

A Study in structural realism

Three kinds of tragedy



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Abstract

This is foremost an essay in international relations theory, where realism is a major school within the field and has been so for quite some time. A sub-field within realism is structural realism that can be said to begin with Kenneth Waltz and his *Theory of International Politics*. This essay takes a “great thinkers”-approach and compares and analyses three versions of structural realism as presented by the prominent realists Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer. Using a qualitative text-method the aim was to present and analyze the fine-grained differences and likenesses of these theories foremost through the It also uses the theories to through their eyes explain the manner of US-China relations.

Keywords: Structural realism, “Great thinkers”-approach, US-China relations

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1. Background and introduction

1.1 Background

Since the end of the cold war we have in the realm of international politics experienced something very rare. Charles Krauthammer called it “*the unipolar moment*” in a well noticed article in Foreign Affairs published in the beginning of the 1990’s.¹ He was referring to the condition in international politics that emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union. The United States had now become the most powerful nation in the world by far, rivalled by none. The US was now the unipole of the world, after the Cold War-era’s bipolarity and struggle between the US and the USSR.

Some believed that this unipolar moment, meant that the main struggle between ideologies was over and that liberal capitalism had prevailed, such as Fukuyama described in his book “*The End of History and the Last Man*”, while others, such as Kenneth Waltz, contended that this unipolar moment was likely to be temporary and the power vacuum the Soviet collapse left the world with, would soon enough be filled.^{2 3}

Neorealism (or Waltz’s realism) was by many seen to be invalidated as it did not accurately predict the fall of the Soviet Union and the passing over to unipolarity. In short, the entire realist school went from being criticized to almost becoming viewed as outdated.

But as Booth notes, realism has quite recently been the object of some renewed interest.

This has come to take a “great-thinkers” approach, where one theorist is studied and focused on rather than trying to generalize and categorize an entire larger school.

Also, understanding and gaining insight into realist thinkers, help us understand competing theories within the international relations field, especially as many have begun as critiques against realism.⁴

¹ Krauthammer, Charles, 1991. “*The Unipolar moment*”. Foreign Affairs

² Fukuyama, Francis, 1992. “*The End of History and the Last man*”. Free Press

³ Waltz, Kenneth, 1993. “*The emerging structure of international politics*”. International Security

⁴ Booth, Ken, 2011. “*Realism and world politics*”. Routledge p. 1-4

Given that realism is indeed one major and old school within IR-theory, gaining greater understanding and insight to it, is today of great interest. In a world where many claim the old Westphalian order is being replaced, the study of IR-theory is perhaps even more interesting than ever before. Realism of course, as with all other schools of thought, has its limits and flaws, and indeed as Waltz notes himself, a theory is never complete. We can only hope to gain deeper but also broader perspective of the world we live by trying to learn different perspectives and make use of their individual strengths.

US power has since the beginning of the 1990's been, and still is today, superior and the unipolar world has remained intact with the US economy as the world's largest. US power is however in steep relative decline, economists predicting that the Chinese economy will catch up with and take lead of the US economy in 2020, or even earlier by some accounts.

Bearing this in mind, many have begun to see ahead, expecting a return to a bipolar world, with the U.S and China as the two major players. There are many different views of how this will evolve and what may happen, structural realism being one of these schools. Realism as an intellectual tradition within academia is a very large body of work and even structural realism as a sub-school could probably fill a small library.

The goal of this essay is to cover some of the major authors of structural realism, taking the "great-thinkers" approach as described by Booth, comparing them and pointing out their different distinct properties, while also using these theories to understand the case of a rising China from the realist perspectives. The relationship between the US and China might well be the great "happening" of IR in many years to come. This essay is foremost however an exercise in IR-theory, and not US-China relations. The US-China example will rather be used as an example to describe how different realisms view the world.

1.2 Problem and question formulation:

The problems of interest in this essay then become to investigate and compare some major different theories within structural realism. The purpose of doing this is rather straightforward. As with most intellectual schools within a larger body of work, the specifics of different views tend to be overlooked and focus is instead put on the common denominators which they all have in common. This, I would argue, leads to a larger picture that is highly generalized and where the depth is overlooked on account of width. Because of

this the depth and fine print of these different theories are lost and generalized pictures become too wide to include depth. It is a common problem of generalizing complex theories into one larger mass; too much is simply lost in the process.

Also, this essay should in part be seen as a contribution to the renewed interest in realist thinkers, as it aims to describe, analyze and compare them. Therefore, the first purpose of this paper is to try and revitalize the depth of different structural realist accounts, while analyzing and comparing them.

The second purpose of the essay is to in broader terms describe US-China relations through the looking glasses of these theories, as to provide a practical application of them. This will foremost be used as a pedagogical tool to present the theories, but can also serve as insight into the US-China relationship.

Why have I chosen China and the US, some might ask? The reason as I see it is also rather straightforward. Realist theory is mainly concerned with great powers or superpowers as it was termed during the cold war, in the international system. This is quite simply for the reason that great powers determine a lot of how the international system is made up. The US is the leading power today, while China today is portrayed as the most likely candidate to rival for, or share this position of power. They are in other words, the two major players in the game at the moment, which also makes them of the greatest interest.

Bearing the above in mind, my question formulation then becomes the following:

I: *What are the differences and similarities of different accounts of structural realism?*

II: *How would these accounts portray and explain the relationship between the US and China today?*

1.3 Theory:

These two questions are of a more empirical nature in the sense that the formulation of the questions are in the basic form descriptive. The aim is to accurately describe and then by comparing and analyzing the schools, produce a descriptive but also analytic account of the schools and their differences and similarities. The second question would use the descriptions produced in the first question to analyse how these descriptions would explain a specific

event, in this case US and Chinese relations; a practical application of the theories on a practical case.

1.4 Methodology and empirical data:

An appropriate method to be employed for these questions is qualitative text analysis, which will focus on describing and analyzing the theories by carefully studying the sources, and drawing implications. This can also be used to make inferences about the theories. By first reading and describing, the goal is also to find identify areas of significance for the theories that then can be more carefully looked at in relation to another, to identify meaningful differences and similarities. The focus here will tend to lean toward differences, where firstly the common ground on which all stand will be identified, and then in a second step be followed by what differs these theories and makes them unique, rather than alike, as the differences are often overlooked motivated by finding the similarities and then generalizing.

The second question would apply these theories to explain (or perhaps not being able to explain) a certain practical event. I would here be more relying on the descriptions in the first question to try and explain the events in question. This part is also of an empirical nature since its purpose is to explain how things are and also why they are as they are. At this stage I can also use authors' writing on these issues that have a certain realist perspective.

Which realist authors or theories, am I then to focus on? There are three specifically that I have chosen to use for the purposes of this essay. The first is Kenneth Waltz, the "founder" of neo-realism, which is beyond doubt the main figure of the school. The second is John Mearsheimer, also prominent and known within the field. The last is Stephen Walt, another figure within the school.

The reasons that I have chosen these are quite simple. They are all prominent within the field, but with own versions of structural realism. They could be argued to be the three most prominent, which make them an interesting list for analysis. Choosing them is also out of practical reasons. They have all produced specific works, which are seen as the main sources of their structural realism(s), and they have all published a large body of articles in scientific journals further explaining and exploring their theories. This makes finding material uncomplicated. Altogether, these reasons seem both logical and practical.

1.5 Disposition

This essay will consist firstly of a methodological discussion, followed by a short theoretical overview. After this the comparison and analysis of the theories will take begin which will take up most space of this essay. I will finish this analysis with a summarizing table as to make the general patterns as lucid as possible. After this a shorter section will focus on US-China relations through the eyes of the theories, followed by conclusions and an executive summary.

2. Methodology

This part will focus on the methodology of my investigation. It will be mainly concerned with making clear in what ways I will examine and analyze the theories, while also presenting a brief overview of Lundquist's levels and types of theory which will be included in the analysis. It shall however be noted that I in this essay will not be using a "theory of theory". The reason for this, is that my investigation has its main focus on an operational level, and does not aim to categorize these theories into perspectives such as actor/structure.

2.1 Qualitative text analysis:

As Devine notes, one's choice of method usually depends on what kinds of question the investigation seeks to answer. You try and use the method most appropriate for your kind of question.⁵ As my first question aims to both describe and compare complex theories, it becomes apparent that in order to answer my question I first of all need a full and deep understanding of these theories.

Do to this, I can choose to proceed by reading the sources of these theories directly, or by reading second-hand descriptions of them, or by a combination of these. Bearing in mind my previous critique of broader generalization, I will foremost find my empirical base in first hand material, i.e. in texts about the theories themselves.

I will use a qualitative text analysis-method, aimed at gaining fuller and deeper understanding of the texts in question. This method is a rather broad and can be used in different ways.

In my case it aims at finding the essential parts of a text through careful reading of the text. The entirety of the text is assumed to be something else than only the sum of its parts, which often is the aim of a quantitative text-method. This means that some passages and parts of a text are more meaningful than others to its entirety. As the theories I am to examine are of a

⁵ Marsh, David, 2002. *"Theory and methods in Political science"*. Palgrave Macmillan p. 202

complex nature, the content is not always easily comprehended, as all things are not explicitly outspoken.⁶

2.1.1 Variables:

To proceed in my analysis the presentation of variables within the theories will be necessary, especially as to point out likeness and difference between them. The variables in this essay can be seen as the central concepts and assumptions of the theories.

My selection of variables becomes crucial. Some variables are arguably not as important to the wholeness of the text as others; some are central while others are peripheral. My selection of these variables will depend on my in depth reading of the texts in question, the ones that emerge as the central concepts vital for the theory. Some concepts might for instance be central in one theory, while non-existent in others. The selection of variables should hence be indicative of the theory's wholeness.^{7 8} In essence, some concepts are more important than others.

2.1.2 An open approach:

The selection of variables will be of a more open approach rather than predetermined. For instance, if *balancing* is a variable, I will not beforehand choose this as a variable and concentrate on it very intimately. As the word *open* suggests, the variables will rather be chosen along the way. Of course, I at this stage have some appreciation of what these variables might be. However, as to stay true to the essay's purpose, I will not in a structured way preselect them, as I might miss out on important parts of these theories. I will not pre-construct categories in which a variable can be placed. Or as Boréus and Bergström calls them, ideal types.⁹

Lundquist notes that complex theories often lose important content on the basis of clear operationalization.¹⁰ One of the reasons for this is as mentioned, that I find generalizing descriptions often to be very poor, focusing on broad categorizations rather than unfolding the intricacies that make one theory separate from others. So to start with the same scope limiting would be a waste of time. I do not want to limit my scope by creating clear and cut out categories as this can have a tendency to miss out important information. To for instance

⁶ Esaiisson, Peter etc., 2004. "Metodpraktikan". Norstedts p. 233

⁷ Esaiisson, Peter etc., 2004. "Metodpraktikan". Norstedts p. 239-240

⁸ Bergström, Göran & Borelius, Kristina, 2005. "Textens menings och makt". Studentlitteratur p. 159-160

⁹ Ibid p. 160-161

¹⁰ Lundquist, Lennart, 1993. "Det vetenskapliga studiet av politik". Studentlitteratur p. 99-100

place *balancing* in either a defensive or aggressive category does indeed clearly differentiate variables, but it also does not say much more than that it is either in the one category or the other. As Esaiasson et al. notes, “*demands to reduce the answer to summarizing categories risk trivializing more than enlightening*”.¹¹ I aim not to trivialize.

With an open approach, I can instead move on to analyzing more freely and independently to gain depth and nuance.¹²

The open approach can of course make use of categorizations created along the way. By doing this the analysis instead remains unrestrained throughout the entire research project, as opposed to the predetermined categorizations where much of the analysis is dependent on the choices made beforehand. During my analysis broader differences might appear, and I could then choose to present these differences by then creating categories, which I in some cases likely will. The point is to not narrow my scope at an early stage, not to exclude later categorization altogether. I will in summarize my findings in the end, for easier overview, using a table placing the theories in different categories.

