



Systemic Theories of International Politics

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Introduction

Systemic theory in international relations is an attempt to capture the relationship between the units of the international system (generally, the states) and the elements of the structure of the international system most relevant to their behavior. The goal is to capture the essence of international relations in the same simple and powerful manner that the heliocentric Copernican model captured the essence of astronomy. In practice, largely due to the complexity of the international system, systemic theory has been elusive in modern international relations. While systemic theorizing in international relations, in the form of balance-of-power theory, is centuries old, the theoretical complexities and empirical challenges of the scientific study of international systems are exceptionally daunting. Accordingly, very few attempts at a logically coherent, empirically supported systemic theory have been made, and far fewer are seen as unproblematic. Certainly no single model has achieved the degree of consensus that the Copernican model has in astronomy. At the same time, systemic theorizing is influenced to a much-larger degree than other forms of theorizing by systemic traditions in other disciplines—sociology, economics, and history, to name just a few. Because the origins, examples, and tests of systemic theories in international relations are so diverse and fragmented, this article will be broader than it is deep—an attempt to survey the landscape rather than to mine any one part of it comprehensively.

Core Readings

Systemic theories are among the most influential and durable theories in the international-relations canon, largely because they seek to capture the most comprehensive understanding of their subject matter possible. Something substantial is lost, scholars in this tradition argue, by theorizing without taking into effect the behavior of all the major actors in the system—just as an understanding of astronomy built up from many partial theories of the behavior of individual planets would be much less intellectually satisfying and useful than the current, coherent systemic explanation. This comprehensive understanding of international relations is the great promise of systemic international-relations theory, and the authors of each of these works seek to realize it in different ways. Kaplan 1957, Wendt 1999, and Braumoeller 2012 focus most directly on the fundamental nature of the agent-structure relationship while remaining relatively agnostic about the forces that drive it, while Waltz 1979, Organski and Kugler 1980, Gilpin 1981, and Modelski 1987 more explicitly theorize about the drivers of state behavior. At the same time, Moravcsik 1997 takes the systemic realists among the latter group of authors to task for their one-dimensional view of state preferences.

Braumoeller, Bear F. *The Great Powers and the International System: Systemic Theory in Empirical Perspective*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations 123. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

This book lays out a fully systemic theory—one in which agents have an impact on structure and vice versa—that connects domestic theories of the state, which focus on the preferences of leaders and constituencies, to the structure of the international system. The book is also noteworthy for its formal mathematical logic and for the extensive evaluation of the theory it proposes, using both statistical methods and detailed historical case studies.

Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

This book focuses on the relationship among relative power, prestige, and conflict—which generally emerges between the hegemon and the second-most-powerful state. Often overlooked, but one of the smartest and most nuanced systemic works in the realist school.

Kaplan, Morton A. *System and Process in International Politics*. New York: John Wiley, 1957.

A very early attempt at systemic international-relations theory, this work describes six ideal-typical international systems and the main characteristics of the actors that might inhabit them, before deriving conclusions about the likely behaviors of those systems.

Modelski, George. *Long Cycles in World Politics*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987.

Argues that long cycles, corresponding to long-term shifts in economic and social activity, are responsible for the cyclical pattern of hegemonic war in the modern world.

Moravcsik, Andrew. “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics.” *International Organization* 51.4 (1997): 513–553.

Without calling it a systemic theory per se, Moravcsik lays the intellectual groundwork for a liberal theory of international politics—one that incorporates not just the capabilities of actors but their preferences as well.

Organski, A. F. K., and Jacek Kugler. *The War Ledger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

A book that describes Organski’s “power transition theory,” a minimally systemic theory that predicts the timing of hegemonic wars on the basis of the relative capabilities of the two most powerful states in the system.

Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. New York: Random House, 1979.

Soon after its publication, this book became the bible of systemic theorizing in international relations. In contrast to earlier “human-nature” realism, it emphasized the importance of the structure of the international system and derived a range of (arguably) testable hypotheses from the realist micromotives of states—to wit, their interests described in terms of power. Reprinted as recently as 2010 (Long Grove, IL: Waveland).

Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

A seminal work in constructivist international relations and international relations in general, this book breaks away from the materialist mainstream of international-relations theorizing to establish a cultural theory of international politics. Building on his earlier claim that “anarchy is what states make of it” (p. 6), Wendt explores the implications for international relations of a range of different “cultures of anarchy.”

Emergence as a Field of Study

Examining systemic research traditions in other disciplines sheds considerable light on the nature of systemic theory in international relations. At the same time, some of the earliest theorists in our own discipline worked very self-consciously to define their field of study and to situate systemic theorizing within it

Origins from Other Disciplines

Many disciplines in the social sciences have some form of systemic theorizing—that is, a tradition of studying the origins and impact of the milieu within which the objects of study interact. While these have largely evolved separately—with the notable exception of general systems theory, which attempted briefly to subsume them all—each has borrowed liberally from the others at times.

