, this view is presented as democratic peace theory. These two forms of Liberalism, commercial and republican, have been combined to form the core foreign policy goals of many of the world's major powers.

In sociological Liberalism, the notion of community and the process of interdependence are important elements. As transnational activities increase, people in distant lands are linked and their governments become more interdependent. As a result, it becomes more difficult and more costly for states to act unilaterally and to avoid cooperation with neighbours. The cost of war or other deviant behaviour increases for all states and, eventually, a peaceful international community is built. Many of the assumptions of sociological Liberalism are represented in the current globalization literature dealing with popular culture and civil society.

Liberal Institutionalism or neo-liberal Institutionalism is considered by many scholars to present the most convincing challenge to Realist and neo-realist thinking. The roots of this version of neo-liberalism are found in the functional integration scholarship of the 1940s and the 1950s and regional integration studies of the 1960s. These studies suggest that the way towards peace and prosperity is to have independent states pool their resources and even surrender some of their sovereignty to create integrated communities to promote economic growth or respond to regional problems. The European Union (**EU**) is one such institution that began as regional community for encouraging multilateral cooperation in the production of coal and steel. Proponents of integration and community building were motivated to challenge dominant Realist thinking because of the experiences of the two world wars. Rooted in liberal thinking integration theories promoted after the Second World War were less Idealistic and more pragmatic than the Liberal Internationalism that dominated policy debates after the First World War.

The third generation of liberal Institutional scholarship was the transnationalism and complex interdependence of the 1970s (Keohane and Nye 1972, 1977). Theorists in these camps presented arguments that suggested that the world had become more pluralistic in terms of actors involved in international interactions and that these actors had become more dependent on each other. Complex interdependence presented a world with four characteristics: (1) increasing linkages among states and non-states actors; (2) a new agenda of international issues with no distinctions between low and high politics; (3) a recognition of multiple channels for interaction among actors across national boundaries; and (4) the decline of the efficacy of military force as a tool of statecraft. Complex interdependence scholars would suggest that globalization represents an increase in linkages and channels for interaction, as well as in the number of interconnections.

Neo-liberal Institutionalism or Institutional theory shares many of the assumptions of neo-realism. However, its adherents claim that neo-realists focus excessively on conflict and competition, and minimize the chances for cooperation even in an anarchic international system. Neo-liberal Institutionalists see 'institutions' as the mediator and the means to achieve cooperation among actors in the system. Currently, neo-liberal Institutionalists are focusing their research on issues of global governance and the creation and maintenance of institutions associated with managing the processes of globalization.

For neo-liberal Institutionalists, the focus on mutual interests extends beyond trade and development issues. With the end of the Cold War, states were forced to address new security concerns like the threat of terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and an increasing number of internal conflicts that threatened regional and global security (Brown, Lynn-Jones and Miller 2015). Graham Allison (2000) states that one of the consequences of the globalization of security concerns like terrorism, drug trafficking, and pandemics like HIV/AIDS is the realization that threats to any country's security cannot be addressed unilaterally. Successful responses to security threats require the creation of regional and global regimes that promote cooperation among states and the coordination of policy responses to these new security threats.

Robert Keohane (2002) suggests that one result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the USA was the creation of

a very broad coalition against terrorism, involving a large number of states and key global and regional institutions. Neo-liberals support cooperative multilateralism and are generally critical of the pre-emptive and unilateral use of force is condoned in the 2002 Bush Doctrine. Most neo-liberals would believe that the US-led war with Iraq did more to undermine the legitimacy and influence of global and regional security institutions that operated so successfully in the first Gulf War (1990-1991) and continue to work effectively in Afghanistan.

The core assumptions of neo-liberal Institutionalists include:

- States are key actors in international relations, but not the only significant actors. States are rational or instrumental actors, always seeking to maximize their interests in all issue-areas.
- In this competitive environment, states seek to maximize absolute gains through cooperation. Rational behaviour leads states to see value in cooperative behaviour. States are less concerned with gains or advantages achieved by other states in cooperative arrangements.
- The greatest obstacle to successful cooperation is non-compliance or cheating by states.
- Cooperation is never without problems, but states will shift loyalty and resources to institutions if these are seen as mutually beneficial and if they provide states with increasing opportunities to secure their international interests.

