

“Systemic Analysis in Geopolitics and IR Theory”

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ABSTRACT: The core aim of the current paper is to summarize the basic argumentation of the Waltzian program and re-examine it in comparison with the legacy of systemic geopolitics. Which is Waltz's contribution, what is added by Mearsheimer and what does systemic geopolitical analysis offer in the margins of the relevant debate? Both of them focus on Great Powers, since these are considered without any doubt rational actors shaping international system. On this line of thought, their specific legacy is comparatively analyzed with systemic geopolitics and it is developed on the common basis of “system”. Systemic analysis is their common starting point towards analysis of international affairs and interstate distribution of power. Beyond their contradiction with reference to conclusions and epistemological issues, systemic analysis offers a common framework of understanding and conceptualizing systemic geopolitical analysis and structural realism. For this reason, system-level parameters are considered critical representing an epistemological and methodological prioritization far from blinkered analyses cited by other theoretical and philosophical traditions.

KEYWORDS: Kenneth Waltz; IR theory; Systemic Geopolitical Analysis; John Mearsheimer; Structural Realism

Date of Submission: 08-01-2020

Date of Acceptance: 23-01-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

Both Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer agree that structural realism emphasizes on Great powers, since these are the basic determinants of the evolution of international politics. Nevertheless, as Mearsheimer mentions referring also to Waltz, “*the theory has relevance for smaller powers, although for some more than for others. Kenneth Waltz puts the point well when he writes, ‘A general theory of international politics... once written also applies to lesser states that interact insofar as their interactions are insulated from the intervention of the great powers of a system, whether by the relative indifference of the latter or by difficulties of communication and transportation’*” (Mearsheimer 2001: 403-404). The core axis of the current research is related to the description of the common ontological parameters of structural realism and systemic geopolitical analysis as well as the necessary clarification of methodological divergences.

Therefore, on the basis of Lakatosian legacy, we proceed into the relevant “*hardcore*” and test Kenneth Waltz's argumentation through this epistemological lens. Afterwards, we elaborate into the notion of “*system*” and what this level of analysis may contribute to the overall debate on international politics. Systemic analysis represents the common ground of the development of the two fields and it is placed beyond any consequent heterogeneous analyses concerning – for instance – predictability or deduction. Finally, there is a brief reference to systemic geopolitical analysis, as this has been introduced and developed by its founding father, Ioannis Th. Mazis (2012; 2002; Mazis and Troulis 2019).

II. THE LAKATOSIAN “HARDCORE” AND KENNETH WALTZ

According to the Lakatosian metatheoretical approach, the substance of a scientific research program is consisted of the “*hardcore*”; i.e. the foundational hypotheses / assumptions of this scientific research program. The “*hardcore*” is protected by the principle of the “*negative heuristic*”; i.e. the rule not permitting researchers of a similar scientific research program to proceed into inconsistency or inconsistencies [in their effort to respond to new empirical data, inclined to confute theory] in relation to the foundational assumptions meaning the “*hardcore*” of this scientific research program (Mazis 2014: 473-482).

The principle of “*negative heuristic*” has been founded because the “*hardcore*” determines the essence of a scientific research program and thus, any possible change could result automatically into an establishment of a new scientific research program. Hence, it is made clear that, from a Lakatosian point of view, that if the “*hardcore*” (i.e. the foundational hypotheses / assumptions) changes, then the whole scientific research program will change in its essence. The metatheoretical approach of Imre Lakatos represents the most suitable epistemologically and the most powerful method of scientific establishment and progress of theoretical approaches in the field of international relations. This issue has been underlined (without having been determined adequately) by scholars of international relations such as Stephen D. Krasner, Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder (Mazis 2014: 76).

The theoretical approaches of realism, liberalism and constructivism could be evaluated on the basis of the Lakatosian principles, since the relevant necessary theoretical revisions, able to be included in the system of rules of the methodology of scientific research programs, have been noted (Mazis 2014: 75). Furthermore, the methodology of the scientific research programs is important since it can be a counter-weight to unstable theoretical re-approaches and the eclectic reading of empirical data. These are two issues of critique in relation to several fields (e.g. balance of power). Therefore, under this Lakatosian lens, Kenneth Waltz’s theoretical “*hardcore*” is consisted of the following theoretical assumptions (Waltz 1979):

