

Keohane, Chapter 1:

This chapter basically lays the foundation for the entire book, discussing first the importance of studying international politics, and then the import of the tradition of political realism. Keohane argues that this area must be studied both by practitioners (policy makers) and by theorists, calling upon what he describes as “the inescapability of theory in studying world politics”. First of all, he says, since neorealism is so widely accepted in policy circles, its study is important, and this is strengthened by the fact that “political realism is deeply embedded in Western political thought.” Additionally, the wide variation in international politics makes theory more problematic, necessitating further and deeper examination.

Keohane elucidates three key assumptions behind realism:

- 1) States are the key units of action
- 2) States seek power
- 3) States act rationally

He identifies these as dating as far back as Thucydides, as we discussed last week in class. Based on 17th century Europe, realism seemed like a logical model for international affairs. It was questioned more in England and the United States, where “there has been a greater tendency to envisage alternatives to power politics and to question the premises of political realism”. But World War II solidified the position of the realist paradigm in the United States, and the tradition of power politics gathered strength as the United States took on its role as arbiter of world affairs. The last remaining vestige of non-realist thinking is in what Keohane describes as the “catchall of national interest”.

Keohane criticizes Morgenthau’s (who he describes as the founder of realism) concept of the way states act, showing that it is based on the actions of individuals. Blaming behavioral traits for conflict, he argues, is a very tenuous argument. He discusses Morgenthau’s three main concepts: power, rationality, and the balance of power, concluding that he was most successful in the second of these in establishing the foundations for a strong theory.

Unlike Morgenthau and his followers, who emphasized the behavior of states in their theories, Waltz designed a theory which was systemic. It is to this theory which Keohane turns his attention. Waltz argues that political structures can be studied in terms of ordering principles, specification of function of differentiated parts, and the relationship between the units themselves. He argues that international systems have no ordering principles, and therefore we are not interested in the functions performed by individual units. Therefore, the focus of his theory is in the third principle: positional relations between states. Waltz posits that the anarchic nature of the international system, combined with the assumption of state rationality means that balances of power will be achieved. This argument, which Keohane believes is significant because it attempts to “systematize political realism into a rigorous, deductive systemic theory of international politics”, is what is known as neorealism.

Since the rest of the chapter is a summary of the chapters of the book, I have not discussed them here. But in general, this book is an attempt to explain Waltz’s theory as well as the challenges to it and criticisms of it.