Historical Origins

If there is one systemic theory that deserves pride of place in international relations, balance-of-power theory is it. And it is impossible to discuss balance-of-power theory without acknowledging the contributions of many historians who developed, refined, and in some cases refuted it. Taylor 1954 and Gulick 1955 argue from a historical point of view that balances of power preserved the peace, while Rosecrance 1963 and Aron 1966 argue for a richer conceptualization of balancing behavior. Schroeder 1994 is the definitive statement of the contrary point of view—namely, that balance-of-power systems produce war rather than peace and that 19th-century Europe was peaceful because it discarded the idea of the balance of power rather than embracing it.

Aron, Raymond. *Peace & War: A Theory of International Relations*. New York: Praeger, 1966.

In a relatively brief section on international systems, Aron distinguishes usefully between homogeneous and heterogeneous systems, the former being those in which “states belong to the same type [and] obey the same conception of policy” (p. 100). Reprinted as recently as 2009 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction).

Gulick, Edward Vose. *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*. New York: Norton, 1955.

Gulick's classic work derives a theory of the goals and means of the balance of power and applies it to a history of the Vienna period following the Napoleonic Wars. Reprinted as recently as 1982 (Westport, CT: Greenwood).

Rosecrance, Richard N. *Action and Reaction in World Politics: International Systems in Perspective*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1963.

A blend of history and theory, this book attempts to derive the workings of international systems from an examination of nine different historical periods. Rosecrance differentiates systems by the number and configuration of the major states (units) and the intensity of conflict among them; in the context of those different systems, he also explores the impact of domestic, or unit-level, attributes such as ideology and regime stability. Reprinted as recently as 1977 (Westport, CT: Greenwood).

Schroeder, Paul W. *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848*. Oxford History of Modern Europe. Oxford: Clarendon, 1994.

Schroeder, a historian, has produced a detailed and comprehensive account of the eighty-five years surrounding the Napoleonic Wars, which he argues constituted a major turning point in international history. Contra A. J. P. Taylor and the balance-of-power theorists, Schroeder makes balance-of-power politics out to be the source of endless fighting and argues that the postwar Concert system maintained peace by explicitly abandoning it.

Taylor, A. J. P. *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918*. Oxford History of Modern Europe. New York: Oxford University Press, 1954.

This iconic history of the latter half of the 19th century also serves as a definitive statement of the importance of the balance of power among the Great Powers for the maintenance of peace. Reprinted as recently as 2007 (Oxford: Clarendon).

Sociological Origins

Of the social sciences listed here, perhaps none is as natural a fit for systemic theorizing as sociology, a discipline for which the situation of individuals within a social context is fundamental. Giddens 1984, Bull 1977, and Wight 2006 all are explorations of the fundamental nature of the international system from a social or intersubjective perspective; Bull and Watson 1984, Spruyt 1994, and Buzan and Lawson 2015 are outstanding explorations of the historical origins of that system. Deutsch 1968 contributed the idea of security communities to the sociological study of international systems, where it has been most thoroughly developed and explored in Adler and Barnett 1998. While historical sociology left its mark on the work of political scientists with some regularity, it found its most compelling and well-known statement in Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* (Wendt 1999, cited under Core Readings).

Adler, Emanuel, and Michael N. Barnett, eds. *Security Communities*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations 62. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

A diverse set of essays by sociologists and political scientists, exploring the importance of international communities for building and consolidating peace throughout the international system.

Bull, Hedley. *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*. 3d ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

Positioned between realists and constructivists, Bull rejected both fully anarchical and fully hierarchical portrayals of international relations, opting instead to explore the concept of the international system as an "anarchical society," for which many modern constructivists acknowledge a considerable debt. Fourth edition published in 2012.

Bull, Hedley, and Adam Watson, eds. *The Expansion of International Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

A seminal text in the European school of international relations, this volume traces the roots of international society to its origins in European history. Reprinted as recently as 2015.

Buzan, Barry, and George Lawson. *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations 135. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Buzan and Lawson explore the oft-neglected 19th century and the way in which it gave rise to modernity, which in turn underpins systemic theory.

Deutsch, Karl W. *The Analysis of International Relations*. Prentice-Hall Foundations of Modern Political Science. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968.

Succinct yet conceptually rich, Deutsch's book is best known for its seminal discussion of different kinds of security communities and how they might be achieved.

Giddens, Anthony. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Describes structuration theory, an approach that argues that structures (understood as rules and resources) make social action possible while at the same time being constituted or created by it. Foundational for many constructivists. Reprinted as recently as 2013 (Cambridge, UK: Polity).