- State entities interact in the margins of an anarchic environment, without some protection from an imaginary senior ruler (“*international anarchy*”).¹
- State entities represents “the protectors of themselves”. Thus, the rule of behavior imposed by the system is the mobilization of resources by the state itself (“*self-help principle*”).²
- The basic problem, created by the system and affecting state, is the threat of its survival. Therefore, state behavior is shaped to the aim of securing survival prospects (“*upmost national interest*”).³
- States play the leading roles in international politics and not sub-state or hyper-state actors (“*state-centric international system*”) (Gilpin 1986: 305).
- States own specific / limited resources, which they can use to improve their chances to survive and thus, they are interested in the maintenance and the increase of such capabilities (“*importance of power in international politics*”).⁴
- In the anarchic, competitive international system, states own a motive to balance their opponents, in order to increase their security (“*balancing strategy*”).⁵
- States choose those strategies offering the most possibilities for gains to outbalance probable losses. Since states are cost-sensitive, they are inclined to behave always rationally for the sake of the biggest gain. Mistakes are punished with power losses (“*rationality*”).⁶
- States evaluate their choices and make decisions with reference (in relation) to their strategic positioning and how they perceive their external environment (“*relative gains*”).⁷

¹ In Lowes Dickinson’s words: “*While this anarchy continues the struggle between States will tend to assume a certain stereotyped form. One will endeavor to acquire supremacy over the other for motives at once of security and of domination, the others will combine to defeat it, and history will turn upon the two poles of empire and the balance of power*” (2008: 1).

² Regarding the “*self-help*” principle, Kenneth Waltz notes that: “*States do not willingly place themselves in situations of increased dependence. In a self-help system, considerations of security subordinate economic gain to political interest*” (1986: 104).

³ “*Nations are competitive actors pursuing their key national interests: national security and survival*” (Blazevic 2009: 60).

⁴ In Hans Morgenthau’s words: “*The concept of interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid, but it does not endow that concept with a meaning that is fixed once and for all [...] It cannot be denied that throughout historic time, regardless of social, economic and political conditions, states have met each other in contests of power*” (1993: 36).

⁵ “*Defensive realists emphasize that if any state becomes too powerful, balancing will occur. Specifically, the other great powers will build up their militaries and form a balancing coalition that will leave the aspiring hegemon at least less secure, and maybe even destroy it*” (Mearsheimer 2006: 75).

⁶ Rational actors “*are aware of their external environment and they think strategically about how to survive in it. In particular, they consider the preferences of other states and how their own behavior is likely to affect the behavior of those other states, and how the behavior of those other states is likely to affect their own strategy for survival. Moreover, states pay attention to the long term as well as the immediate consequences of their actions*” (Mearsheimer 2006: 69-70).

⁷ According to Joseph Grieco’s classical remarks: “*States are positional, not atomistic, in character. Most significantly, state positionality may constrain the willingness of states to cooperate. States fear that their partners will achieve relatively greater gains; that, as a result, the partners will surge ahead of them in relative*

- In the anarchic international system, states are enforced to take measures to increase their security. These measures, however, decrease security of other states by definition and re-feed insecurity, uncertainty, antagonisms and consequently security dilemmas. Possible efforts, made by states to balance their opponents, contribute to the establishment of a self-regulated system of balance of power, which can contribute from its own part to the status quo protection. Distribution of power in the international system may contribute to the stability or the instability of the system (*“balance of power”*).⁸

The afore-mentioned undoubted recommendations represent the *“hardcore”* of the Waltzian structural realism under a Lakatosian theoretical approach. It is true that the Lakatosian establishment of structural realism presents some differences in comparison with the Lakatosian establishment of systemic geopolitical analysis. In specific, structural realism is based on some foundational core hypotheses / assumptions from which, if one is disproved or doubted (as a result of new empirical data), the theoretical establishment of structural realism will be negated in total.

III. SYSTEMIC-LEVEL DOGMATISM AND COUNTER-DOGMATISM

The fact that structural realism is based on some foundational assumptions limits its flexibility and makes it vulnerable to scientifically new data or empirical ascertainment. On the contrary, systemic geopolitical analysis is based on *“less dogmatic”* assumptions and thus, it is highly adaptive to new scientific and empirical data and case studies. Structural realism is by definition an *“inflexible”* and *“heavy”* structure, a whole political theory, which encapsulates and embodies some strict foundational assumptions / hypotheses.

In case that state policy is not correlated with, not identified with or not fully compatible to the foundational assumptions of structural realism, then this seems weak to offer satisfying theoretical responses or to explain why the tested state followed a policy not compatible to the basic theoretical assumptions of structural realism.

Moreover, structural realism finds it difficult to fully understand, analyze and explain behaviors and choices made by non-state actors (e.g. terrorist organizations, internationalist movements, religions, NGOs, multinational companies etc.). This is proved via multiple case studies. On the contrary, systemic geopolitical analysis is less *“dogmatic”* than structural realism embodying only two foundational assumptions, not related to the substance of international system (i.e. if this is anarchic, state-centric, antagonist, conflictual or if power is an important means for survival etc.).

