

Review of “Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond” (in Neorealism and Its Critics, Chapter 7)

Keohane’s article is a response to Waltz’s proposed theory of neorealism; Keohane simultaneously accepts basic tenets of the neorealist argument while rejecting what he calls “major inconsistencies” within the theory. Keohane believes that three aspects of neorealism create useful starting points for investigating international relations. Those concepts are: its interest in a system level theory focusing upon a set of interacting units (i.e. states, which are considered the most important actors in world politics) which show behavioral regularity and identity over time; the assumption that states act rationally, that is to say they have “consistent ordered preferences;” and the assumption that states seek power to affect other states.

However, Keohane argues that the concepts of states “maximizing power” and states creating a “balance of power” are in fact contradictory. He points out that “states concerned with self preservation do not seek to maximize their power when they are not in danger” (p. 174). Nations which seek to conquer other nations must temper their drive for universal domination, as such an incautious approach may “jeopardize their own autonomy.” Further, Waltz’s conception of neorealism does not allow for change (such as from a medieval to a modern state) and does not meet the rigorous standards for testing as Waltz himself delineated in chapter one. Keohane argues that “realism is particularly weak in accounting for change, especially where the sources of that change lie in the world political economy or in the domestic structure of states” (p. 159).

Keohane, arguing that he is not undertaking a “wrecking operation” (p.160), proposes a “multidimensional” synthesis of Waltz’s ideas and other approaches which will allow for change, focus on incomplete information flow within states, and look more closer at international institutions. In the end, he proposes a “modified structural research program” in which the following realist assumptions are invoked: 1) the principal actors in the world are states, but researchers will also focus upon nonstate actors; 2) the assumption of rationality is maintained, with a recognition of imperfect information; 3) “the assumption that states seek power, and calculate their interests accordingly, would be qualified severely.”