Spruyt, Hendrik. *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change*. Princeton Studies in International History and Politics. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.

A brilliant exploration, not of systemic theory, but of a prior question: the evolution of the system itself. Spruyt explores the various modes of human organization throughout history and documents the evolution and dominance of the sovereign territorial state.

Wight, Colin. *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations 101. New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

An examination of agency and structure in international relations and social theory, with a focus on integration of the two at the level of ontology.

Economic Origins

To economists, the system of interest in systemic theorizing is typically a national or global economy. In order to help understand its functioning, economists built immense and incredibly complex macroeconomic models. Bodkin, et al. 1991 constitutes a useful overview of the development of the field. Meadows, et al. 1972 is one of the most famous examples of this approach: its simulation of exponential population and economic growth in the context of finite resources predicted catastrophic systemic failure if then-current policies were not significantly altered. Cole, et al. 1973 is a very useful critique of the model in Meadows, et al. 1972, demonstrating the frailty of its results. As the field has developed, macroeconomic models have displayed a tendency to metastasize to include thousands or even tens of thousands of variables; Bankes 1993 is a useful corrective, one that offers and defends an empirically more modest approach. Despite Lucas 1976, which prompted a move away from macroeconomic modeling, some of these models are still in use today, especially in forecasting applications.

Bankes, Steve. "Exploratory Modeling for Policy Analysis." *Operations Research* 41.3 (1993): 435–449.

This out-of-the-way article is a very smart and useful perspective on modeling, and a useful corrective to the fragile thousands-of-variables approach of the macroeconomic-modeling school.

Bodkin, Ronald G., Lawrence R. Klein, and Kanta Marwah. *A History of Macroeconometric Model-Building*. Brookfield, VT: Edward Elgar, 1991.

This collection is a useful primer on macroeconomic modeling, economists' equivalent of systemic theory.

Cole, H. S. D., Christopher Freeman, Marie Jahoda, and K. L. R. Pavitt, eds. *Models of Doom: A Critique of The Limits of Growth*. New York: Universe, 1973.

The authors of this book dissect the model at the heart of *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows, et al. 1972) and demonstrate that very small changes in its assumptions can produce significantly different results. Together with *Limits*, an excellent case study in the challenges of coming to conclusions about complex systems.

Lucas, Robert E., Jr. "Econometric Policy Evaluation: A Critique." *Carnegie-Rochester Conference Series on Public Policy* 1 (1976): 19–46.

A classic critique of large-scale econometric modeling that focuses on its inability to predict well solely on the basis of relationships observed in historical data, given that those relationships could easily change and in fact are likely to do so as an economy evolves over time.

Meadows, Donella H., Dennis L. Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and William W. Behrens III. *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*. Potomac Associates Books. New York: Universe, 1972.

One of the most famous books of the 1970s, this slim volume used computer simulation to produce dire predictions about the coming collapse of the world economy due to environmental stresses and resource depletion. Republished as *The Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update* as recently as 2010 (London: Earthscan).

Origins in Political Geography

The contributions of political geographers are also worth noting because of their acute appreciation of the role of space. Nierop 1994 is a useful introduction to the field in the context of regional subsystems.

Nierop, Tom. *Systems and Regions in Global Politics: An Empirical Study of Diplomacy, International Organization, and Trade, 1950–1991*. Bellhaven Studies in Political Geography. New York: John Wiley, 1994.

This book examines the question of how the interactions of states within regional subsystems drive the political structures and functions of the international system.

General Systems Theory

An impressive attempt to bring a wide range of disciplines together under the systemic banner, general systems theory soon collapsed under the weight of its own ambition. Although it never gained the analytic traction that its originators hoped it would, it remains a fascinating look at how different disciplines think of systemic theory and what they do (and don't) have in common. Bertalanffy 1969 is the general system theorist's bible—the definitive statement of the movement's aims and philosophy. Buckley 1968 and Gillespie and Zinnes 1977 contain many outstanding examples of systems theory as applied to the behavioral sciences in general and to international relations specifically. Weltman 1973, while colorful at times, contains a thoughtful critique of general systems theory in the context of international relations.

Bertalanffy, Ludwig von. *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications*. Rev. ed. New York: George Braziller, 1969.

Foreshadowing E. O. Wilson's book *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, Bertalanffy argued that the sciences in different fields could be unified, but under the general rubric of systems theory. The book reflected the substantial enthusiasm for systemic theories across disciplines at the time. Reprinted as recently as 2015.

Buckley, Walter, ed. *Modern Systems Research for the Behavioral Scientist: A Sourcebook*. Chicago: Aldine, 1968.

An intellectual blunderbuss of a book, this edited volume contains short essays by contemporary luminaries on an incredible array of topics—from general systems theory to cybernetics to entropy—that touch on the behavior of human systems.