2.1.3 Risks of an open approach:

This approach also entails certain risks that I need to be aware of. Firstly, it becomes easier to loose track of the problem of an investigation, and get sidetracked into matters that are not really important, albeit interesting. I also need to be aware that predetermined answers are a strength in the sense that well reflected answers beforehand can point out what answers can be, which makes the presence or non-presence of something just as interesting. The risk of the open approach is that I go by analyzing my text not being aware of what could be there, but is not. This has to be kept in mind throughout the project.¹³

2.2 Types and levels of theory

2.2.1 Types of theory:

One absolutely fundamental distinction of a theory is its nature; in other words if a theory is empirical, normative or constructive, or possibly a combination of these. Confusion in what of

¹¹ Esaiasson, Peter etc., 2004. “*Metodpraktikan*”. Norstedts p. 241

¹² Ibid, p. 240

¹³ Ibid, p. 241-242

these categories a theory belongs to can end up in complete miscomprehension of its implications. This hence provides me with a starting point for comparison of my theories.¹⁴

I earlier wrote that I would not use predetermined categorizations as not to limit myself, so this might seem contradictory. I argue however that this is not the case. These three categories are fundamental to all theory, and they do affect how a theory is seen. Placing my theories in one or more of these categorizations becomes rather necessary to understand what kinds of theories they are on a basic level. Without making this categorization I would rather be leaving out vital information about the nature of these theories that very directly affects the theories as a whole. They are used at a level beneath the one where categorizations become limiting, if you will.

2.2.2 Levels of theory:

When analyzing social science theory, an often present problem is that theories are internally stratified, much like ontology and epistemology. The first level is described by Lundquist as scientifically inferred stipulations, based on one's ontology. The second level is dependent on the stipulations but is separated, the operative level. The operational level includes descriptions and explanations of reality, while the other level provides the foundations for these descriptions and explanations. This division of level becomes a logical starting point of my analysis.

The metaphysical assumptions or ontology based stipulations become extremely important to be aware of as these assumptions both affect the operational level as the end result. Simply put, you cannot fully grasp the operational level without understanding the one beneath it.¹⁵

The first part of my analysis will hence focus on, in Lundquist's terms, the fundamental level of theory, while the following will focus on the operational level of theory.

The greater focus of my investigation will be on the operational level. To be clear, this paper is not comparing the theories in the sense of pre-constructed theory-variables, such as actor-structure etc. but instead focus on what they say on the operative level.

¹⁴ Lundquist, Lennart, 1993. "*Det vetenskapliga studiet av politik*". Studentlitteratur p. 81

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 77-79

3. Theoretical framework

This theoretical introduction aims to present a very short overview of structural realism in international relations theory. The three “kinds” of neo-realism are those of Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer. As my later analysis will go quite deep with these separate theories, I shall here only provide a shorter introduction of structural realism in general, along with some general critique.

3.1 Realism in international relations:

Political realism is all but new as a phenomenon. Historical overviews often refer to historical figures such as Thucydides and his account of the Peloponnesian War, and Niccolò Machiavelli and *The Prince*, as proponents of political realism.

Realism as a whole tends to state that the basics of international relations has not undergone any major changes historically, but have been driven by certain factors that are unrealistic to be able to overcome, if not impossible. These factors include the inherent lust for power in human nature and the anarchical international system, and explain why terrible wars have been recurrent phenomena in history, and that this is unlikely to change.¹⁶

The state is assumed to be the main player of international life and is always seeking ways to guarantee its own security in an uncertain and dangerous world. The main ways to provide for one's security is to have strong national capability, both economic and military, or to ally with others states if necessary. This is why the focus on power, simply defined as the capability of a state, is put in focus. States' relative power toward one another thus becomes a central part of realist theory. The states with the most power become the major players internationally (great powers) as their actions determine much international outcome, fight the most devastating wars and in short control the arena of states.^{17 18}

¹⁶ Williams, Paul, 2008. *Security studies: An Introduction*. Routledge p. 16

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 17-19

¹⁸ Hurrell, Andrew, 2007. *On Global Order*. Oxford University press p. 29-30

Bearing this in mind, it is important to note that while focusing on state behaviour as a whole, the main focus is on great powers, and thus realism becomes a theory that focuses mainly on great powers politics. It is not that less powerful states are not taken into account, but rather that since they don't have corresponding impact they become less interesting for the whole. The classical approach finds its roots in the flawed nature of man, or in the words of Morgenthau a prominent realist, "*Political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature*".¹⁹

The neo-realist, or structural, approach instead finds the determining factors of action in the structure of the international system, which is one of anarchy. This anarchy, or lack of an international centralized government, leaves states in a system where they enjoy limited choice of action if they want to survive. In Kenneth Waltz's words "*Structures encourage certain behaviours and penalize those who do not respond...*".²⁰

This is the main distinction between classical and structural realism, and although they both focus on much of the same issues such as balance of power, they find the roots for their beliefs on different levels; human nature and systemic.

This also leaves us with some interesting reflections. Whereas Morgenthau assumes that states are inherently aggressive due to their lust for power, this is not the case in a structural world. Structural assumptions are much more "benign", since they only assume that states wish to survive, not that they are aggressive by nature. For the larger picture this means that the two worlds they describe are inherently different; one in which aggression rules, and one in which survival rules. Granted, the will for survival may in practice lead to aggression, but it also means that the world does not have to be one of constant conflict between great powers, which is rather the implication of Morgenthau. Structural theory presents a different picture than just mere attribution to man's flawed nature, as we shall see throughout this essay. This leaves us with the conclusion that although neo-realism may be pessimistic and cynical about international relations, it is a milder cynicism than the "human nature" perspective.

3.1.1. Realist critiques:

The realist account of reality no doubt places states and humans in a rather dull world that is in a sense "doomed" to a painful and difficult existence dominated by cynic calculation and

¹⁹ Morgenthau, Hans, 1948. "*Politics Among Nations*". New York p. 6

²⁰ Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. "*Theory of international Politics*". Random House p. 106

self-centeredness. Much of the critique against realism has its base in one of its main theoretical antagonist in the field of IR, liberalism and its varieties.

It is often critiqued on basis that it ignores cooperation that actually takes place, and that fruitful peace is possible. Liberals often point to roles that norms, international institutions and economic gain play to international relations. Concepts such as human rights and democracy can't be ignored without leaving a lot of the picture out.^{21 22}

The democratic peace thesis holds that wars between liberal democracies are virtually non-existent, and points out the peaceful effects that both liberalism and democracy produces.²³

One of the major critiques shared by all realist opponents is the state-centric view of international politics. This view contends that realism blindly sees national interest and states as the only meaningful motivations and actors, while in fact there is a huge amount on NSA:s (non-state actors) in the arena that immensely influences international politics. One recent example would be terrorism, non-state groups that has had enormous impact on the global political arena, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for instance. These critics contend that up until recently the state as portrayed by realists has been the major player, but that this has changed and is currently changing even more. Globalization has created a "smaller" world where people are closer to each other and where borders are becoming less meaningful.²⁴

Sorensen, argues that structural realism is not equipped to analyze the changes in statehood and its implications for international life. He also argues that the concepts of "structure" is too narrowly viewed as it only focuses on the ordering principle of anarchy, and ignores factors like norms. Also postmodern states have turned the classic realist competition for security on its head as they have constructed a common security community where conflict between them is close to non-existent (think EU, NATO).²⁵

The fact that most wars today are not between states, but instead between groupings within states, or failed states, s to the diminishing role of the nation state.

A constructivist argument would be that perceptions are the most important factor, how reality is described and understood. The critique thus becomes that realism is a sort of self-

²¹ Ikenberry, John, 2011. "*Liberal Leviathan*". Princeton University press chapters 7,8

²² Richmond, Oliver, 2008. "*Peace in international relations*". Routledge p. 27-28

²³ Williams, Paul, 2008. "*Security studies: An Introduction*". Routledge p. 36

²⁴ Ibid., p. 40-41

²⁵ Sorensen, Georg, 2009. "*Big and important things in IR*". International relations p. 235-236

fulfilling prophecy in that as long as realist view others with suspicion, it will continue in a downward spiral. But also, that for instance conflict between the US and European countries has become unthinkable, is a part of the critique. It might be the case that a realist view has historically existed, but that the world has now, at least partly, overcome this.²⁶

The list of criticism could easily cover the length of this essay and miles more. I have tried to provide a more general picture of critiques against realism, without going into much detail, as the purposes of this essay is not to plunge further into the abyssal depths of realist critique.

4. Comparison & Analysis

This section will perform comparison and analysis of the different accounts of structural realism. It will be carried out section by section, or variable by variable; i.e. the central and meaningful concepts of the theories. Anarchy will for instance constitute one section, and all the theories' different views will be kept under this section.

In accordance with what I outlined in the methodology section, I shall begin by going over types of theory, i.e. empirical, normative or constructive.

4.1 Types of theory:

Waltz in his theory of international politics very clearly and early on stipulates what he means by theory, and moreover what is the point of theory, which is rather straight forward. Its usefulness is its point, and this usefulness is determined by its ability to explain and predict.²⁷ By this criteria Waltz's per say definition of theory is that of an empirical theory. It aims foremost to describe and explain, and based on this possibly make useful predictions of the future. Waltz's theory hence falls under the empirical umbrella. In doing this its first clear limitation is inferred. This is not a predicative or constructive theory, it does not tell states how to act, neither present anything constructive in that it tries to build or present a new solution to something.

As Walt on his first page in his main work, *The origins of alliances*, describes what kinds of questions he wants to answer, it becomes apparent that at least his view of his own theory is that it is empirical, i.e. descriptive and explaining. The question "*What causes states to*

²⁶ Williams, Paul, 2008. *Security studies: An Introduction*. Routledge p. 60-62

²⁷ Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. *Theory of international Politics*. Random House p. 9

support one another's foreign policy or territorial integrity?"²⁸, is clearly empirical, and all the questions he tries to answer in his book are of an empirical nature. It neither prescribes how a state should act, or present constructive ways in how a state could act. It merely describes and explains.

Mearsheimer goes further, his theory is both descriptive and prescriptive (normative) he claims, but foremost and mainly descriptive.²⁹ His argument is that as with any theory, his has its short-comings, there are some anomalies that it cannot explain. In these cases, he claims the implications of his theory could be used prescriptively, a manual of sorts.

In fact, he claims that the theories of the above two are normative as well. Even that Waltz's theory has its greatest value in being normative. The question is if his argument is really convincing. I argue that while he certainly has valid points, he forgets to separate the nature of the theories from what possible implications could be drawn from them. Let me explain.

He claims that the anomalies that his theory cannot explain are due to that they do not follow the logic of offensive realism. He notes that as much as international anarchy acts as a restraint forcing states to act in a certain manner, some cases appear where they act in contradiction to the theory which then ends badly for the states in question. He then means that states in such a position could use his theory normatively and act according to its dictates.³⁰

The same goes for his saying that Waltz's theory is better off being normative. As Waltz's theory cannot explain much behaviour, he claims, it is best viewed as a blueprint for how states should act if they wish to avoid bloodshed.

What Mearsheimer is actually doing is confusing what constitutes an empirical theory with the purposes for its creation with its possible applications. After all neither Mearsheimer, nor Waltz, set out aiming to create a theory of how states should act, merely describe and explain. That a describing and explanatory theory might be used for prescriptive means, is quite another thing. Then it rather becomes an empirical theory, with prescriptive implications if someone should choose to use it in that manner and that's a big if. Mearsheimer's account is

²⁸ Walt, Stephen, 1987. *The Origins of Alliances*. Cornell University press p. 1

²⁹ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. *"The Tragedy of Great Power Politics"*. W.W. Norton & Co p. 11

³⁰ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. *"The Tragedy of Great Power Politics"*. W.W. Norton & Co p. 10-11

not an equivalent to Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Hence, I find Mearsheimer's argument for his and Waltz's theory being in at least part normative, unconvincing.

We can draw the conclusion that all of these theories are of an empirical nature. They aim to describe and explain, not prescribe nor present possible alternatives of action.

4.2 Founding stipulations:

I have now arrived to the point I mentioned in the methodology section, the levels of theory. The operational level of theory includes descriptions and explanations of reality, while the "foundational" level is made up of stipulations that the operational level builds on, and is also dependent on. In more general terms, these are the most basic assumptions of these theories. Misconceptions of Waltz's grounding principles are often made, as I shall return to later. Waltz clearly defines his basic principles that the operational level of his theory is made of. These stipulations conclude that; states are the main actors in international politics, and operate in a system characterized by anarchy, where states, as a minimal assumption, seek to survive.³¹

Walt's basic stipulations are somewhat more unclear, as they are never explicitly outspoken. This makes the reading of Walt somewhat difficult, as he is basing all of his work on Waltz and refining it, while not presenting the clear basis of his inherent assumptions. To be able to grasp Walt you hence need to understand Waltz and his terminology, and assumptions. In short, Walt shares neorealism's stipulations, with one major change. Walt adds the assumption that states are rational actors. As with Waltz, states are the main actors in international politics, and operate in a system characterized by anarchy, where states, as a minimal assumption, seek to survive and are rational actors.³² As we shall see, this last addition has far-going implications.