These give emphasis on methodological issues and the significance of using mathematical exemplars and scientific methods not capable to produce countable effects as well as the assumption that in the geographical zone to be tested at least two homogeneous, cohesive poles should exist. These poles should be incapable to be self-determined or hetero-determined referring to their international environment.

The Lakatosian notion of protective belt of the auxiliary hypotheses offers the characteristic to be tested, to adopt and re-adopt, as well as to be replaced when new innovative empirical data arise de-structuring the older ones. In the theoretical framework of structural realism, as it has been mentioned already, two sub-approaches of protective belt derive:

a. Defensive realism. State actors maximize their security protecting status quo. States prioritize the need for balance of power, since they are afraid of mobilizing anti-hegemonic coalitions. At the same time, they cannot neglect expansion or even hegemonic inclinations, but only after rational perception of interstate

capabilities; and, finally, that their increasingly powerful partners in the present could become all the more formidable foes at some point in the future. State positionality, then, engenders a ‘relative gains problem’ for cooperation. That is, a state will decline to join, will leave, or will sharply limit its commitment to a cooperative arrangement if it believes that partners are achieving, or are likely to achieve, relatively greater gains. It will eschew cooperation even though participation in the arrangement was providing it, or would have provided it, with large absolute gains. Moreover, a state concerned about relative gains may decline to cooperate even if it is confident that partners will keep their commitments to a joint arrangement. Indeed, if a state believed that a proposed arrangement would provide all parties absolute gains, but would also generate gains favoring partners, then greater certainty that partners would adhere to the terms of the arrangement would only accentuate its relative gains concerns. Thus, a state worried about relative gains might respond to greater certainty that partners would keep their promises with a lower, rather than a higher, willingness to cooperate” (1988: 498).

⁸ John Mearsheimer mentions that: *“Any country that improves its position in the global balance of power does so at the expense of other states, which lose relative power. In this zero-sum world, it is difficult for a state to improve its prospects for survival without threatening the survival of other states. Of course, the threatened states then do whatever is necessary to ensure their survival, which, in turn, threatens other states, all of which leads to perpetual security competition” (2006: 75).*

distribution of power. Therefore, state actors care for their survival seeming unwilling to escalate and broaden security dilemmas at the expense of their real or potential opponents.

b. Offensive realism. State actors maximize their power perceiving that in this way they increase their security. The utmost strategic aim is the same and it is identified with achieving survival. However, according to offensive realists, states are not prudent and they get into a vicious circle of continuous power antagonisms. This is reasoned by the anarchic structure of the international system and the fact that states are uncertain about the intentions of the others. No actor can be sure for the other's intentions. Under this lens, “*tragedy*” in the title of Mearsheimer's work for the politics of Great Powers is best explained, since states seem insatiable to look for power fearing that a possible empowerment of the other could be disastrous regardless of an eventual transitory balance.

At this point, it is necessary to describe briefly the “*hardcore*” and the protective belt of the auxiliary hypotheses of systemic geopolitical analysis. In this way, a comparative analysis of geopolitical research programs will be implemented. The first foundational assumption, representing the epicenter of the “*hardcore*”, is that all the characteristics of the sub-spaces of a geographical complex are counted or they are just countable, since they derive from countable results. The second assumption refers to the existence, in the margins of the geographical case study, more than two poles coherent, homogeneous and i) self-determined in the same way towards their international environment, but also ii) hetero-determined homogeneously and identically towards their environment, defined by the international actors existing inside it. These last actors are characterized by their common systemic relation. The auxiliary hypotheses shaping the protective belt of the geopolitical research program are the following:

- The level of power is analyzed by four foundational pillars (Defense, Economy, Politics, Civilization / Information). These are defined by a number of geopolitical indicators to be counted or countable, found at the internal structures of poles representing the sub-systems of the geopolitically testing geographical complexes.
- The afore-mentioned poles represent foundational structural components of a continuously changing international system.
- The poles represent social wills or wills of the decision-makers characterizing the international behavior of the pole.
- These evolve as “*causative*” or “*objective*” notions of the Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Space, as well as the in-between-them combinations.
- It aims to conclusions of “*practicality*”; i.e. the development of a prediction exemplar for re-distribution of power tendencies. It is strictly negative to proceed into recommendations from a blinkered point of view as geostrategy does.