Gillespie, John V., and Dina A. Zinnes, eds. *Mathematical Systems in International Relations Research*. Praeger Special Studies in International Politics and Government. New York: Praeger, 1977.

Written well before mathematics was common in political science, this thick collection represents some of the earliest forays by international-relations scholars into mathematical systems research.

Weltman, John J. *Systems Theory in International Relations: A Study in Metaphoric Hypertrophy*. Lexington, MA: Heath, 1973.

While hyperbolic at times, Weltman usefully argues that systems theory, while conceptually rich, suffers from an unconscionable degree of conceptual and logical looseness. At best, he concludes, it can be seen as “a sort of bank of ideas and novel interpretations” that “does not serve to verify hypotheses, but merely to provide them” (p. 79).

Pre-theoretical Background

In the 1950s and 1960s, scholars spent a considerable amount of time reflecting, not on specific theories, but rather on ontology—that is, on the “stuff” of which the international world consisted. Sprout and Sprout 1956 explores the problem of situating actors within their environment. Haas 1953 asks what, precisely, the balance of power is and how it should be understood, while Deutsch and Singer 1964 attempts to connect it theoretically to international stability. Easton 1965 represents an early attempt to draw some of these insights together into a comprehensive understanding of the international system, while Eulau 1996 is a retrospective evaluation of the discipline’s early grapplings with these sorts of “micro-macro” issues. Questions such as these have experienced a renaissance in the wake of the Cold War, when international-relations scholars again focused on how to understand the new world that they faced: Jervis 1997 is one of the more prominent post–Cold War works in the systemic-ontological vein.

Deutsch, Karl W., and J. David Singer. “Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability.” *World Politics* 16.3 (1964): 390–406.

A landmark piece that explores the relationship between the number of interacting units and the amount of attention that could be devoted to each, as well as the implications for bipolar and multipolar systems.

Easton, David. *A Framework for Political Analysis*. Prentice-Hall Contemporary Political Theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965.

A classic early attempt to detail the requirements of a systemic analysis of politics, Easton’s book describes international political, ecological, and social systems and explores how inputs from those systems drove outputs from the domestic political system.

Eulau, Heinz. *Micro-Macro Dilemmas in Political Science: Personal Pathways through Complexity*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.

A prominent scholar’s musings on the state of his discipline and the challenges of integrating micro- and macro-level theory. A ramble through a sprawling intellectual landscape that rewards those who come along.

Haas, Ernst B. “The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda?” *World Politics* 5.4 (1953): 442–477.

Haas’s thorough and penetrating examination of the balance of power raises a wide range of pertinent questions for scholars of international relations. Is a balance static or dynamic? Does it refer to equilibrium or preponderance? Is it a description or a strategy? In answering such questions, one is forced to refine one’s own understanding of systemic theory.

Jervis, Robert. *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

An extended qualitative and historical discussion of the unanticipated outcomes that might be expected in the international realm, given the surprising findings of complex systems theory.

Sprout, Harold, and Margaret Sprout. *Man-Milieu Relationship Hypotheses in the Context of International Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1956.

A pioneering exploration of the relationship between foreign and military policies, on the one hand, and “something variously called the arena, stage, setting, environment, or milieu” (p. 3), on the other. Explores possibilities ranging from “environmental determinism” to “possibilism.”

The Agent-Structure Debate

The problem of systemic theorizing is often construed as the problem of agents and structures: How do we deal with the fact that agents both affect and are affected by the structures within which they are situated? Is there a way to account for their joint endogeneity in a theoretically principled manner, or is it possible to envision agency and structure in such a way that the impact of each on the other can be readily accounted for?

Nature of the Problem

Scholars working in the sociological tradition have been most acutely aware of the agent-structure dilemma and have offered useful critiques of international-relations theories that rely too heavily on one or the other. Wendt 1987 focuses on the fundamental nature of the problem, while Dessler 1989 explores the challenges inherent in resolving it.

Dessler, David. “What’s at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?” *International Organization* 43.3 (1989): 441–473.

Dessler explores the importance of the agent-structure problem, or the difficulty of deriving theories that account both for agency (the fact that human activity is the only cause of outcomes in the social world) and structure (the fact that human activity occurs within concrete historical circumstances that constrain and shape the possibilities for action).

Wendt, Alexander E. “The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory.” *International Organization* 41.3 (1987): 335–370.

Wendt argues that international-relations theory generally emphasizes either structure or agency, to its considerable detriment, and he shows that structuration theory can meet the challenge of incorporating both into an analysis of international systems.

The Role of Structure

Much of what passes for systemic international-relations theory is in fact structural, in that it deals with the impact of structure on agents without focusing on the impact of agents on structures. While such work constitutes only one half of a fully systemic theory, it is nevertheless extremely illuminating, given that structural causes of state behavior have historically been a focus of major attention in international-relations scholarship.