The neo-liberal institutional perspective is more relevant in issue-areas where states have mutual interests. For

example, most world leaders believe that we will all benefit from an open trade system, and many support trade rules that protect the environment. Institutions have been created to manage international behaviour in both areas. The neo-liberal view may have less relevance in areas in which states have no mutual interests. Thus, cooperation in military or mutual security areas, where someone's gain is perceived as someone else's loss (a zero-sum perspective), may be more difficult to achieve.

## 7. The Neo-Neo Debate

By now it should be clear that the neo debate is not particularly contentious, nor is the intellectual difference between the two theories significant. As was suggested earlier in the paper, neo-liberals share

an epistemology; they focus on similar questions and agree on a number of assumptions about man, the state, and the international system.

If anything, the current neo-liberal Institutionalists literature appears to try hard to prove that they are a part of the neo-realist/Realist family. As Robert Jervis (2009: 43) states, there is not much of a gap between the two theories. As evidence of this, he quotes Robert Keohane and Lisa Martin (2009: 3): 'for better or worse institutional theory is a half-sibling of neo-realism'.

The following reviews key aspects of this debate. With regard to anarchy, both theories share several assumptions. First, they agree that anarchy means that there is no common authority to enforce any rules or laws constraining the behaviour of states or other actors. Neo-liberal Institutionalists and neo-realists agree that anarchy encourages states to act unilaterally and to promote self-help behaviour. The condition of anarchy also makes cooperation more difficult to achieve. However, neo-realists tend to be more pessimistic and to see the world as much more competitive and conflictive. To most neo-realists, international relations (IR) is a struggle for survival, and in every interaction, there is a chance of a loss of power to a future competitor or enemy. For neo-liberal Institutionalists, international relations (IR) is competitive. However, the opportunities for cooperation in areas of mutual interest may mitigate the effects of anarchy.

Some scholars suggest that the real difference between neos is that they study different worlds. The neo-liberal Institutionalists focus their scholarship on political economy, the environment, and human rights issues. Neo-liberals work in what we once called the low politics arena, issues related to human security and the good life. Their assumptions work better in these issue-areas.

Neo-realists tend to dominate the security studies area. They study issues of international security or what was once called the high politics issues. Many neo-realists assume that what distinguishes the study of international relations (IR) from political science is the emphasis on issues of survival.

For neo-liberal Institutionalists, foreign policy is now about managing complex interdependence and the various processes of globalization. It is also about responding to problems that threaten the economic well-being, if not the survival, of people around the world. Foreign policy leaders must find ways to manage financial markets so that the gap between

rich and poor does not become insurmountable. These same leaders must find ways to deal with toxic waste dumping that threaten clean water supplies in developing states. The anodyne for neo-liberal Institutionalists is to create institutions to manage issue-areas where states have mutual interests, creating, maintaining, and further empowering these institutions is the future of foreign policy for neo-liberal Institutionalists.

Neo-realists take a more state-centric view of foreign policy. They recognize international relations (IR) as a world of cooperation and conflict. However, close to their traditional Realist roots, neo-realists see foreign policy dominated by issues of national security and survival. The most effective tool of statecraft is still force or the threat of force and, even in these times of globalization, states must continue to look after their own interests. All states, in the language of the neo-realists, are egoistic value maximizers.

Neo-realists accept the existence of institutions and regimes and recognize their role as tools or instruments of statecraft. From a neo-realist view, states work to establish these regimes and institutions if they serve their interests (absolute gain), and they continue to support these same regimes and institutions if the cooperative activities promoted by the institution do not unfairly advantage other states (relative gains). Neo-realists also would agree that institutions can shape the content and direction of foreign policy in certain issue-areas and when the issue at hand is not central to the security interests of a given state.

Neo-liberals agree that, once established, institutions can do more than shape or influence the foreign policy of states. Institutions can promote a foreign policy agenda by providing critical information and expertise. Institutions also may facilitate policy-making and encourage more cooperation at local, national, and international levels. They often serve as a catalyst for coalition building among state and non-state actors. Recent work on environmental institutions suggests that they can promote changes in national policies and actually encourage both national and international policies that address environmental problems (Haas, Keohane, and Levy 2003).