WALTZ'S ARGUMENTATION AND SYSTEMIC GEOPOLITICAL COUNTER-ARGUMENTATION

The demand of predictability in theory is accepted via its inclusion in the existence and the evolvement of relations of “*causality and interdependency*”. Furthermore, the demand of explanatory ability of “*good theory*” is accepted. These two facts make predictability the core characteristic of a “powerful” theory.

However, Waltz overrides it, something resulting to the so-called “*Waltzian self-negation*”. Waltz never tended to include structural realism into the Kuhnian metatheoretical framework. On the contrary, in metatheoretical terms, he is a “*critical Lakatosian*”. In the neo-positivist framework he has an unclear perception of what theory is, even from the Lakatosian point of view. Perhaps he defines it as an ad hoc explanatory mechanism, something revealing diversification.

In the case of the neorealist research program and in the framework of its “*positive heuristic*”, prediction for evolutions in international politics is a great challenge. The Waltzian neorealist program is characterized by a “*continuous adoption of auxiliary proposals for the dispensation from deficiencies through explanations*”, where according to Lakatos, the reason of existence of the changes of auxiliary hypotheses in the protective belt is the protection of the “*hardcore*”.

The field of the so-called Lakatosian frame of theories, as also of structural realism, keeps its own “*hardcore*” and evolves through similarly unclear epistemological notions of a normative “*nation-state*”, “*national interest*”, “*inter-state system*” and “*balance of power*”. As it has been mentioned already, Waltz emphasizes on two empirical issues: a) the explanation of what he defines as the foundational rule of International Relations; i.e. balance of power and b) the description of nonlinear results of bipolarity and multipolarity vis-à-vis systemic stability.⁹ The Waltzian neorealism is a theory strictly for international politics,

⁹ On the definition of “system” and aiming to clarify its function, Kenneth Waltz notes that: “*A system is defined as a set of interacting units. At one level a system consists of a structure, and the structure is the systems-level component that makes it possible to think of the units as forming a set as distinct from a mere collection. At another level, the system consists of interacting units [...] Definitions of structure must omit the*

which is not inclined to explain foreign policy or specific historical cases. This stance has been disputed by Colin Elman and John Mearsheimer.

On the contrary, systemic geopolitical analysis embodies important quantitative mathematical models and specific Lakatosian methodology of analysis. It owns specific phases: The title of the subject and its analysis, analysis of systemic spaces, synthesis and conclusions. It demands primarily multi-scientific approach since it encapsulates tools of quantification of the methodological approach derived from systemic theory. According to this, the notion of geographical determination is the common basis of reference for all the natural and human evolutions implemented in the margins of all the “*Special and Full Compositional Spaces*”.

Geopolitical analysis ought to research the special characteristics, the structure and the functionality of the four foundational pillars, composing and determining power and its re-distribution in the inner systemic framework of geographical complex, the influences and the changes that these pillars receive from the outer systemic environment of the same complex. A consequent aim is the creation of a model of prediction for re-distribution of power in the afore-mentioned complex without any blinkered or ethnocentric lenses.

IV. CONCLUSION

The core assumptions of structural realism emphasize on the definition and the description of the structural / foundational characteristics of the interstate reality. This fact profoundly limits to a large extent the research field, the adaptability and the explanatory capacity of this theory. On the contrary, systemic geopolitical analysis does not proceed into assumptions referring to the structure and the endogenous characteristics of the international system; its assumptions are related to the methodological part of research (e.g. demand for countable indicators and effects) as well as to the fact that at least two homogeneous poles should exist in each geographical case study.

Therefore, it could be concluded that systemic geopolitical analysis gives emphasis on the methodology, the principles and the countable shape of the effects, to which scientific research concludes, whereupon it is less dogmatic and presents less unilateral preconceptions and bias. At the same time, it offers a greater flexibility than what structural realism does.

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attributes and the relations of units. Only by doing so can one distinguish changes of structure from changes that take place within it” (1979: 40). Accordingly, Robert Powell highlights that: “*Given the central role that the possible use of force plays in structural realism, it would seem that any model of the international system envisioned in structural realism would have to satisfy two requirements: (1) the option of using force should be represented in the model; and (2) the model should allow for the possibility that the use of force might, whether intentionally or not, change the system [...] Repeated games can satisfy [the first] requirement. But repeated games cannot satisfy the second requirement, and this renders them poor models of the international system implicit in structural realism [...] using a repeated game to model the international system is to say that the system in 1939 was formally equivalent to the system that emerged in 1945*” (1993: 218-221).

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Ioannis Th. Mazis, et.al. “Systemic Analysis in Geopolitics and IR Theory”. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(1), 2020, pp. 36-41.