The Role of Anarchy

Pride of place among structural characteristics in international-relations theory clearly goes to anarchy, especially following the publication of Waltz 1979. Debates about the impact of anarchy on state behavior dominated the international-relations literature of the 1980s and early 1990s and had a lasting impact on the discipline. Keohane 1984 and Axelrod 1984 are seminal discussions of the ways in which international regimes and the “shadow of the future,” respectively, can induce cooperation even under anarchy; Oye 1986 offers additional perspectives, both pro and con. Grieco 1988 responds by questioning the absolute-gains assumptions of so-called

neoliberal institutionalists such as Robert Keohane and Robert Axelrod; Snidal 1991 demonstrates that Joseph Grieco's criticism precludes cooperation only under a very narrow range of circumstances. Lake 1996 is an outstanding exploration of the various organizational principles that are possible among states, while Wendt 1992 offers an even more radical critique—that the impact of international anarchy depends crucially on the actors' understandings of it.

Axelrod, Robert. *The Evolution of Cooperation*. New York: Basic Books, 1984.

This book, one of the most widely read in the social sciences, argues that cooperation under anarchy is possible because actors' long-term interest in future cooperation, or the “shadow of the future,” can outweigh the short-term incentives that push them toward conflict.

Grieco, Joseph M. “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism.” *International Organization* 42.3 (1988): 485–507.

Grieco responds to neoliberal institutionalist critiques of neorealism by arguing that, under anarchy, states must focus on relative rather than absolute gains, a fact that dramatically undermines the prospects for cooperation.

Keohane, Robert O. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Keohane's work focuses specifically on the problem of continued international cooperation in the wake of perceived American decline in the 1980s, and he argues, contra Waltz, that international regimes and institutions can sustain cooperation in the absence of a hegemon, or dominant state.

Lake, David A. “Anarchy, Hierarchy, and the Variety of International Relations.” *International Organization* 50.1 (1996): 1–33.

Begins with the metaphor of the state as a firm that produces security; argues that when states enter into associations with other states to do so, they can choose a variety of relationships, from anarchic alliance to hierarchical empire.

Oye, Kenneth A., ed. *Cooperation under Anarchy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Originally a symposium in the journal *World Politics*, this edited volume comprises a comprehensive set of answers to the question of how states achieve cooperation under anarchy both in economic and security affairs.

Snidal, Duncan. “Relative Gains and the Pattern of International Cooperation.” *American Political Science Review* 85.3 (1991): 701–726.

Snidal contributes to the relative- versus absolute-gains debate by exploring the impact of changing states' payoffs in a game-theoretic setting to reflect different weights on relative versus absolute gains. He finds that while the prospects for cooperation do dwindle as states place greater emphasis on relative gains, cooperation is precluded only in a world in which absolute gains are entirely irrelevant.

Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. New York: Random House, 1979.

This work, the foundation of the school of thought that has come to be known as neorealism, remains the most influential exploration of the role and importance of anarchy in international relations, which limits cooperation by introducing the ever-present threat of violence, magnifying the importance of uncertainty about the future actions of other states and generating a need for states to maintain the ability to help themselves rather than to rely on others.

Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 46.2 (1992): 391–425.

Wendt argues that the impact of anarchy in international relations depends heavily on state interests and identity, which he argues are socially constructed rather than determined by purely material factors.

Neoclassical Realism

In Gideon Rose's felicitous words, "neoclassical realists" both see the value of theorizing about the impact of anarchy on state behavior and recognize its inherent indeterminacy. For that reason, they focus on augmenting realism with theory from different levels of analysis in an attempt to explain outcomes in international relations. Because classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan did much the same thing, this branch of scholarship seeks to go "back to the future" to help resolve some of the fundamental problems of neorealism. Christensen 1997, Schweller 1998, and Wohlforth 1993 are outstanding examples of the neoclassical-realist school, while Rose 1998 offers a summary and characterization of neoclassical realism more generally.

Christensen, Thomas J. *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958*. Princeton Studies in International History and Politics. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Christensen links systemic pressures, domestic politics, and ideology to explain the hostility of the United States and China during the early Cold War.

Rose, Gideon. "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy." *World Politics* 51.1 (1998): 144–172.

In this book review, Rose coins a new term, neoclassical realism, to denote scholars who seek to connect Kenneth Waltz's spare theory of international politics to unit-level theories in order to explain the foreign policies of individual states—a goal that Waltz himself explicitly eschews.

Schweller, Randall L. *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Schweller's penetrating exploration of the origins of the Second World War integrates the structure of the international system, which he argues was tripolar rather than multipolar, and the interests of states into a broader "balance-of-interests" theory.