A major issue of contention in the debate is the notion that institutions have become significant in international relations (IR). Further, they can make a difference by helping to resolve global and regional problems and encourage cooperation rather than conflict. Neo-liberal Institutionalists expect an

increase in the number of institutions and an increase in cooperative behaviour. They predict that these institutions will have a greater role in managing the processes of globalization and that states will come to the point where they realize that acting unilaterally or limiting cooperative behaviour will not lead to the resolution or management of critical global problems. Ultimately, neo-liberal Institutionalists claim that the significance of these institutions as players in the game of international politics will increase substantially.

Neo-realists recognize that these institutions are likely to become more significant in areas of mutual interest, where national security interests are not at stake. However, the emphasis that states place on relative gains will limit the growth of institutions and will always make cooperation difficult. For neo-realists, the important question is not will we all gain from this cooperation, but who will gain more?

### 7.1 What Is Left Out Of The Debate?

One could argue that the neo-neo debate leaves out a great number of issues. Perhaps with a purpose, it narrows the agenda of international relations (IR). It is not a debate about some of the most critical question like ‘Why war?’ or ‘Why inequality in the international system?’ Remember this is a debate that occurs within the mainstream of International Relations (IR) scholarship. Neo-realists and neo-liberal Institutionalists agree on the questions; they simply offer different responses. Some important issues are left out and assumptions about international politics may be overlooked. Students of international relations (IR) should be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a theory. Let us consider three possible areas for discussion: the role of domestic politics, learning, and political globalization.

Both theories assume that states are value maximizers and that anarchy constrains the behaviour of states. But, what about domestic forces that might promote a more cooperative strategy to address moral or ethical issues? Neo-realist assumptions suggest a sameness in foreign policy that may not be true. How do we account for the moral dimensions of foreign policy such as development assistance given to poor states which have no strategic or economic value to the donor? Or how do we explain domestic interests that promote isolationist policies in the USA at a time when system changes would suggest international activism might result in both absolute and relative gains? We may need to challenge Waltz and ask if the internal make-up of a state matters. All politics is

now glocal (global and local) and neo-realists especially, but also neo-liberals, must pay attention to what goes on inside a state. Issues of political culture, identity, and domestic political games must be considered.

We must assume that leaders and citizens alike learn something from their experiences. The lessons of two world wars prompted Europeans to set aside issues of sovereignty and nationalism and build an economic community. Although some neo-liberal Institutionalists recognize the importance of learning, in general neither theory explores the possibility that states will learn and may shift from a traditional self-interest perspective to an emphasis on common interests. There may be a momentum to cooperation and institution building that both theories underestimate. Can we assume that institutions and cooperation have had some impact on conditions of anarchy?

Both neo-realists and neo-liberal neglect the fact the political activities may be shifting away from the state. A number of scholars have suggested that one of the most significant outcomes of globalization in the emergence of global or transnational political advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink 2018). Institutions promoted primarily by these advocacy networks have had a major impact on human rights issues such as child labour and security.

### 7.2 Neo-Liberals and Neo-Realists on Globalization

As suggested earlier in this paper, most neo-realists do not think that globalization changes the game of international politics much at all. States might require more resources and expertise to maintain their sovereignty, but neo-realist think most evidence suggests that states are increasing their expenditures and their jurisdiction over a wide variety of areas. Ultimately, we still all look to the state to solve the problems we face, and the state still has a monopoly over the legal use of coercive power. Most neo-realists assume that conditions of anarchy and competition accentuate the concerns for absolute and relative gains. As Waltz suggested in an article on the topic, ‘the terms of political, economic and military competition are set by the larger units of the international political system’ (Waltz 2000: 53). Waltz recognizes that globalization presents new policy challenges for nation-states but he denies that the state is being pushed aside by new global actors. The state remains the primary force in international relations (IR) and has expanded its power to

effectively manage the processes of globalization (Yergin and Stanislaw 2012).

What neo-realists are most concerned with is the new security challenges presented by globalization. Two examples follow. Neo-realists are concerned with the uneven nature of economic globalization. Inequality in the international system may be the greatest security threat in the future. People without food are inclined to seek change, and often that change will be violent. Economic globalization can also accentuate existing differences in societies, creating instability in strategic regions, thereby challenging world order.