In contrast to Walt, Mearsheimer in his landmark book *The Tragedy of Great Power politics*, very pedagogically and thoroughly presents his underlying assumptions. These are; **I:** The international system is anarchic **II:** Great powers have some offensive military capability

³¹ Waltz, Kenneth, 1988. "*The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory*". *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* p. 618

³² Williams, Paul, 2008. "*Security studies: An Introduction*". Routledge p. 20

III: States can never surely know the intentions of others **IV:** Survival is the primary goal of great powers **V:** Great powers are rational actors.³³

Implications: What is clear is that all assume the international system is anarchic in which states are the main actors and wish to survive. This is the common ground. The most important difference is that Waltz has no rational actor assumption. As he says, “... *the theory requires no assumptions of rationality...*”³⁴. What does this really mean for the rest of his theory? What it means is that on the foundational level of theory, he discards the possibility of states always acting rationally. The absence of this assumption is why he states that his theory does not explain state behaviour, but rather international outcome. He simply cannot claim to explain state behaviour with it, which is why he does not claim to. It is simply too complicated to be able to explain state behaviour altogether as it is dependent on too many factors.

In this way Waltz’s theory becomes clearly disconnected from unit-level variations. The only things we see are larger outcomes produced by states’ responses to a structure that encourages (or discourages) a certain type of behaviour, which is why the system always seems repetitive.

Walt and Mearsheimer (W & M) do not face this problem. With the assumption that states are rational they can indeed explain state behaviour. To both of them, states always act rationally with survival in mind, regardless of unit-level variations. Where Waltz say unit-level variations indeed affect state behaviour to an immense degree³⁵, W & M agree that unit-level variation is present, but that when states calculate how to act, rationality most often prevails over other preferences. An implication illustrated by the quite telling “*domestic political calculations are not likely to undermine sound strategic thinking*”.³⁶

This is also the reason why Waltz contends you need a separate theory of foreign relations and international relations to explain state behaviour, and W & M do not.

What other implications can we draw from this? One obvious comes to mind. W & M’s theories should emerge as miles easier to disprove than Waltz’s. As W & M claims to explain

³³ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. “*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*”. W.W. Norton & Co p. 30-31

³⁴ Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. “*Theory of international Politics*”. Random House p. 118

³⁵ Ibid., p. 91

³⁶ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. “*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*”. W.W. Norton & Co p. 30-31

state behaviour, whereas Waltz does not, the latter becomes immensely more difficult to disprove than the former.

The other differences in assumptions are minimal. Albeit, M adds a few (see II and III). These are however really logically implicit in Waltz's theory. Anarchy causes insecurity for Waltz, as for W & M, still, why would anyone have to be insecure in a world where there is no offensive capability? Actually, the possibility of offensive action is perhaps the most basic *Sine qua non* of all realist theory. M's two additions, rationality excluded, are really just two logical implications of Waltz's stipulations.

Having covered the foundational level of theory, I shall now move on to the operative level.

4.3 Focus of theories:

As all other theories, the ones examined here have a certain focus. They all to a degree share a common framework, concepts etc. However, there are some matters of focus that a reader of these theories should be made aware of to fully understand them.

Waltz:

Waltz's focus is on providing a framework for understanding what dis- or encouraging effects the anarchic system has on state behaviour. He claims that this effect is so strong that ultimately, differences in ideology, way of government etc. tend to produce the same results. In other words, although actors are widely different, the same patterns keep occurring.³⁷

These patterns however, are far from clear patterns of state behaviour. While his balance of power-theory, tends to assume that states rationally balance against power, he also concludes that foreign policy is too affected by sub-national factors to satisfactorily be able to explain it by theory. Hence, what Waltz's focus is on is not state behaviour (which is often assumed) but rather on what he terms *international outcomes*. Here the focus is on the great powers in the system, as they simply have the most effect. But what does then this mean?

International outcomes can be a range of likely outcomes of action and interaction of states in a certain system, and also explains how changes in this system can affect action and interaction.³⁸

³⁷ Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. *Theory of international Politics*. Random House p. 106

³⁸ Mearsheimer, John, 2009. *Reckless States and Realism*. International relations p. 246

This indeed might seem awfully abstract and far away from a practical world. However, the occurrence of war is one of these international outcomes. With changes in the system, the expectancy of war also changes. As Waltz himself notes, expected frequency of war is a central question for structural theory.³⁹ His theory can however be used for general predictions of state behaviour in theoretical sense, not in practical prediction however. This is Waltz's focus, and indeed this have to be kept in mind while reading the rest of his theory, for without doing this, his theory as a whole can easily become interpreted as being predicative of specific state behaviour.

Walt:

Walt's realism is very similar to Waltz's in many ways. However, his theoretical scope is slightly different. Walt's landmark book *the origin of alliances*, as the name suggest is focused on explaining why states ally with one another (or not) and under what conditions the two are more likely. Why a state chooses one ally over another, how to great powers choose which states to protect, and how small states choose which great power to be its patron.⁴⁰ Walt takes Waltz's conclusion that balancing is more common than bandwagoning, but sees the latter's balance of power-theory as inadequate in explaining alliance formation. This is his focus, in large, alliance behaviour. This is very state specific, and he does not limit itself to international outcome as Waltz, while still agreeing with them. In this sense W is largely a refinement of Waltz in "replacing" Waltz's balance of power-theory (BoPT) with his own balance of threat-theory (BoTT).

Walt later evolves on his theory, and really realist theory as a whole, by trying to explain why and how revolutions (a purely national phenomena) affects the balance of power in a larger system and hence the behaviour of states in it. What Walt does here is quite uncommon in realist theory, he incorporates how changes on the sub-national lever actually affects a larger level.⁴¹

Mearsheimer:

³⁹ Waltz, Kenneth, 1988. *The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory*. Journal of Interdisciplinary history p. 620

⁴⁰ Walt, Stephen, 1987. *The Origins of Alliances*. Cornell University press p. 1

⁴¹ Walt, Stephen, 1997. *Revolution & War*. Cornell University Press p. 18

M in his theory, again has a slightly different scope. M clearly focuses on only great powers, and more specifically their behaviour towards each other. He also focuses on when conflict is less or more likely. But what remains the absolutely central part of his theory is the behaviour of great powers. Of course this means some focus on alliances (as with Walt) but this is not his main focus.⁴²

A lot of focus is put on what different kinds of strategies great powers can use, which are “good” and “bad”, and which specific goals great powers pursue in a certain environment. He also brings in geography as an absolutely central factor, and elaborates on it far more than realists before him, and also elaborates of different kinds of military power (air, naval, land) which is the best.⁴³ In other words M brings in a strategic and tactical scope, that is very closely related to “practical matters”, if you will.

Implications:

One thing that I have disregarded up until here is that all these theories focus on how much power states are after, i.e. how much power states need to be secure. This is a central question to all realist theory, and all spend some time on it. What implications do these theories’ differences in focus have? The obvious answer becomes, depending on focus answers to certain types of questions will have more or less nuance. For instance, while M might provide larger insight to great power alliances alone, W can provide it for both great powers and lesser powers. W also adds a subnational phenomenon to his theory that affects international balance of power and outcome, i.e. how revolutions affect international relations. This is something neither Waltz nor M have anything on.

The explanatory differences between Waltz and the other two are also clear. Waltz does not care to explain specific wars or specific behaviour, while the other two readily do so. This means that one of these theories might be better suited to explain certain things than another, and vice versa. This also becomes important to remember throughout this paper. If you want a deeper look on how anarchy affects behaviour, Waltz should be your choice as this is one of his main points, while you would be wise to turn to W if you want to explain specific alliance behaviour between states.

⁴² Mearsheimer, John, 2001. *“The Tragedy of Great Power Politics”*. W.W. Norton & Co p. 5

⁴³ Ibid., p. 12

4.4 Anarchy and its effects:

All the authors basically share the same assumptions of what anarchy is and what its effects are. How is then anarchy understood? It is easy to imagine complete and utter chaos much like the Hobbesian state of nature, where men are just rambling around trying as best possible to survive using whatever means and tactics possible. This is however not the case.

Anarchy is not understood as chaos, but rather as an ordering principle. Waltz compares this international anarchy with national hierarchy, where there exist power relations that are principally ordered in relation to one another, government-parliament-ministry, for instance. There is no equivalent internationally. In Waltz's words anarchy can be seen as "*the absence of a central monopoly of legitimate force*".⁴⁴ Walt adheres to the same view, where the absence of central government internationally is what constitutes the anarchy.⁴⁵

Perhaps M's depiction of it is the most telling. He refers to it as the "911-problem", whereas nationally that is the number you turn to if something goes ill. A threatened state however has no such function to turn to.⁴⁶

This anarchy is taken as being highly unlikely to be replaced. W & M does not really elaborate on this, but Waltz does. He concludes that if, however unlikely, some form of international government should arise, that it would likely not be lasting, "*the prospect of world government would be an invitation to prepare for global civil war*".⁴⁷ In essence, the mere creation of a world government would also mean an instigation to civil war.

Implications:

One difference between Waltz and the other two is however the actual strength of anarchy. Waltz has as has been noted no rational actor-assumption while the other two do. Why is this really? Waltz believes that sub-national matters do matter quite a bit when deciding on foreign policy, while the other two believe that a rational actor-assumption can be made about state behaviour. I.e. with Waltz anarchy is not "strong" enough to alone determine state-

⁴⁴ Waltz, Kenneth, 1988. "*The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory*". Journal of Interdisciplinary history p. 618

⁴⁵ Walt, Stephen, 1997. "*Revolution & War*". Cornell University Press p. 18

⁴⁶ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. "*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*". W.W. Norton & Co p. 32

⁴⁷ Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. "*Theory of international Politics*". Random House p. 112

behaviour, while it is with W & M. To them the anarchic features are so strong that suboptimal behaviour mostly succumbs to rationality, while to Waltz the anarchic feature is actually quite weak, as it does not by far alone determine state behaviour.

In fact, M argues that Waltz has a view of anarchy as fairly weak or benign. One can certainly understand his point, as Waltz obviously does not believe it strong enough to alone be a strong enough determinant of behaviour.

The answer could be found on another level however. Waltz comes off as more realistic in his claims, he does not claim to explain very much after all, while W & M claim to explain much more. One could connect this to these scholar's views on how much is it realistic for one given theory to explain. Given that a theory's value lies in explanation, these authors have come to quite different conclusions of what is realistic to explain. Waltz sees a highly complicated world too dependent on a combination of factors, while W & M have chosen to make it less complicated, for the purpose of creating a more valuable theory.

More valuable, as often noted, also means more easily disproved. So Waltz possibly chose to exclude the rational actor assumption because he simply believes the world is too complex. From this view it can also be argued that W & M are equally too ambitious in their explanatory aims. In either case, one is drawn to admit that Waltz's theory has the most realistic aims of the three.

4.4.1 The security dilemma:

Anarchy then leaves state in a worried and vulnerable position, as the risk of violence being used against them, is ever present. The principle of self-help is the one that prevails, since you can never fully know and appreciate one's motives or intentions, and even if you think you do, motives and intentions are not static.⁴⁸ In other words you have to provide for your own security, since you cannot readily assume that others will come to your aid when in need. As M notes, "*in international politics God helps those that help themselves*".⁴⁹ Security becomes the highest aim of the state.

All three have the same reading of the security dilemma, in that one's measures to increase one's security offsets a reaction that causes your rival to increase security as well and hence a

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 105

⁴⁹ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. "*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*". W.W. Norton & Co p. 33

spiral ensues. As Schweller notes however, there is one difference.⁵⁰ In Waltz's and W's world, states do not have revisionist aims, they simply want to keep the status quo but given the dynamics of the security dilemma, measures of increasing one's security can have opposite effects. This is truly tragic in the sense that states do not have revisionist aims. With M however, they do have revisionist aims and hence competition does not in the same sense appear as tragic, since states always seek more power. The security competition remains, but is hardly a dilemma as revisionism is the aim to start with. Waltz's description of it is that individually rational behaviour gets collectively unwanted results (heightened insecurity, competition among "benign" status quo-states). But M's states are not status-quo, so the dilemma is no longer a dilemma in the original sense.