Wohlforth, William Curti. *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War*. Cornell Studies in Security Affairs. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Wohlforth's study of the end of the Cold War filters the material reality of the distribution of capabilities in the international system through the perceptual lenses of the actors involved.

Formal Theoretical Treatments

In addition to the purely verbal theories of Kenneth Waltz, A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, Robert Gilpin, and Alexander Wendt, systemic theory has been formalized in a variety of different ways in an attempt to understand its implications and to generate testable hypotheses.

Agent-Based Models

Some of the earliest formal work on international systems took the form of agent-based modeling. Because agent-based models are well designed to capture both agents and the contexts within which they interact, this methodology is a natural fit for systemic theorizing. Although they have never been especially common or mainstream, agent-based simulations of international systems remain some of the most interesting theoretical work available on the subject. Bremer 1977 and Bremer and Mihalka 1977 are outstanding early examples of the promise of agent-based modeling in international relations, and Cederman 1997 offers a compelling application of agent-based modeling both to analyze the process of state formation and to critique the more offensive variants of political realism. Pepinsky 2005 is an insightful review of other applications in the field.

Bremer, Stuart A. *Simulated Worlds: A Computer Model of National Decision-Making*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977.

Bremer's book is a highly innovative and ambitious work that paired a simulated international system (SIPER) with an attempt to assess the accuracy of its conclusions.

Bremer, Stuart, and Michael Mihalka. "Machiavelli in Machina: Or Politics among Hexagons." In *Problems of World Modeling: Political and Social Implications*. Edited by Karl W. Deutsch, Bruno Fritsch, Helio Jaguaribe, and Andrei S. Markovits, 303–337. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1977.

An outstanding discussion of the promise and challenges of computational systems modeling.

Cederman, Lars-Erik. *Emergent Actors in World Politics: How States and Nations Develop and Dissolve*. Princeton Studies in Complexity. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Organized around a systemic, agent-based model, this masterly book examines the issue of how systems evolve to be bipolar or multipolar in the first place, both in balance-of-power systems and in the age of nationalism.

Pepinsky, Thomas B. "From Agents to Outcomes: Simulation in International Relations." *European Journal of International Relations* 11.3 (2005): 367–394.

A thoughtful review of computational models of complex adaptive systems, highlighting their heretofore-unexamined epistemological and ontological underpinnings and offering guidance for future development.

Dynamic Models

In a similar vein, scholars have occasionally used systems of differential equations to model the behavior of systems of states. Such systems are especially good at capturing the dynamic interplay among the actors in the international system. Although they are sometimes criticized for their microfoundational ambiguity, they are flexible enough to incorporate a wide range of theoretical assumptions about actors' motivations. While many if not most applications of dynamic models in international relations capture the behavior of pairs of states, Zinnes and Muncaster 1988 is an exemplary application of dynamic modeling to the international system as a whole.

Zinnes, Dina A., and Robert G. Muncaster. "The War Propensity of International Systems." *Synthese* 76.2 (1988): 307–331.

A dynamic model, based on a system of differential equations, that captures the behavior of an international system whose structure is defined in terms of the relative satisfaction of the actors. A good early example of systems theory applied to international relations.

Graph/Network Theory Perspectives

Graph theory was an early precursor to network theory. Both are well suited to comprehending the agent-structure interplay of the networks that they model. At this point, however, there are very few examples of work that captures qualitative systemic theory in international relations in graph-theoretic or network-theoretic form. Harary 1972 provides theoretical background on graph theory, while Harary 1961 represents an instructive application. Hafner-Burton, et al. 2009 evaluates network theory in the context of international relations, while Maoz 2011 is an outstanding example of how network theory can be applied to the international system as a whole.

Hafner-Burton, Emilie M., Miles Kahler, and Alexander H. Montgomery. "Network Analysis for International Relations." *International Organization* 63.3 (2009): 559–592.

This thoughtful agenda-setting piece explores both the promises and the shortcomings of network analysis in international relations and lays out an agenda for future research.

Harary, Frank. "A Structural Analysis of the Situation in the Middle East." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 5.2 (1961): 167–178.

An early application of graph theory to explain the dynamics of politics in the Middle East.

Harary, Frank. *Graph Theory*. Addison-Wesley Series in Mathematics. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1972.

A primer on graph theory. Originally published in 1953 under the title *Graph Theory as a Mathematical Model in Social Science* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan), coauthored by Harary and Robert Z. Norman; reprinted as recently as 2015 (Cambridge, MA: Perseus).

Maoz, Zeev. *Networks of Nations: The Evolution, Structure, and Impact of International Networks, 1816–2001*. Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences 32. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

In this pathbreaking application of network theory to international relations, Maoz argues that states react to threats by forming security ties, which in turn form the structure of the international system within which states must compete for security.

