

In Short

Schweller argues that neo-realists exhibit a bias towards thinking of states in the international system as preferring the status quo, which leads logically neither to the perception of a security threat nor to competitive behavior. Conflict, as well as the security dilemma, are driven by the misperception of state motives, and by the existence of states dissatisfied with their present territorial holdings. Schweller argues that empirically, we find many examples of revisionist states that seek to maximize absolute gains, and which drive the instability of the international system. Thus, Schweller concludes that in order for the competitive, self-help world upon which neorealists base their thinking to exist, there must be some degree of unit-level variation, which structural realism has yet to admit.

Central Question

What breeds competition in the international system?

Central Hypotheses

In a world of security-seeking states and no aggressors, the security dilemma does not arise. In the neo-realist picture, unit-level variations in the preferences for security versus power do not impact the stability of the international system. Competitive behavior in the international system can only be understood in a world where there are what Schweller refers to as revisionist states.

How he makes his argument

Realist thought has not always held the assumption that states are security-seekers. Classical realists, for example, assumed that states continually sought greater power, and were therefore prone towards expansion. Cultural hegemonists of the early nineteenth century argued that states embodied cultural ideas that they were bound to attempt to export, coercively if necessary. Competition among states breeds better forms of social organization. This brings us to Social Darwinism, wherein states compete for maximal control over economically useful resources, often outside of their territorial bounds. Only in the realism that emerged after World War II was the assumption that states were necessarily motivated by the pursuit of greater power relaxed. Postwar realists divided the world into status quo versus expansionist powers, and argued that stability in the international system depended upon the balance of power among revisionist and status quo states. These realists have been succeeded by structural realists (led by our man Waltz), who emphasize that anarchy drives states that seek to survive to self-help behavior, and that states are best served by relative gains. Waltz also asserts that the pursuit of power will only occur in the wake of assured survival, or security. Schweller asserts that security is inherently variable-sum, rather than zero-sum, which means that it is not subject to the logic of relative gains. This means, according to Schweller, that it is not appropriate to characterize the security dilemma as a Prisoners' Dilemma, but rather as a Stag Hunt. Disputes among states will most likely occur as to the point of coordination, rather on coordination itself.

Schweller questions Waltz's assertion that states value what they already have more than what they want. He argues that there are many states who exhibit revisionist tendencies, and that these states are the ones that inspire balancing behavior. He proceeds to examine the concept of relative gains, asserting that relative gains analysis is incomplete insofar as it is limited to two players and does not take into account the possibility of outside pivots. Moreover, Schweller believes that the term has often been confused with 'unequal gains' and 'disproportionate gains,' when analysis does not take the distribution of power among states into adequate account. Next, Schweller contends that gains through coordination are neither static nor easily identified, which makes analysis of state interactions in these terms even more difficult. Finally, Schweller uses the example of the Nazi-Soviet pact to demonstrate how revisionist states often enact deals that ignore relative gains in favor of absolute gains.

Schweller ends his paper with a discussion of Waltz and the security dilemma, arguing that it is the uncertainty over state intentions that drives the security dilemma in Waltz, not the structure of the international system. In other words, misperception, not some inherent characteristic of interstate interactions, drives the possibility of conflict among states. This, according to Schweller, is contrary to the basic logic of neorealism (à la Waltz). Furthermore, the logic of the security dilemma does not make clear why a world of security-seeking states would require armaments—weapons buildups must logically occur in the face of a revisionist state. Schweller dismisses deterrence models as an explanation, claiming again that they do not fit in a world of "imagined" conflict where there is no fundamental incompatibility among state interests. He does concede that second image arguments could explain the pursuit of weaponry, but points out that they lie outside of structural realism. Essentially, Schweller concludes that the assumptions of structural realism do not logically imply competition, nor do they logically lead to spiraling behavior as a consequence of the security dilemma. The logic of competition and the security dilemma both require more specific interpretations about the preferences and perceptions of the state.