Cooperation between states is not thereby negated. Cooperation, trade etc. take place all the time. The point is rather to point out that ultimately, trust between states is always conditioned by the worry for one's security. Moreover, states worry greatly about that which they depend on, and can go to great lengths in order to ensure it. In a self-help system states try sensibly to achieve their goal of survival. This means paying great attention to one's external environment.^{51 52} Here is where the views start to differ. Waltz provides us with a balance of power-theory that contends that states balance against power, whereas W provides us with a balance of-threat theory while M also uses a balance of power-theory, albeit one that comes to different conclusions from Waltz. I shall turn to these in good time.

4.5 Measuring power

To be sure, there is a lot of talk of power among all these theorists. Hence it becomes crucial to go through how the authors define power and how it should and can be measured.

Waltz:

How one is placed in the international system (vis-à-vis others) is determined by how a state ranks in overall power. In a self-help system, "*States..., have to use their combined capabilities in order to serve their interests*".⁵³ Separate measurements of one's economic and military strength hence shall not be viewed separately, but together as the sum total of

⁵⁰ See, Schweller, Randall, 1996." *Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias*". Security Studies

⁵¹ Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. "*Theory of international Politics*". Random House p. 106,118

⁵² Walt, Stephen, 1997. "*Revolution & War*". Cornell University Press p. 18-20

⁵³ Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. "*Theory of international Politics*". Random House p. 131

different areas of power is what matters. This larger variable of power is constituted by population- and territory-size, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence. These factors place one in power ranking-list, which is what states use as basis for the balance of power concept.

How then does Waltz measure these? It is far from obvious, and uncomplicated. While factors as size of population and land might be fairly uncomplicated, the rest are far from it.

Economic capability is usually measured through GNP, while military strength is measured through number of troops, level of technology and overall quality of the military. The remaining two are not elaborated, but on overall reading political stability appears as the ability for political leadership to carry out political decisions, without opposition.

What can be concluded is that measuring and appreciating power is far from obvious and a matter of great debate. Waltz has on this issue suffered much critique, and rightfully so, since his definitions are unclear and almost non-existent on occasion.

Waltz:

In measuring power, W more or less assumes the same view that Waltz has. “*A state’s total resources, e.g. population, industrial and military capability, and military prowess*”⁵⁴, is the definition used in origins of alliances, but as we can see from the formulation it is again rather loose and unclear how to measure it in practice. In R & W he again uses rather loose terms where he describes aggregate power with “*such as population, industrial and military might, raw material endowment etc.*”⁵⁵

While overall assuming Waltzian terms of how to measure, it is however not entirely clear how it is done. While Waltz rather clearly says that his variables are the ones used to measure power, with W we see that he only speaks in highly generally words when he uses words as “such as, etc.” and so on. Again, it is far from clear how measurement of power takes place in practice.

Mearsheimer:

In difference to the above two, M spends considerable effort on defining power, what different kinds there are, and how to measure it. There are two basic kinds of power, latent

⁵⁴ Walt, Stephen, 1987. *The Origins of Alliances*. Cornell University press p. 23

⁵⁵ Walt, Stephen, 1997. *Revolution & War*. Cornell University Press p. 18

and military power. Latent power is basically economy and population while military power indicates size of military forces, their quality and so on. These two are connected and in part dependant on each other but not synonymous. Latent power is more broadly the “*raw potential it (the state) can draw on when competing with rival states*”.⁵⁶

The more important of the two is however military strength since the theory argues that “*force is the ultima ratio of international politics*”.⁵⁷ Hence, military power becomes what is most indicative of measuring the balance of power.

Furthermore, he differentiates the value of land, air and naval forces, where land forces is valued most as to conquer an area you need boots on the ground to do so. The value of air and naval forces can of course be great, but its greatest value is seen in the assistance of land forces.⁵⁸

Implications:

What is clear is that Waltz and W does not have clear ways of measuring power, but are rather loosely defined, which makes the later application of their balance of power/threat-theories more difficult. Waltz argues that it is indeed complicated to measure power in total, and states often make mistakes in doing so that lead to unwanted consequences.⁵⁹ Still, there has largely been historical agreement on which have been the great powers and the ordering amongst them, he goes on leading him to the conclusion that these rather rough approximations are enough, as all seem to reach the same conclusions.

The focus on material factors is obvious, which leaves all three focused on a highly material world, where military forces and economic strength are prevalent. Waltz’s usage of political stability and competence are no doubt qualitative inclusions, which shall not be overlooked, however the tendency towards material factors prevail. While the first two does not make any difference between military power, M does however. This leads one to expect that different conclusions about the balance of power might occur. Great Britain’s inclination for naval power for many years, could very well lead to differences of power between the former two

⁵⁶ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. “*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*”. W.W. Norton & Co p. 55

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 56

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 56-57 For more detail on how M measures power see ch. 3 in “the tragedy of great power politics”

⁵⁹ Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. “*Theory of international Politics*”. Random House p. 131-132

and M, as he values land forces the most. He has an internal power-ranking of military power, which the other two do not share.

Also, as Toft notes, M limits himself on only military focus leaving out prospects of the impact of economic warfare etc., which might be a too narrow view of power. M himself argues that military power in the end is what matter the most, so for him it is not really that much of a problem, but it is still a clearly narrow view.⁶⁰ Waltz and W also focus on military might, but does not exclude the importance of especially economic power. M however notes that less powerful states sometimes beat mightier ones with clever strategies etc., but still the balance of military capabilities affects the odds of success on a fundamental level.⁶¹

All three have a highly material focus, while leaving some space for non-material factors. One reason for this, as Pashakhanlou writes, could be all the authors' inclination towards scientific realism, and hence more focus is put on factors easier to quantify.⁶²

4.6 Balance of power/threat theories (BoPT/BoPT)

Waltz:

According to Waltz, Realpolitik is the fundamental way in which states view each other. The parts of Realpolitik essentially mean that the state's interest is the ultimate source of action, while the necessities of policy stem from competition among states. Realpolitik is in short the methods of by how foreign policy is conducted, while structural constrains explain why these methods are the prevailing ones under anarchy.

BoPT aims to explain the result that these methods produce. It is a micro-theory of the behaviour of states and a given system is characterized by their action and interaction. It is about the results of the uncoordinated actions by states.⁶³

The way in which states act in response to their environment is by balancing, internally or externally, that is by amassing one's own strength or by allying with others. Balancing prevails over bandwagoning, in which a weaker state chooses to "jump on the bandwagon" of

⁶⁰ Toft, Peter, 2005. "*John Mearsheimer, an offensive realist*". Journal of international relations & development p.384

⁶¹ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. "*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*". W.W. Norton & Co p. 58

⁶² Pashakhanlou, Arash, 2009. "*Comparing and Contrasting Classical Realism and Neorealism*"

⁶³Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. "*Theory of international Politics*". Random House p. 117-122

the stronger state to ensure one's security. This seldom happens, and when it does it is only very weak states that do it in the face of no other viable options.

Upholding a balance is seen as the ultimate goal, for as long as no "winner" is produced, the balance will be seen as the best way of ensuring security. Power is only a means, not an end. The goal is security, and power can provide a ground for this. If states only sought to maximize power, and not security, hegemonic alliances would be seen forming, rather than loose coalitions that share over time only to balance one another out. Hence, balancing is the behaviour induced by the system. States then care greatly about the position in the balance of power and seek to keep the "position" in the power-list.⁶⁴

Secondary (weaker states) tend to draw to the weaker side of two coalitions as it is the stronger one that constitutes the threat. Successful military behaviour is copied by others, on the basis that it "works". This is why balancing behaviour has been socialized into the system. States notice that certain behaviour works while other is punished, and they amend their behaviour accordingly. BoPT in this sense breeds socialization to a degree. This is what Waltz means when he says that certain behaviour is encouraged and other punished by the system.

Waltz's conclusions are that BoPT leads to that states balance, rather than bandwagon and that there is a tendency for balance in a system, albeit not permanent balance. "*the expectation is not that a balance, once achieved, will be maintained, but that a balance, once disrupted, will be restored in one way or another.*"⁶⁵

What does this mean? That states tend to balance would lead one to expect that constant competition between states entails, but that war would perhaps not be very common. Here, is where Waltz's absence of a rational actor comes in. He concludes that what the above behaviour is what the structure encourages, but also that states often behave irrationally and foolishly, which is why they fall by the wayside. The tendency to balance is then the rational response to the structural effects, given that security is one's highest aim. But as he notes, states often fail and enter war which they end up losing, sometimes fatally. This is what happens when you ignore the logics of BoPT and act irrationally.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 126

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 128

States are encouraged to balance against the power of other states in a system as a means of stability and hence security. When they do not, or cannot, a bloody result often entails. As this leads us to expect that states will ultimately balance against power, the pursuit of too much power becomes self-defeating. The best way of achieving security by this reading becomes to not be weak enough as to encourage other states to conquer you but not too strong. Instead you should aim for just the right amount of power as to keep stability. The system encourages a defensive stance where states aim at keeping the balance of power. This is what is often called the status-quo bias of Waltz. That states do not have revisionist intentions as the system rather encourages balancing. The Waltzian logic is that if one state gains too much power, other will in the end form up against it. In international politics, to succeed means to in the end fail, states realize this and hence revisionist behaviour is discouraged.

Walt:

While building on the above, Walt further develops it. He uses the same terms as Waltz, balancing and bandwagoning, and agrees that balancing is by far the common response. But instead of being a response to power, he claims it is a response to a larger variable of threat, with different basis. As W has an assumption of rationality embedded, he cannot accept that states often act foolishly and irrationally. So, where Waltz explains this behaviour with that states are not perfect rational actors, W instead modifies his BoPT to include other factors than just mere aggregate power to included, and hence provides a larger basis to which states respond rationally.

States respond not to mere power, but instead to the larger picture of threat. Power calculation is one major part of this, but not the only one. He also includes geographic proximity, as the ability to project power lessens with large distances. The conclusion is that states will tend to ally with or against states that are close, rather than distant.⁶⁶

Offensive power means the ability to threaten the security of another state at an acceptable loss. The ease with which aggregate power can be turned into offensive power is affected by relative advantages to either offence or defense at a given time. At one time a state's offensive capability may be so large that its ability to conquer another state would be hardly a feat,

⁶⁶ Walt, Stephen, 1987. *The Origins of Alliance*'s. Cornell University press p. 22-23

while the targeted country's defensive capability may be very low. As with Waltz this means that states are prone to seek balance and act accordingly.

The last variable included is aggressive intentions. I.e. how aggressive a state is perceived will affect if balancing against that state occurs or not. The more aggressive a state is perceived the more likely that a balance against it will ensue, and vice versa.⁶⁷

The sum of all these variables hence provides grounds for when balancing occurs.

Walt draws the same conclusions about how states should achieve security. Becoming too strong is self-defeating just as being too weak is. Therefore the aim is to find just the right amount in between the two.

Mearsheimer:

M sees a different world in which aggression and not only balancing is common. He agrees that balancing coalitions most often occur against too powerful states. But in difference to Waltz and W he argues that the ultimate achieving of security is only done by being so strong that no other would dare attack you. Having this insight in mind, balancing does occur, but states also constantly try to gain power at the expense of others.

States hence pay very close attention to the balance of power, but at the same time try to grab as much of it as possible. The really hard part becomes to be the winner of this game without being balanced against or being unable to balance against another. Aggression is hence incremental in his theory. Hegemony is the ultimate guarantee of security, which is why all reach for it, however unlikely hegemony is. As other states think along the same lines, paying close attention to defense as well as offense becomes equally important. Allowing another state to gain power at your expense has to be guarded against.⁶⁸ The impossibility of global hegemony is largely attributed to the difficulties of projecting power globally, and more specifically projecting power across water.

States are however not mindless power-maximizers that only care about gaining more power. If a state through a certain move gains power but if others do as well, the focus is on relative power. If other states gain more by a certain move, there is no incentive to do it. States realize that hegemony is very difficult to achieve, still since the best way to achieve security is seen

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 24-26

⁶⁸ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. *"The Tragedy of Great Power Politics"*. W.W. Norton & Co p. 33-35

as being the strongest, and as states are rational actors in pursuing survival, they are bound to keep trying to gain this security, even if it is unlikely that they will.⁶⁹

This is the tragedy of great power politics, as long as anarchy remains.

In essence, BoPT is still the first logic by which states think, the implications drawn from it are however different from the other two, as the goal is to gain power at the expense of others. States engage in balancing-coalitions whenever necessary. M might even agree that BoPT infers balancing, but still argues that states in their seeking of security ignore this as being the most powerful still is the best way to ensure survival. Where Waltz and W have difficulty explaining aggressive behaviour M does not.