Rational-Choice Perspectives

Rational-choice theory is in some ways not well designed for systemic applications: the challenges of calculating optimal responses to other actors' behavior increase dramatically as the number of actors increases, and in the absence of fairly drastic and limiting assumptions it can be challenging to derive predictions. Nevertheless, some game theorists have done so, and their work rewards careful study. Wagner 1986 explores the meaning and implications of balance-of-power theory for international stability, while Niou, et al. 1989 derives the implications of balance-of-power theory for a wider range of state behavior.

Niou, Emerson M. S., Peter C. Ordeshook, and Gregory F. Rose. *The Balance of Power: Stability in International Systems*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

An unusual application of cooperative game theory focused on deriving the implications of balances of power for alliance formation, systemic stability, and war.

Wagner, R. Harrison. "The Theory of Games and the Balance of Power." *World Politics* 38.4 (1986): 546–576.

Wagner uses noncooperative game theory to explore the conclusions of balance-of-power theory. His findings—that stability is

enhanced by conflicts of interest, that inequality rather than equality of power leads to stability, and that tripolar systems are the most stable—directly contradict much of the historical and theoretical literature on the subject.

Empirical Analysis

By just about any criteria, comprehensive empirical tests of fully systemic theories are extraordinarily rare. The endogeneity inherent to the agent-structure relationship creates profound problems for inference, and the timeframes over which interactions take place in international systems create serious problems for qualitative and quantitative analysts alike.

Partial Tests of Systemic Theories

Some of the most interesting partial tests of systemic theories either explore the dynamics of interaction within a subset of states over time or focus on a small number of historical cases to achieve a more detailed understanding of the workings of the system more generally. Such studies often strike an excellent balance between richness and parsimony.

Models of Systemic Dynamics

Understanding the dynamics of international interaction—in particular, the dynamics of state behavior in the context of alliances—by using formal methods is one of the most complex and challenging problems in international relations. While a small and currently little-known literature took it up in the 1970s, the more sophisticated tools of network analysis have made it an interesting theoretical target for early-21st-century scholars. Healy and Stein 1973, Hart 1974, and McDonald and Rosecrance 1985 represent highly original combinations of very early analysis of international-events data analysis with graph theory. Cranmer, et al. 2012 offers a highly original exploration of the evolution of networks of international alliances as a function of the structure not of the international system per se, but of the alliance network itself.

Cranmer, Skyler J., Bruce A. Desmarais, and Justin H. Kirkland. “Toward a Network Theory of Alliance Formation.” *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations* 38.3 (2012): 295–324.

Cranmer and coauthors propose a network-based theory of alliance formation in which the evolution of the alliance network over time is largely determined by its structure.

Hart, Jeffrey. “Symmetry and Polarization in the European International System, 1870–1879: A Methodological Study.” *Journal of Peace Research* 11.3 (1974): 229–244.

Using an approach very similar to that in Healy and Stein 1973, Hart assesses whether nations reciprocate cooperative and conflictual actions and whether there is a net tendency toward polarization in the system in the 1870s. The author concludes that nations reciprocate both cooperative and conflictual acts and that there is a general tendency toward polarization into two blocs.

Healy, Brian, and Arthur Stein. “The Balance of Power in International History: Theory and Reality.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 17.1 (1973): 33–61.

This article derives hypotheses from some early systemic theories of international politics and carries out straightforward empirical tests to assess them in the context of the early Bismarckian period (1870–1881). While the authors' findings contradict many of the specific claims of balance-of-power theory, they nevertheless support the general claim that the system tends toward balance (in the sense of consistency of alignments).

McDonald, H. Brooke, and Richard Rosecrance. "Alliance and Structural Balance in the International System: A Reinterpretation." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 29.1 (1985): 57–82.

This article extends Healy and Stein 1973 by incorporating additional data from the 1880s. In so doing, it calls into question Healy and Stein's conclusion that there is a net tendency toward balance in the international system.

Case Studies

Another approach to unearthing and understanding the processes by which systemic theories work involves detailed historical case work. While such research typically sacrifices breadth for depth, it provides unparalleled detail and outstanding food for thought. Very often, as with the work in Schweller 1998 and Hopf 1991, a focus on systemic dynamics can turn up novel interpretations of important historical events or provide valuable empirical perspective on systemic theory. In other work, such as Wohlforth, et al. 2007, the examination of large numbers of historical events can help mitigate the depth-breadth trade-off inherent in the methodology.

Hopf, Ted. "Polarity, the Offense-Defense Balance, and War." *American Political Science Review* 85.2 (1991): 475–493.

Hopf points out that Kenneth Waltz's argument that bipolar systems are inherently more stable than multipolar ones is supported by observation of a very small number of systems. He explores another historical period that experiences both bipolarity and multipolarity—Europe from 1495 to 1559—and concludes that changes in polarity cannot account for changes in stability.