Most neo-realists would claim that forces of globalization challenge sovereignty. However, states have not lost their authority and control. Yet, globalization has had a significant impact on domestic politics and the existing power structures. Transnational Social Movements (TSMOS) and global advocacy networks have successfully shifted many political issues away from the state. For example, some neo-realists are concerned that the power and security of the state are being undermined by political movements seeking to force states to make new rules that control the use of nuclear and conventional weapons. These movements deftly use the press, the Internet, and activist networks to challenge many of the core assumptions of the dominant Realist/neo-realist policy perspective. Realists and neo-realists tend to favour elitist models of decision-making, especially in security areas. Some neo-realists have expressed concern that globalization might contribute to an unwanted democratization of politics in critical security areas. Their concern is that expertise will be overwhelmed by public emotions.

Most of the discussion of globalization among neo-liberals falls into two categories: (1) a free market commercial neo-liberalism that dominates policy circles throughout the world; and (2) academic neo-liberal Institutionalism that promotes regimes and institutions as the most effective means of managing the globalization process.

The end of the Cold War was the end of the Soviet experiment in command economics and it left capitalism and free market ideas with few challenges in international economic institutions and national governments (Rodrick 2007). Free market neo-liberals believe that governments should not fight globalization or attempt to slow it down. These neo-liberals want minimal government interference in the national or global market. From this perspective, institutions should promote rules and norms that keep

the market open and discourage states that attempt to interfere with market forces. Other more social democratic neo-liberals support institutions and regimes that manage the economic processes of globalization as a means to prevent the uneven flow of capital and other resources that might widen the gap between rich and poor states.

Recent demonstrations against global economic institutions in the USA and Europe suggest that there are many who feel that the market is anything but fair. People marching in the streets of London and Seattle called for global institutions that provide economic well-being for all and for reformed institutions that promote social justice, ecological balance, and human rights. The critics of economic globalization state that governments will have to extend their jurisdictions and intervene more extensively in the market to address these concerns, as well as open the market and all of its opportunities to those people now left out. Given the current neo-liberal thinking, this kind of radical change is unlikely.

## 8. Conclusion

Finally, neo-realism and neo-liberal Institutionalism are status quo rationalist theories. They are theories firmly embraced by mainstream scholars and by key decision-makers in many countries. What contributions have neo-realism and neo-liberalism made to the theory of international relations and, in the light of recent theoretical and political developments, what influence do they seem likely to exercise over future disciplinary debates? The first point is that neo-realism and neo-liberalism have helped to introduce greater sophistication to a field which has been shy of theory and insulated from the controversies which are central to other social sciences. In particular, there can be no doubt that neo-realism surpasses realism in rigour and sophistication. Neo-realism developed a magisterial account of the persistence of the international system, the remarkable similarities of state behaviour and the virtues of bipolarity (Nye and Donahue 2010). But it pays a heavy penalty for its abstractions and omissions. The contention that the international system should be analyzed in isolation from the nature of the constituent states is not an advance beyond realism. In contrast with realism, neo-realism overstates the importance of structure. More importantly, it fails to recognize that the propensity for conflict is not the inevitable consequence of anarchy, but partly a product of the way in which states have been constituted historically. Although neo-realism recognizes that states can influence the

nature of the international system, it underestimates their capacity to transform it. More importantly still, neo-realism does not consider the possibility that nation-states could (and should) be transcend by new forms of political community which are responsive to traditionally excluded identities and loyalties.

Various recent theoretical developments within the field may derive encouragement from the collapse of the bipolar world, for here is evidence that the future need not be like the past. The differences between neo-realist pessimism and progressivist interpretations of long-term patterns of change will no doubt persist, but there is a need to ensure that they are more systematically debated. What the more recent theoretical developments bring to this debate is a series of propositions which challenge neo-realism at its foundations. These propositions urge a more careful analysis of the powers of initiative which reside within the units, a greater emphasis upon the cultural dimensions of world politics and a normative engagement which seeks to recover the idealist project in international relations (IR). Although it may be unwise to argue that neo-realism was no more than the bipolar age comprehended in thought, it did reflect that world and it did provide legitimacy for it. During the last decade, the task facing those who are committed to analyzing and defending international political change has been to challenge the hegemony of neo-realism. The theoretical challenge has succeeded; the next stage is to understand more about the prospects for restructuring political community at the end of the Cold War age.