Implications:

Where Waltz theory remains purely structural, the others do not. W's refinement of Waltz has far-going implications. While still being a structural theory at its core, the theory clearly includes unit-level variables as perceptions of aggression. Where Waltz claim states have acted irrationally, W rather claims they acted rationally according to his BoTT. In including perceptions of aggression and geography he however takes his theory one step further away from structure and introduces a constructivist level as well as a geopolitical one.

That states take another state's aggressive intentions into calculation comes off as odd to a theory that at basic level claims that states can never really trust each other nor their intentions. Especially since the implications of BoTT still is that states are mostly defensively oriented. Also, how are a state's aggressive perceptions measured and how much does this matter in relation to the general balance of power which still plays an integral part? These questions are largely left unanswered.

One important difference with Waltz is, as W notes, that BoPT cannot explain why a state is not balanced against, BOTT can. The inclusion of the threat-variable has the possibility of explaining why a state is not balanced again when classic BoPT indicates it should.

The inclusion of geography also takes a step away from structure. Geography is hardly a structural restraint. The inclusion leads us to believe that states inherently worry about nearby enemies rather than distant ones. This comes off as very logical. What does it really mean however? Does it mean that states focus most attention on nearby potential enemies than

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 36

distant, or just do not care after a certain geographical distance is reached? Obviously W intends for the former, but does not state it. All of his additions to BoPT are rather loosely defined, and they serve well as valuable theoretical constructs no doubt. Determining a level of threat however becomes extremely and highly susceptible to individual interpretation. By adding variables to Waltz's BoPT W adds theoretical scope, but also in a sense moves away from practical application.

If we think back a bit to the dictates of realpolitik, this is exactly what M is talking about. Whereas Waltz's BoPT seeks to explain the results of this "method of foreign policy", so does M. They just come to very different conclusions, which in great part have to do with the relationship between security and power. Too much power is self-defeating to Waltz and W, where to M there is no such thing as too much power as power is the ultimate guarantee of security.

Where Waltz draws the conclusion that states often behave aggressively and foolishly, and explains it with that states are not always rational, M assumes they are rational but provides reasons that explain much of the aggressive behaviour observed throughout history. Because Waltz's theory does not explain aggressive behaviour, but rather ascribes it to unit-level attributes, which are infinite. W has a lot of problem explaining aggressive behaviour, and here mostly relies on the offense-defense level which in itself is dubious, what is an acceptable loss for victory? The threat-variable is also dubious, do states behave aggressively because they are, or do they behave aggressively if others perceive them as being so and hence behave in kind? Or both? The causality is unclear.

M here instead finds a logic that explains aggressive behaviour while keeping states rational. The underlying difference lies with in what way states best achieve security. The best way would be to not have enemies, which would no longer be a realist theory, and the second way is to be so much stronger than your enemies that no one can or dare hurt you. Waltz and W takes a third way, where the keeping of a precarious and difficult balance is meant to prevent that any aggression could prevail.

The best way for M to survive is to maximize relative power with the goal of becoming the hegemonic power. As states try and do it all at the same time, conflict entails. Hegemony is the ultimate goal and the cause of aggression, but still the defensive logic of Waltz and W is

present with M, just not prevailing. So in conclusion, where the logics of Waltz and W see the status quo as being the goal and state-behaviour accordingly, M does not. M sees war and aggression as useful tools, while the others see the prospect of aggression as useful, i.e. the possibility of war leads to a defensive stance. Indeed, as Waltz notes, "*Force is most useful... when it need not be used in the actual conduct of warfare*".⁷⁰ Waltz and W maximizes security whereas M maximizes power as a means of gaining security.

4.7 Distribution of power and poles and its effects:

Waltz:

The international system of states can be of a uni-, bi- or multipolar design. A unipolar system is when a system is dominated by one state far stronger than all others, a bipolar between two, and multipolar between three or more. Great powers are defined as the dominant states in a system. In what ways do polarities matter? I shall now turn to each.

Unipolarity:

Unipolarity is when one power is so much stronger than the rest that it cannot be balanced effectively against. It is however the least stable system, as it is least likely to prevail for very long because of two main reasons. The first reason is that unipolarity tends to make the unipole act foolishly in accepting too many burdens, trying to accomplish too much and hence in the long run weakening itself.

The other reason is that unbalanced power is unlikely to last, "*as nature abhors a vacuum, so international politics abhors unbalanced power*".⁷¹ Since states fear unbalanced power more than anything, internal efforts or external will in the end see to it that a balance is restored. When Waltz says that success leads to failure, this is one obvious point. The preponderant power the US has today accordingly makes the US the unipole of today's world.⁷²

Bipolarity:

Bipolarity is prone to be highly stable but also inflexible. This means that it is stable in the sense that there are two rivals, focused on no others than one another, ergo a state only has to estimate strength in relation to the other, leaving much smaller room for miscalculation as the calculating becomes harder as numbers increase. In a bipolar world one side's loss is easily

⁷⁰ Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. "*Theory of international Politics*". Random House p. 186

⁷¹ Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. "*Theory of international Politics*". Random House p. 28

⁷² Ibid., p. 27-29

taken to be a gain for the other, leading to a balancing response. As by definition the great power (or superpowers) are so much stronger than everyone else, engaging in alliances is not effective in changing the BoP, alliances are not unwanted and can indeed be useful, not just in changing the overall BoP. This means that balancing in a bipolar world is done foremost through internal efforts (increasing one's economy, army etc.).⁷³ The power distribution of the cold war is seen as a bipolar order.

Multipolarity:

Multipolarity allows for external balancing and is less stable than bipolarity, as numbers increase, uncertainties grow. Three great powers is however seen as being rather unstable, as two can easily gang up on the third and driving it back to bipolarity. Hence, stable multipolarity consists of four or more poles. If two states should gang up, the remaining two can join forces. That three should gang up on one is not logical, as that would drive the system back to three poles and the easiness of two ganging up on one, leading to bipolarity. War and conflict is hence most likely in multipolar systems, and are also less stable than bipolar.⁷⁴ As Waltz notes in this world "*miscalculation is hard to avoid*".⁷⁵ Also, as flexibility increases with numbers it also leads to limitation of freedom of decision. I.e. one has to take much more into account before making a decision and this makes choices less free. The opposite is then valid for bipolar systems, where the rigidity of alignment (there is none) leads to decisions having to take into account fewer factors.⁷⁶ Of course freedom of decision then becomes superior in unipolarity as there is no others to which you have to conform to.

Walt:

Walt accepts Waltz's terms and definitions and does not change anything, but adds insights to unipole behaviour and state behaviour under unipolarity.

In short, he concludes that fixed alliance structures between the unipole and its allies are less likely and that it will rely most on ad hoc coalitions of countries, which makes its own

⁷³ Ibid., p.163 & Waltz, Kenneth,1993. "*The emerging structure of international politics*". International Security p.73

⁷⁴ Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. "*Theory of international Politics*". Random House p. 163-164

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.163 & Waltz, Kenneth,1993. "*The emerging structure of international politics*". International Security p.73

⁷⁶ Waltz, Kenneth, 1988. "*The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory*". Journal of Interdisciplinary history p. 622

freedom of action greater. Constraining unipole power will take place but not in the form of an opposing alliance unless it acts highly aggressive towards different areas of the globe.⁷⁷

Unipolarity does indeed increase insecurity about the unipole's intentions and preferences but it still matters where it is located and in what ways it uses its power. If it is constrained in its actions, poses no military threat to conquer others, it is unlikely to face larger coalitions. The freedom of behaviour greatly increases for the unipole as "*paradoxically, a unipole structure means that purely structural constraints on the unipole are sharply reduced*".⁷⁸

We can clearly see the influences of his BoT in play here, in what ways a state uses its power, if it appears as aggressive and so on, rather than a pure focus on only relative power.

Mearsheimer:

Unipolarity:

Where most scholars would accept that we have seen a unipolar order since the end of the cold war, M would disagree. He agrees that the US is by far the most powerful state in the system; but that the definition of unipolarity means that there is only one great power which he does not believe. His definition of great power is loosely portrayed as "*a state that has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the system.*"⁷⁹ By his definition there hence exist three great powers today (US, Russia, China).

Unipolarity hence comes to mean something along the lines of one state's ability to crush all of its enemies without facing meaningful opposition. A modern great power also has to possess nuclear capability. The only possible way M sees of unipolarity happening, is that one state would gain a nuclear superiority. I.e. that one state had the possibility to destroy its enemies without bearing the risk of being nuked in kind, which is extremely unlikely.

Bipolarity:

Bipolarity is hence when two great powers exist, which he would agree was the case during the cold war. This is also the configuration that produces least fear, and hence is the most stable one. He is here in agreement with the above two in general.

⁷⁷ Walt, Stephen, 2009. "*Alliances in a Unipolar World*". World politics, p. 119

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 120

⁷⁹ Booth, Ken etc., 2006, "Interview with John Mearsheimer", International Relations p.113

Multipolarity:

He basically has the same definition as Waltz here, with one difference. He differentiates between balanced and unbalanced multipolarity, where unbalanced means the presence of a potential hegemon, a state with “*so much actual military capability and so much potential power that it stands a good chance of dominating all of the other great powers in its region of the world*”⁸⁰ Balanced multipolarity is the absence of a potential hegemon.

Implications:

Determining polarity for all three depends on how many great powers there are. The differences in calculating power however lead to differences in defining great powers. Calculating who is a great power or not, is clearly dependent on the definitions of power. When we remember that M has a focus on almost only military capability his different views on great powers and polarity become rather obvious. Where Waltz argues a state’s total sum of factors determines a state’s power, including economy etc. (what M calls latent power) M focus on the military capabilities. This explains why M defines a great power by military means only, where the others include more factors. Ultimately this leaves us with different ways of measuring power which affect the number of great powers than in turn affect polarity. So where unipolarity is more or less impossible for M, it is the current distribution for Waltz and Walt. The current unipolar system is by Waltz and W seen to be changing rather quickly, while it for M today is balanced multipolarity and is likely to remain so.

4.8 The impacts of geography

This section will foremost be spent on M as geography has a rather clear effect to him. First off, let us consider a regional perspective however. As geography has a quite clear effect for W (BoTT) and Mearsheimer, does it have any meaning for Waltz? The truth is that in his theory, there is very little mention of geography. His overall theory remains very theoretical in the sense that it does not include very many real life variables. The question is if his BoPT is applicable on a regional level as well? I.e. are there regional balances of power etc. or is there only an international larger one? As he rarely mentions geography one can easily get the impression that the BoP he talks about is an international one. By closer reading, however, one can find pieces elsewhere where he readily applies his BoPt on regional levels.⁸¹ So, there exist regional balances of power, as well as broader international ones. This is all we learn

⁸⁰ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. “*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*”. W.W. Norton & Co p. 45

⁸¹ Waltz, Kenneth, 2000. “*Structural realism after the cold war*”. International Security p. 35-37

from Waltz on this point. W includes geography in a very general sense, building on Waltz's, accounting for regional balances of power and in part paying credit to proximity when determining threat. What regions exist, or what the requirements for a region are not brought up.

Mearsheimer:

Let us begin with different kinds of states; continental and insular. The continental great power is located on a larger area of land that is also inhabited by one or more great powers. The insular great power is then the only great power on a larger mass of land that is surrounded by water on all sides.⁸²

The implications are that insular states should be generally be more secure, as it is harder to invade them as the aggressor has to cross water to do it. This goes in the other direction as well, i.e. it becomes harder for insular states to meddle in continental affairs given the power projection difficulties posed by water. Whether a state is continental or insular hence affects what strategies are preferred. Examples of insular states would be Great Britain, when it was still a great power, and the US today, as it is the only great power located in the Americas, and while Japan has the geographic qualifications of an insular state, given its limits in military power (and lack of nuclear weapons) M would not rank it as a great power.

M does not really draw up any criteria for what a region constitutes. As Toft notes, there is no accepted way of defining regions and M seem to take regions such as the Americas, the middle-east, East Asia etc. for granted.⁸³

Another problem with combining a regional and an international concept of balance of power, is how to assess which one is at play at a specific point in time, or rather how the combination of the two works. For instance, is a regional balance at one point in time more important than the international balance? These questions are not dealt with and are clear weaknesses in M's theory.

4.9 Strategies under anarchy:

Waltz:

As briefly mentioned the two main ways state a state acts in is either through balancing, or bandwagoning.

⁸² Mearsheimer, John, 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton & Co p. 126

⁸³ Toft, Peter, 2005. *John Mearsheimer, an offensive realist*. Journal of international relations & development p.393

Balancing is defined as either internal balancing (increasing one's own power in response to a threat) or through external balancing (joining forces with another to check a threat). As his BoPT earlier stated balancing is preferred, and bandwagoning is not good as you ally with a stronger force, but in that alliance mutual possible gains will end in the stronger's favour and hence making the relative power-gap even broader.⁸⁴

So balancing is the rational behaviour according to BoPT, and is induced and rewarded by the system.

But then what is Waltz's view of war? Waltz admits that states try to gain power at the expense of others, as a means of increasing one's own security, more specifically by trying to be just a bit more powerful than rivals as this is the best way of ensuring security. This goes in the opposite direction as well, to make sure that no other states gain power at your own expense. This is the source of the constant competition.⁸⁵

War is however an ill-advised strategy that is costly and rarely pays off, and it is particularly bad for trying to change the status-quo as aggression ultimately leads to countering coalitions. War is in other words not a useful strategy for either gain, as it is so costly, and neither for domination as balances will form against the aggressor.⁸⁶ In other words, the only time you should go to war is when it is for defending yourself against an aggressor.

The question that arises becomes, why then does war occur? The answer is that states behave irrationally, thinking that they can through clever strategy or military superiority overcome the costs of war. Or it can be a product of miscalculation, as mentioned states spend time approximating each other's power, and since states are not perfect calculators, mistakes sometimes happen. War in general, and especially trying to achieve hegemony, is a bad idea since sooner or later a balance will be formed against you.

This means that there are two main strategies in Waltz's world, at least that are elaborated on; balancing and bandwagoning, where the latter is discouraged by the system. He does however note that states try to gain some power at other's expense (just not too much of it), but does not elaborate further on which strategies to use to do this. The focus is on general terms and trends rather than specific differentiated strategies. What can be extrapolated from the systemic features where balancing and bandwagoning are two broad categorizations of it.

⁸⁴ Waltz, Kenneth, 1979. *Theory of international Politics*. Random House p. 126

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 126-128

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 191

Just as the acquirement of nuclear weapons could be viewed as a balancing act, so can for instance one state's entering a war on one side rather than the other. Revisionist behaviour (war, expansion etc.) is however in the long run bad choices. This conclusion is why is sometimes accused of having a status quo bias.

Walt:

In essence, W reaches the same conclusions as Waltz, on slightly different grounds. War does not pay off, and is an irrational response to systemic pressures. As he uses the same terminology as the above, and concludes that balancing is prevailing further elaboration on it is unnecessary. What becomes of interest here is then why war occurs. As noted, W has a rational actor assumption, and since war is irrational according to his theory, why does it occur? Waltz can easily point to that states often are irrational and also domestic factors (which decide much foreign policy). W does not however have this luxury. If war is irrational and states are rational, why do states start wars of aggression in a balancing world which he claims it is? ⁸⁷

He does not provide a good answer to this question. One answer that comes to mind is that the offence-defense variable so greatly favours the offense that war indeed is fruitful. But still he argues that defense almost always has the advantage, and also why would states go to war if they know balancing coalitions will form? There is no clear answer and this is a large glitch in the theory.

As Elman notes, this theory is more suited in explaining how states respond to revisionist behaviour, rather than explaining the origins of revisionism. As W claims to be able to explain state behaviour through structural means, he cannot either turn to domestic factors as an answer as that is not within his theory. ⁸⁸

One answer could be that the effects of the security and miscalculating lead to unwanted effects. I.e. that states will interpret others defensive actions as being a preparation for offensive action, and hence conflict ensues. The argument is however not that convincing since states are still rational and should know that aggression does not pay off.

Mearsheimer:

⁸⁷ Walt, Stephen, 1987. *"The Origins of Alliances"*. Cornell University press p. 26-28

⁸⁸ Williams, Paul, 2008. *"Security studies: An Introduction"*. Routledge p. 22

Mearsheimer has some practically defined strategies that states use under anarchy. Like the previous two, balancing and bandwagoning are two concepts present, where the prevailing one is balancing. There are however several others, which I will soon turn to. To M, global hegemony would be the ultimate guarantee of security, he does not however see this as possible. Instead states, while still believing world domination to be the best security but realizing it is unlikely, focus on achieving regional hegemony which is much more realistic. This means controlling one's geographical part of the world, and this short of global hegemony, becomes the best way of achieving security.⁸⁹

A regional hegemon (the only great power in a system) does not want any peer competitors, and hence once a state achieves regional hegemony it does its best to prevent other states in other regions from becoming regional hegemons. This is because such an enemy would be especially powerful and able to cause trouble in one's own "backyard".⁹⁰

Essentially, the underlying logic is that when a state achieves regional hegemony, its gaze is turned away from the regional to a wider perspective. A regional hegemon hence seeks to stop others from rising to the same status. So even when achieving the best realistic guarantee of security states remain revisionist in that they seek to prevent potential hegemons in other regions from emerging.

Given this world, M provides a set of strategies that can be categorized as either defensive or offensive. He also, contrary to the others, provides us with a set of variables that tell us what strategies are more likely to be used under certain conditions. These conditions are relative power and geographic proximity. What is important to make out here is that in difference to Walt, his BoPT does not include geography, rather it is clearly separated but M later adds proximity as a variable when to tell us which strategy is more likely.

Defensive strategies aimed at containing aggression:

These are mainly used to check aggressors, i.e. to stop an aggressive state from gaining power at one's loss. Balancing occurs when a state directly takes on an aggressor from changing the balance of power, this is done either through deterrence or if it becomes necessary through war.

⁸⁹ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics". W.W. Norton & Co p. 40

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 41

Buck-passing, alternatively, is when a state rather than balancing tries to get another state to deter or possibly go to war against the aggressor. In essence, by standing aside and keeping on the side-lines one hopes that another state will take the responsibility instead. This is however a risky strategy, as the cost of failure can be great.⁹¹

What this means is that M takes a clear step away from having balancing as the ever prevailing outcome. For instance, what happens when states pass the buck but the buck-catcher fails to catch it? In M's world the failure of balancing mechanisms to engage is very possible.

If we think back to W we know that his BoTT includes geographic proximity as an independent variable to threat which explains when states balance or not. M does not include this in his BoP, since this is rather determined by military strength. However, geography does matter when it comes to if state chooses to balance or to buck-pass. While the BoP is unaffected by geography, the actual choice of whether to balance or buck-pass is affected.

Aggressive strategies aimed at gaining power:

War is the obvious strategy where one simply tries to bring the enemy to his knees. It can however be very costly which is why states only use it when benefits are calculated to be higher than costs. Limited war is war for limited aims when the cost-benefit analysis is weighted toward the latter. Hegemonic war is when a state tries to become the hegemon, which only happens when a potential hegemon appears; i.e. when a state's capabilities is that far ahead that it can bring its enemies to their knees.⁹²

Another is *blackmail* in which a state through the threat of violence tries to gain power. It is when successful, preferable to war as it is cost free, but is ultimately unlikely to succeed in changing the BoP in a meaningful way. *Bait and bleed*, is when a state tries to get two rivals to fight each other and hence reducing their strength, while you yourself idly stand by gaining in relative power as the conflict continues. This can also be very effective, but is hard to carry out in practice since it involves actively getting two rivals to fight each other. The last one is *blood-letting*, where you instead of getting rivals to war each other, you try and prolong a war between two states already in action, and by trying to prolong it, hence decreasing both rivals' strength, increasing one's own relative power.⁹³

⁹¹ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton & Co p. 156-167

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 147

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 152-154

When it comes to bandwagoning M immediately dismisses it, arguing that joining a rival M hence provides a rather broad set of alternatives of how to act given a certain goal. As aggression is inherent in his theory, the need for such strategies provides further theoretical scope of state-behaviour.

Implications:

Waltz and Walt live in a world where war rarely pays off, both claiming it to be irrational given their theories. Waltz can however explain war by ascribing to unit-level factors and irrational behaviour, where W cannot as states are rational actors and their behaviour can be explained by structural phenomena. Explaining aggressive behaviour is not done in an exhaustive way by either two. Waltz can escape that problem, given his limited theoretical claims, but W cannot. By contrast M explains aggressive as well as defensive behaviour, not only adding ways of doing it but also providing a rationale for doing it. The status-quo bias is removed from M's theory where it remains a problem for Waltz and W. A clear difference is also M's inclination away from "pure" theory, and inclusion of military strategy and geopolitics, which is not included in Waltz and W.

In this way M in a sense can be argued to combine defensive and offensive realism in that he does not refute that states often balance, but rather claims that this is not the whole picture. Balancing remains central in his theory, just not dominating. Indeed M has no logical choice but to say that balancing sometimes fails and revisionism succeeds, as he claims states are rational actors and revisionism would be irrational if balancing mechanisms always ensued, causing revisionist behaviour to fail. For aggression to succeed, balancing must fail in one way or another.

The same logic goes for W but in the opposite direction, if aggression is a strategy doomed to fail due to balancing dynamics and states are rational, why then does aggression occur? It should not, it is a logical anomaly and a glitch in W's reasoning.

M's theory provides new theoretical scope and is in this way an advancement of structural realism not suffering from a "status quo-bias". M's theory might however be argued to tilt in the opposite direction "revisionist-bias" as all great powers have revisionist aims, but what is important to note is that a "status quo-bias" tilted towards non-aggression finds it difficult explaining aggression, where as a "revisionist-bias" only notes states have revisionist aims,

which is far from saying states will be aggressive every day of the year. Rather, those certain days of the year where circumstances and clever strategy allow for aggression to succeed at reasonable cost, they are not idly ignored.

Waltz remains in a defensive world, but where irrational behaviour often causes conflict. Walt seems to live in the same defensive world without ascribing aggression to irrational behaviour, and simply put has a hard time explaining it, whereas M lives in a world where aggression is both constant and rational, while also including defensive behaviour.

4.9 The nuclear deterrent:

I have yet to discuss the one unit-level phenomenon that limits the effects of structure, so I shall now discuss nuclear weapons.

The views on nuclear weapons are strikingly similar with all three authors. The logic that underpins the view on nuclear weapons is one of deterrence. In other words, just having nuclear weapons is such a frightening capability that they are unlikely to be used against another country in possession of them, as the decision to use nuclear force would lead to nuclear force being used against yourself.⁹⁴ With nuclear capability the shift from more conventional weaponry to nuclear means that “*any state will be deterred by another’s state’s second-strike forces*”.⁹⁵ This means that a country’s capability of launching after they have been hit by a nuclear attack, which is seen as unlikely to be taken out, will effectively stop nuclear states from using these weapons against each other as it would be devastating.^{96 97} This has very real effects on the likelihood of war between nuclear states. War may still occur, but is due to nuclear weapons unlikely to lead to defeating wars as a state standing on the brink of destruction would threaten to use its nuclear arsenal.

Implications:

What this means is that war between nuclear powers become less likely, and wars that do occur are more likely to be limited in nature. The nuclear deterrent becomes a last solution of sorts, as no one would risk to use it unless facing defeat, and states realize this and hence such wars are highly unlikely to take place.

⁹⁴ Waltz, Kenneth, 1990. “*Nuclear Myths and Political Realities*”. The American political science review p. 736-737

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 737

⁹⁶ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. “*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*”. W.W. Norton & Co p. 130, 358

⁹⁷ Walt, Stephen, 1987. “*The Origins of Alliances*”. Cornell University press p. 163

Moreover, what we have here is a unit-level factor that has clear effect on the systemic level. It actually limits the effects of structure, as it makes war more unlikely. In this sense, it is a step away from purely structural effects, and indicating that other factors than pure structures need to be taken into account.

4.10 Summary:

I will here present a table covering the larger differences between these authors as to make it easier to visually see them.

	Waltz	Walt	Mearsheimer
Anarchic effect	Benign/weak	Benign/Strong	Malign/Strong
State rationality	Limited	Complete	Complete
Explanatory Focus	Internat. Outcome (I.O) great powers	I.O. +state behaviour, alliances	I.O+ state behaviour, great powers
Measuring power	Overall material focus (wealth,population, military etc.)	Overall material focus (wealth,population, military etc.)	Military focus (strength/size of armed forces)
Basis of behaviour	Balance of power	Balance of threat	Balance of power
Type of behaviour	<i>Defensive+offensive (rational/irrational)</i>	Defensive (rational)	Defensive+offensive (rational)
Most stable/unstable system	Bipolar/unipolar	Bipolar/unipolar	Bipolar/multipolar
Most war-prone	Multipolar	Multipolar	Multipolar
Inclusion of geography	None	Limited (proximity)	High (proximity, insular/continental)
Amount of power	Means for security ("appropriate) amount)	Means for security ("appropriate" amount)	Means and end as power=security (power-maximizing)
General state behaviour	Maintain status quo/ balance of power	Maintain status quo/ balance of power	Aim for hegemony / "clever" aggression

Some of the above categorizations may come off as odd, or even inaccurate, by the observant reader. These hence deserve some explanation.