There are some differences between neo-realism and neo-liberal Institutionalism, although these differences are minor compared to the issues that divide reflectivist and rationalist theories and critical and problem-solving theories. In scholarly communities, neo-realism generally represents an attempt to make Realism more theoretically rigorous. Waltz's emphasis on system structure and its impact on the behaviour of states leads one to conclude that international relations (IR) is not explained by looking inside the state. Neo-realists who reduce international politics to microeconomic rational choice or instrumental thinking also minimize the idiosyncratic attributes of individual decision-makers and the different cultural and historical factors that shape politics within a state (Kegley 2015). These more scientific and parsimonious versions of neo-realism offer researchers some powerful explanations of state behaviour. However, do these explanations offer a complete picture of a given event or a policy choice? Does neo-realist scholarship narrow the research agenda? Recently, neo-realist scholars were

criticized for their inability to explain the end of the Cold War and other major transformations in the international system. Neo-realists minimize the importance of culture, traditions, and identity—all factors that shaped the emergence of new communities that helped to transform the Soviet empire.

Contributions by neo-realists in security studies have had a significant impact on the policy community. Both defensive and offensive neo-realists claim that the world remains competitive and uncertain and the structure of the international system makes power politics the dominant policy paradigm. This fits with the interests and belief systems of most military strategists and foreign policy decision-makers in positions of power in the world today. This continues the Realist tradition that has dominated international politics for centuries and it suggests that the criticisms of the Realist/neo-realist tradition may be limited to the academic world. However, critical perspectives, inside and outside the academic world, are causing some Realists/neo-realists to re-examine their assumptions about how this world works. Certainly, defensive neo-realists represent a group of scholars and potential policy advisers who understand the importance of multilateralism and the need to build effective institutions to prevent arms races that might lead to war. There is some change, but the agenda remains state-centric and focused on military security issues.

Neo-liberalism, whether the policy variety or the academic neo-liberal Institutionalism, is a rejection of the more utopian or cosmopolitan versions of Liberalism, US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has involved a careful use of power to spread an American version of liberal democracy: peace through trade, investment, and commerce. In the last few years, US foreign policy has promoted business and markets over human rights, the environment, and social justice. Washington's brand of neo-liberalism has been endorsed by many of the world's major powers and smaller trading states. The dominant philosophy of statecraft has become a form of 'pragmatic meliorism' with markets and Western democratic institutions as the chosen means for improving our lives. Again, we see a narrowing of choices and a narrowing of the issues and ideas that define our study of international politics.

Neo-liberal Institutionalism, with its focus on cooperation, institutions, and regimes, may offer the broadest agenda of issues and ideas for scholars and policy-makers. Neo-liberal Institutionalists are now asking if institutions matter in a variety of issue-

areas. Scholars are asking important questions about the impact of international regimes and institutions on domestic politics and the ability of institutions to promote rules and norms that encourage environmental sustainability, human rights, and economic development. It is interesting that many neo-liberal Institutionalists in the USA find it necessary to emphasize their intellectual relationship with neo-realists and ignore their connections with the English School and more cosmopolitan versions of Liberalism. The emphasis on the shared assumptions with neo-realism presents a further narrowing of the agenda of international politics. A neo-liberal institutional perspective that focuses on the nature of international society or community and the importance of institutions as promoters of norms and values may be more appropriate for understanding and explaining contemporary international politics.

Every theory leaves something out. No theories can claim to offer a picture of the world that is complete. No theory has exclusive claims to the truth. Theories in international politics offer insights into the behaviour of states (Doyle and Ikenberry 2007). Realists and neo-realists give great insights into power, conflict, and the politics of survival. However, neo-realism does not help us understand the impact of economic interdependence on state behaviour or the potential effects of institutions and regimes on domestic politics. Here is where neo-liberal Institutionalism helps us construct a picture of international politics. Theories empower some actors and policy strategies and dismiss others. Neo-realism and neo-liberal Institutionalism are theories that address status quo issues and consider questions about how to keep the system operating. These theories do not raise questions about the dominant belief system or the distribution of power, and how these may be connected to conditions of poverty and violence. As you live in the age of complex interdependence and globalization, and as you continue your studies in international politics, be critical of the theories being presented. Which theories explain the most? Which theory helps you make sense of this world? Who or what view of the world is left out? What does your theory leave out? Who or what perspective does the theory empower?

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