Anarchic effect is described as benign/weak with Waltz and benign/strong with Walt. This might seem strange, but is not however. What I mean with benign is the effect of the structure in terms of what its logic leads us to expect, and as noted the logical behaviour produced under anarchy is defensive, war is not encouraged, hence benign in that sense.

By weak I mean that the logic of anarchic effects is not alone strong enough to determine state behaviour, as Waltz notes the logic is often ignored. By strong, I mean the opposite, that anarchy is seen as having strong enough effects to determine state behaviour, as Walt does. By malign, the anarchy leading to aggression/war is meant.

Furthermore, “type of behaviour” warrants some explanation. Waltzian logic induces that aggressive behaviour is ultimately self-defeating and is not mandated by structural effects, rather defensive behaviour is. Given that Waltz says states often behave irrationally and aggressively, this is accounted to ignoring the encouraging effects of anarchy. Hence, what I mean is that according to Waltz’s logic, defensive is rational behaviour, but since he also says states are irrational and behave aggressively, this also have to be taken into account. Normally Waltz is portrayed as a defensive realist, a categorization I find misleading however. While it remains true that his balance of power-theory induces a defensive logic, this logic is often ignored and hence leading to aggressive behaviour. Marrying these two together leaves us with a world where defense might be the rational thing to do, but we are not always rational which is why I have also included offensive behaviour with Waltz. That he is usually labeled purely defensive has more to do with a tendency to ignore the “irrational behaviour” of states part of his theory. The same goes for M’s theory in reverse, it largely relies on defensive behaviour as well as offensive, where the former is mostly overlooked, so to label his theory as only “offensive” becomes misleading in a sense, which is why I have included defensive behaviour to his theory.

5. Theory applied – the case of China and the US

I will now take the insights of my reading and analysis of the theories and use them to explain, in general terms, sino-american relations from the perspective the three kinds of structural realism. It is of course not easy taking the general insight from a certain theory and applying it to a practical case. I am however convinced that my investigation has provided enough insight and understanding for these theories to be able to analyze a practical case from the perspectives of these theories. While I will rely on my analysis I will also rely on what the authors have produced on the subject.

Waltz:

To begin with, Waltz would argue, as many others, that we at the moment live in a unipolar system where the US is dominant but at the moment in relative decline, most notably in relation to China. Given his views on unipolarity as the least stable system, i.e. least likely to last, US decline is to be expected as time passes. As he notes, *“those who refer to the unipolar moment are right. In our perspective, the new balance is emerging slowly in historical perspectives it will come in the blink of an eye.”*⁹⁸

What are the reasons for US decline? Unipolar powers act foolishly in trying to do too much in too many places, overusing their own power, in the end leading to decline. In practical terms, the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in combination with taking on the burden of world police, are indeed things to be expected from a unipole. In essence, the lack of opposed power leads a unipole to do too much; objectives that were never considered before all of a sudden becomes possible. A unipole is bound to take much on its plate, in the end leaving that plate weakened. What is important to note here is that systemic pressures under unipolarity are minimal, and can readily be ignored without immediate effect. Such is the nature of the unipolar world. Waltz would however argue that the anarchic structure in the end punishes the unipole’s rash behaviour ultimately leading to its decline. In other words, his dictum that success ultimately leads to failure, is a suitable choice of words.

The second reason for unipolarity not lasting is that power is in the end balanced against, as states more than anything fear unchecked power. So far there has indeed been an absence of

⁹⁸ Waltz, Kenneth, 2000. *“NATO expansion: A realist’s view”*. Contemporary Security Policy p. 25

balancing against the US, mainly because it has been so strong that coalitions would have to be so large and combine so many states that it is essentially impossible.⁹⁹

China is now however in a position where it will in not many years catch up to the US economically, and so in other areas it does it best to try and balance against US power. Chinas military expenditure would be a clear indication of this, its attaining of a blue water navy only one example. Indeed, as unipolarity is doomed the world will soon enough change back to either bipolarity or multipolarity. Which is most likely? As the US is still ahead of China, especially militarily, and China is ahead of all other contenders (foremost Russia, Japan), Russia for mainly economic reasons and Japan for military reasons, bipolarity shared by the US and China becomes the most likely.

Some might ask what about European countries? The answer from Waltz would be rather simple. No singular European country is strong enough, and the EU faces so much organizational difficulty, that it will never in a meaningful way equal the state.¹⁰⁰

We know that bipolarity is the most stable system, as the two contending powers will focus on each other, reducing possibilities of uncertainty as poles lessen. The stability of this system is dependent on the rise of other powers. At present, there seem to be no contenders rivaling China. Does Waltz have anything to say about the behaviour of the US and China until unipolarity is broken? He would say that a unipole of course wants to maintain its power, hence the US will try and stop China from rising to stay the unipole. The U.S has lately been reaffirming its allies in the Asia-Pacific, as a means of stopping China from affirming its power. One recent example would be the stationing of U.S troops in Australia.

For Waltz, this is seen as breaking the rationale of BoPT. What the US is doing is managing and reassuring allies with its own military power. In essence, the US is using its own power in the region to try and balance China. This has the effect that countries are less worried about the US, while much worried about China, and since US allies are indeed dependant on the US, they are stopped from balancing themselves. In other words, the US is using its power so that others don't have to, while it should instead rely on balance of power-effects to let China's worried neighbors do the balancing on their own. In other words, the US is an obstacle in

⁹⁹ Waltz, Kenneth, 2000. *Structural realism after the cold war*. International Security p. 27-28

¹⁰⁰ Waltz, Kenneth, 2000. *NATO expansion: A realist's view*. Contemporary Security Policy p. 25

letting a regional balancing take place and instead places more strain on itself, furthering weakening its power.

Under bipolarity, sino-american relations will be tense and a struggle for power will take place. As we know, under bipolarity, the main battle is fought internally. That is by trying to increase economies and militaries internally, while allies are useful but not the main arena in which competition will occur. The likelihood of war is significantly decreased by nuclear weapons, and if war breaks out it will be limited in scope. A bipolar world in Asia would be seen as “*tense but basically stable*” to Waltzian realism.¹⁰¹

To summarize; Waltzian realism would predict unipolarity ultimately failing, no matter how hard the U.S. tries to stop it, and indeed by trying to do so they are in themselves making it easier. And once bipolarity emerges, security competition between the two will take place, mainly through internal efforts. War is not likely, but instead a balance is expected to form providing certain stability between the two poles. In Waltzian terms unipolarity is so unlikely to last because it is essentially unbalanced power, and balance always finds its way back, one way or another.

Walt:

Walt essentially shares many of Waltz’s views. The main difference lies in his rational actor assumption of states and his balance of threat, rather than power only.

Let’s start off with the rational actor assumption. W shares the view that unipolarity will ultimately fail given the above reasons. Waltz however largely views unipolar behaviour as irrational. W assumes that states are rational all the time, calculating their best move from a certain set of conditions. So, how does W see U.S. decline, and more importantly, the reasons for it?

W would not ascribe U.S decline to irrational behaviour, as that would contradict his theory, rather he would ascribe it to miscalculation. From his view Iraq and Afghanistan has been failures, leading to relative decline, but he does not ascribe it to irrational behaviour. Rather, he would argue the US grossly miscalculated Al Qaeda’s capabilities and underestimated the

¹⁰¹ Friedberg, Aaron. The future of U.S.-China Relations. International Security p. 28

difficulties of invading Iraq/Afghanistan which turned out to be continuing spirals of cost and difficulty.¹⁰²

Walt contends that unipolarity limits structural effects, but cannot agree that states behave foolishly ultimately leading to their decline, as they are rational actors. Rather, he puts focus on miscalculation and balancing against perceived threats. Indeed, perception is a large portion of his picture. The US has made sure its view in the middle-east is far from good, and through criticizing China's regime and ideology made sure that the Chinese in some sense fear they will act upon their beliefs. In other words, US attitude towards China, especially the liberal critique, has been founded in a belief that China can be "turned" and liberalized more than it already has. This today seems unlikely and is something Chinese leadership is greatly opposed to.

There are two factors of his BoTT that clearly stand out, geographic proximity and perception of aggression. The geographic positions of the US and China should have rather large implications. There are separated by the pacific hence mitigating any immediate threats of invasion, which is moreover made practically impossible by nuclear weapons. Concerning perceptions the US has as mentioned utilized a policy of criticizing China with the aim of liberalization. China has in its turn quite on the contrary assumed a strategy of non-intervention, more or less abiding by the sovereignty principle arguing that national affairs should not be meddled with. China has pursued a strategy of appearing as the "peacefully rising China" where they have tried as best they can to minimize a perception of themselves as a threat to anyone. As Buzan notes speeches by President Hu has been based on a "*strict interpretation of sovereign equality and non-intervention*"¹⁰³

This can also be seen in UN's security council where China has taken a clear stance against intervention in almost all cases.

In other words, US perceptions of China should be perceived as less threatening than Chinese perceptions of the US. Hence the geographic variable should lead the BoT being rather low. This does not however seem to be the case as the US still seems to see China as a large threat. We would argue this to be an effect of the US being unipolar and fearing China becoming one of two poles in a bipolar world. As he notes, "*In the decades ahead, the United States should*

¹⁰² Walt, Stephen, 2011. *The end of the American era. The National Interest* p. 3-4

¹⁰³ Buzan, Barry, 2011. *A World Order Without Superpowers. International Relations* p. 13

*shift its main strategic attention to Asia, both because its economic importance is rising rapidly and because China is the only potential peer competitor that we face”.*¹⁰⁴

In this case when a unipole faces becoming one of two poles, perceptions do not really matter as the unipole ultimately will fear its own decline leading to bipolarity. Unipolarity with W seems to strongly mitigate, or weaken, much of W's additions to BoPT. One is almost inclined to say that when it comes down to it, BoP-logic prevails over perceptions and geography in this case.¹⁰⁵

To summarize; given that unipolarity sooner or later will be replaced, US-China relations will continue to be tense at best. Especially if the US continues its confrontational, in ideological terms, approach towards China. Also, the closer China gets to US strength, the more incentive China will have to continue and try harder to reach this goal, as US power then would be balanced, as it is today unbalanced in favour of the US. Major war between the two is not likely, but focus will instead be on balancing, and if war should break out it is likely to be highly limited in nature. The US will continue to try and preserve the status quo as this would preserve their predominant power and China will do its best to break the status quo to the point where a new balance of power against the US is formed. When this is attained both states will act to preserve the status quo according to Walt's logic, while striving to be just slightly stronger than the other as this is the best way to achieve security. The main arena where this would take place is Asia, as the US is still the dominant power in the region. When a new balance of power is formed in Asia, to China's benefit, a status quo-seeking behaviour will entail.

What is interesting and might seem contradictory is that a unipole will seek to maintain the status quo while all other states more or less have revisionist aims. This might seem odd as all states are taken to be status quo-seekers. What shall be remembered though is that the status quo-seeking follows from a reliance on balance, and since there is no balance under unipolarity states hence becomes revisionist in that they seek to reestablish a balance.

¹⁰⁴ Walt, Stephen, 2011. *“The end of the American era”*. *The National Interest* p. 5

¹⁰⁵ For general thoughts on Asia policy from Walt, see

http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/18/explaining_obamas_asia_policy

Mearsheimer:

From M's point of view US decline is rooted in bad policy decisions based on miscalculation. Terrorists in his view have wrongfully been turned into a Goliath that shall be much feared, when in fact this is a miscalculation. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq based on going after the terrorists is first of all misguided since terrorism is not a large threat to US security, also the belief that these states could be invaded and reformed easily is at best naïve and also misguided.¹⁰⁶ So as with Waltz, the US has acted foolishly leading to a decline in relative power. The reasons for this foolishness are not irrational however, but based on severe miscalculation. The main benefactor from US focus on terrorism in the middle-east has been China, as it has been allowed to "rise" when US gaze has been focused elsewhere.

Mearsheimer would identify the international system today to be multipolar, the great powers being the US, China and Russia, the US still being the mightiest of the three followed by China. The international balance of power is hence the most war prone of the polarities. The US being a regional hegemon in the western hemisphere (the only regional hegemon of the world) wants to keep this position as it best provides for US security.¹⁰⁷

According to this logic, the US being a far off state, should firstly rely on what is termed offshore balancing, i.e. trying to get the regional powers to check Chinese power. If this does not work however the US will increase its military presence in the region to make check Chinese rise itself. This however, will only happen at a time where China reaches the state of potential hegemony, i.e. when China is so much stronger than the other states in the region that it has a good chance at achieving regional hegemony in north-east Asia. This is also the clear goal of China, to become a regional hegemon, and China constantly strives to achieve this as it would be the best guarantee of security. Hence China has revisionist aims, while the US seeks to maintain the present status quo, as it is the only regional hegemon in the world.

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Mearsheimer would argue that China has reached or soon will become a potential hegemon. The strong Chinese economy allows it to transfer more of its latent power into military power, ultimately becoming so strong that the others in the region do not dare go against it. In such a position, termed unbalanced multipolarity (regional level) M would argue we are slowly

¹⁰⁶ Mearsheimer, John, 2011. *"Imperial by Design"*. The national Interest p. 21-22

¹⁰⁷ Booth, Ken etc., 2006, "Interview with John Mearsheimer", International Relations p.113-115

¹⁰⁸ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. *"The Tragedy of Great Power Politics"*. W.W. Norton & Co p. 401-402

¹⁰⁹ Mearsheimer, John, 2010. *"The Gathering Storm"*, Chinese Journal of International Relations p. 386-387

entering, the US would greatly increase its military presence in the region to stop China from reaching regional hegemony. If China was to try and dominate Asia it is to M clear that “*The united states does not tolerate peer competitors*”.¹¹⁰ As the logic encourages China to seek regional hegemony as much as it encourages the US to try and stop this, conflict in one way or another seems unavoidable.

The international polarity is not likely to change however, as Russia is still a great power, albeit not as powerful as the other two. So the system would internationally remain multipolar, should China reach regional hegemony. The difference would be that we now would have two regional hegemonies of the world, leaving both of them free to meddle with each other’s affairs in their respective regions leading to tighter competition between the two.

In M’s world states are as noted more inherently aggressive when opportunity is presented and also spend great effort on misrepresenting one’s objectives. In Walt’s terms the US becomes a threat to China mainly due to ideological critique of its system which the US seeks changed. In M’s terms however, the US posits an obstacle of Chinese expansion and domination as more power equals more security. From this perspective the most clever thing China could do might be to adhere to Deng Xiaping’s famous words calling for China to “...*hide our capabilities and bide our time*...”¹¹¹. China’s peaceful rise image is rather seen as a clever strategy of misinformation to benefit China. The peaceful rise of China is not admissible according to the logics of offensive realism. That M chooses to use Churchill’s title “the gathering storm” as the title of one paper on US-China power comes as no surprise.

To summarize; China-US relations are tense today and are likely to become more so as China grows more powerful. The US will seek to preserve the status quo, China will seek to alter it; The US will try and stop China from achieving regional hegemony and China is bound to aim for it according to the logic of offensive realism. The world today is one of unbalanced multipolarity, and not unipolarity which is a rather different claim, and should US-China power “level out” on an equal plane, it would still remain multipolar, but balanced multipolarity as no state is then far more powerful than its opponents. The power competition will take place in north-east Asia foremost as long as China does not achieve regional hegemony as in case off this the competition will take a more global approach. If conflict

¹¹⁰ Mearsheimer, John, 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton & Co p. 390

¹¹¹ Quoted in: Kay, Sean, 2006. *Global Security in the Twenty-First Century: Rowman & Littlefield p. 112*

ensues it is however not likely to lead to situations where one's destruction hangs in the thread due to the threat of nuclear weapons, and will most likely stay limited in scope.¹¹²

¹¹² For the reading of a classical realist see Kissinger, Henry, 2011. *"On China"*

6. Conclusions and closing remarks

Let us start with looking at the original two research-questions:

I: *What are the differences and similarities of different accounts of structural realism?*

II: *How would these accounts portray and explain the relationship between the US and China today?*

This paper has pointed out obvious differences and likenesses of these theories, as well as more fine-grained ones. It has also pointed out differences in the picture of US-China relations even though the overall picture did not turn out to be deeply divided. What can be concluded is that the theories share a lot, but also differ a lot. One difference that had major effect throughout the entire paper was the absence of a rational actor assumption with Waltz, and its presence with the others. Indeed, this might be the most fundamental difference that in one way or another shine through in the theories as wholes. Its inescapable effects on for instance BoP-logic as with Waltz states can readily ignore it due to the rationality absence, while the others can only attribute it to decisions made on bad information.

The differences in how much power a state should seek is up for debate and while one can understand and appreciate the logics of all three, I personally find it hard to overcome the “status-quo” bias of W. Especially as he, but also Waltz, have some trouble in explaining aggressive behaviour. Logically Walt’s theory comes off as the weakest one as a good explanation for war simply is not provided. Waltz’s theory however becomes the most hard to disprove, with its rather limited claims, where M’s theory becomes the easiest to disprove given his rather precise predictions at times and W’s end up somewhere in between.

What should be remembered however is that both W & M are continuations of Waltz, and hence that they on some accounts are much more advanced is only natural, indeed the opposite would come off as strange.

The conclusions that could be made of US-China relations are highly general and unspecific, still some interesting differences appear. Where Waltz and W more or less would conclude that a balance will be restored leading to security dilemma-effects, where for M we already have some sort of balance. For the former two US power will eventually fade leading to bipolarity, where for M we are already in multipolarity where the US will remain the most powerful (hence secure) state as long as it remains the only regional hegemon of the world.

This difference in polarity is in turn an effect of their different views on the measurement of power. I would argue that the future of US-China relations is the trial of fire for M's theory, as its logic demands China will act in an aggressive way (revisionist) and the US will try to stop this aggression from succeeding (status quo). Should M be proven wrong the theory would take a severe if not fatal blow (much like the one Waltz received when the cold war ended), and should he turn out to be right, realism would receive at least some tail-wind.

Waltz, predicting the decline of US power, should be at least partly vindicated if the trend of today continues. Given that W's theory is at least in its conclusions very much like Waltz's, though the way there differs, his most interesting contribution is really his inclusion of revolutions and its effects on international politics. I consciously chose not to go into much detail on that part, as it more or less goes against his founding stipulations that states are the main actors in international politics. Still his work on this subject should receive more attention than it has and might especially today be interesting given the wake of the Arab Spring. A suggestion for future research would then be to use his theory of revolutions and their international impact on some of the countries involved in the Arab Spring-movement.

I would like to end with two quotes that Waltz, Walt and Mearsheimer would most certainly agree with.

Before all else, be armed.

- Machiavelli

It is more agreeable to have the power to give than to receive.

- Churchill

7. Executive Summary

This essay is foremost a work in international relations-theory where the realist school is and has been one of the most influential ones since Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* was published in 1979. Realist theory before this had its foundations in the power-hungry nature of man while Waltz took a structural perspective arguing that the structure of international politics was the main source of behaviour, and not the nature of man.

The concept of anarchy is central and is explained as the absence of higher legitimate authority where the state is the central player. This leads to a struggle for survival in an unsafe world where states are to a large extent forced to only trust in themselves. Power is the main currency in this world and the balance of power is a key concept.

This essay investigates, compares and analyzes three different strands of structural realism; The one presented by Waltz in the above work, the defensive structural realism of Stephen Walt and the offensive structural realism of John Mearsheimer. The aim is to make clear likenesses and differences, while also going in depth to gain a full and deep understanding of these theories. The method employed is a qualitative text analysis with an open approach; that is the in depth reading and analyzing without constructing variables or categories beforehand, but rather doing it during the journey. This is done foremost not to limit the analysis, as predetermined categories/variables can easily lessen one's scope. In the final stages a description of US-China relations from the perspectives of these theories is provided as both an illustrative example, but also as a minor insight to US-China relations.

The analysis begins with saying that all three theories are of an empirical nature; that is mainly descriptive. The founding stipulations are then examined and shown to be more or less identical with one major exception. As Both Mearsheimer and Walt in some sense have continued Waltz's work this is to be expected. The major difference was that Waltz does not include a rational actor assumption, while the other two do, which throughout the essay is shown to have far-going implications.

The focus of the theories are also somewhat different whereas the Waltz is mainly focused on what he calls international outcome, which are things like the polarity of a given international system, the propensity of war etc. His theory is not fit for specific state behaviour predictions or explanations, while the other two claim to be able to explain specific state behaviour. Also,

Walt is more focused on alliance formation, whereas Mearsheimer is more focused on great power-behaviour, leading these theories to being more informative about different things. The anarchy previously explained, is concluded to be rather weak for Waltz as he does not believe it alone accounts for state-behaviour, given his lack of rationality. He instead readily says that states often ignore the logic inferred by the anarchy and act irrationally. For Walt and Mearsheimer the structure is instead seen as strong as it alone can determine state behaviour, without including sub-national explanations.

The authors are also concluded to have different views on how much power states seek. For Waltz and Walt only an “appropriate” amount is sought, as too much power leads to other forming up against you. For Mearsheimer however, power=security and hence states seek as much power as possible. This in turn means that states for the former two are defensively orientated and aggression is not mandated by the structure, rather the opposite, as they both see war as a costly and in the end self-defeating business.

For Mearsheimer this is not the case, and his theory is concluded to be both offensively and defensively orientated as states at the same time wish to survive, and stop other states from gaining too much power, but also act aggressively to gain power at the expense of others when it is smart to do so.

Their definitions of power also diverge where Waltz and Walt are orientated to the total capabilities of a state (territory, population, economy, military etc.) and Mearsheimer says it is the military might that ultimately matters, although this is connected to one’s economy. Mearsheimer furthermore sees land-based military power as the superior force, which is a further divergence. It is concluded that the way of measuring power is for Waltz and Walt rather diffuse, where slightly easier for Mearsheimer, and measuring power is subject to miscalculating.

What then decides how states act? Their behaviour mostly consists of balancing, meaning that if one state gains more power, its rival also tries to get more and so the spiral ensues. What decides if states want more or not is the balance of power; that is the distribution of power between the states in a given system. While Walt agrees with this in part, he adds more variables to his theory, which is called balance of threat-theory, and the previous balance of power-theory. These inclusions are e.g. geographic proximity and perception of threat. Walt’s theory is however rather loosely defined, and if a balance of power is hard to determine, his balance of threat becomes even harder. Also, there is not internal ordering on which of the

variables have the largest affect, but it is concluded that the balance of power seems to prevail a lot of the time.

The different authors have different views on polarity which simply put is how many great powers that exist in a given system. A unipolar world is where one such power exists, and is by Waltz and Walt seen as the least likely to last (which is what we have today) while Mearsheimer given his different definitions of power see a unipolar as one which the unipole can militarily defeat its rivals without too much cost, which he sees as highly unlikely, and furthermore made almost impossible by nuclear weapons. Hence their definitions of today's world and what polarities are possible differ. They all agree that the most stable world is a bipolar one, that is a world consisting of two great powers. Also the polarity that produces the most conflict is the multipolar world, consisting of three or more major powers.

It is concluded that while Waltz and Walt only minimally includes geography, Mearsheimer takes a much more geopolitical perspective and also includes different ways of gaining power (other than war) where the other two face problems explaining why war occurs. Offensive realism hence becomes the most rich account when it comes to describing different types of behaviour. Also, it is concluded that where Waltz's theory is rather hard to disprove, since it is actually rather limited in its claims, Mearsheimer is the easiest to disprove as his claims go much further and are more specific with Walt ending up somewhere in between.

US-Chinese behaviour is by all accounts described to be tense and consist of security competition, but also that the risk of a major war is low due to the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons. The nuclear weapon is described as a unit-level factor that clearly mitigates structural effects and points to the limits of purely structural accounts.

In Waltz's eyes US power is seen to ultimately weaken to the advantage of China, and the world is headed toward bipolarity rather quickly in historical terms which is agreed with by Walt. Mearsheimer instead sees a multipolar world where the possibility of China becoming a regional hegemon (only great power in one's region) which is what the US is in its region today. Having another regional hegemon in the world would decrease US security and US will hence spend much effort on making sure China does not reach that status, just as China will try hard reach it ultimately leading to some confrontation. Neither of these accounts hence have a very positive view of this relationship, not now nor in the future.

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