Schweller, Randall L. *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Schweller uses his systemic "balance-of-interests" theory to explore and explain the origins of the Second World War.

Wohlforth, William C., Richard Little, Stuart J. Kaufman, et al. "Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History." *European Journal of International Relations* 13.2 (2007): 155–185.

An extremely ambitious attempt to test balance-of-power theory systematically by examining eight new case studies that span two thousand years.

Tests of Structural and Systemic Theories

Structural theories are those in which the structure of the international system has an impact on the agents, but the behavior of the agents is irrelevant to the structure. Systemic theories are those in which agents have an impact on structures and vice versa. While neither is especially common, the latter are far rarer than the former.

Tests of Structural Theories

The focus of international-relations scholars on the structure of the international system as a primary cause of state behavior has inspired a fair number of empirical tests. Minimally structural theories incorporate some aspect of the international system—typically, the balance of material capabilities—as one variable among many in a multivariate analysis. Structural theories such as the three included in this subsection emphasize the importance of structure and more closely follow the logic of structural theory. Organski and Kugler 1980 represents one of the earliest attempts at a statistical test of a structural theory, while Thompson 1986 tests two such theories against one another. More recently, Debs and Monteiro 2014 offers more-sophisticated theorizing and testing of A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler's power transition argument.

Debs, Alexandre, and Nuno P. Monteiro. "Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War." *International Organization* 68.1 (2014): 1–31.

Debs and Monteiro point out that the rapid shifts in relative capabilities that precede systemic conflict in power transition theory arise largely from endogenous military investments, and they argue that when those investment decisions are transparent, peace prevails.

Organski, A. F. K., and Jacek Kugler. *The War Ledger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Using nothing but cross-tabulations and relatively coarse data, Organski and Kugler demonstrate that their power transition theory is a much more compelling explanation for systemic war than balance-of-power theory, which had held sway for centuries.

Thompson, William R. "Polarity, the Long Cycle, and Global Power Warfare." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 30.4 (1986): 587–615.

Thompson tests the predictions of Waltzian neorealism against George Modelski's long-cycle theory across a period of nearly five hundred years.

Tests of Systemic Theories

Scholars likely disagree over what constitutes a fully systemic theory, but by most definitions the number of tests of such a theory can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Some of the advances described above—in agent-based modeling and network theory, in particular—hold forth the promise of expanding the number of entries in this category. Braumoeller 2012 operationalizes both systemic and state-level variables and tests their impact on one another, while Maoz 2011 captures the impact of the interstate network on the behavior of the states that compose it.

Braumoeller, Bear F. *The Great Powers and the International System: Systemic Theory in Empirical Perspective*. Cambridge Studies in International Relations 123. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Braumoeller argues that the structure of the international system, which consists of distributions of things that matter to states (power, ideology, and so on), both motivates state behavior and is a product of it. He formulates a dynamic model that captures this interaction and tests it using data from a survey of historians to produce what one reviewer calls "the first logically sound and empirically tested systemic theory of international relations."

Maoz, Zeev. *Networks of Nations: The Evolution, Structure, and Impact of International Networks, 1816–2001*. Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences 32. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Maoz connects state behavior, in the formation of network ties, to international structure, which is made up of those ties and constitutes the environment within which states must compete for security.

Empirical Analysis at the Systemic Level

A final category of interest in this area is work that seeks to explain phenomena at the level of the international system—the amount of war in the system, for example, or its ideological composition. While these works are quite rare relative to the dyadic studies that dominate the discipline, they constitute an ambitious attempt to understand the forest rather than the trees. Singer, et al. 1972 is an early attempt to explain war between major powers, and Gartzke and Weisiger 2014 seeks to explain the propensity for war in the international system more generally. Mitchell 2002 posits a systemic cause—the spread of democratic norms throughout the system—as an explanation for the behavior of third parties in conflict resolution

Gartzke, Erik, and Alex Weisiger. "Under Construction: Development, Democracy, and Difference as Determinants of Systemic Liberal Peace." *International Studies Quarterly* 58.1 (2014): 130–145.

Gartzke and Weisiger find the sources of systemic peace in systemic development and regime-type homogeneity. They argue that once those two factors have been taken into account, democracy per se has no independent effect on systemic peace.

Mitchell, Sara McLaughlin. "A Kantian System? Democracy and Third-Party Conflict Resolution." *American Journal of Political Science* 46.4 (2002): 749–759.

Mitchell argues that as the proportion of democratic states in the international system increases, democratic norms of conflict resolution increasingly suffuse the international system, even affecting the behavior of nondemocratic states.

Singer, J. David, Stuart Bremer, and John Stuckey. "Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820–1965." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association held 8–12 September 1970 in Los Angeles. In *Peace, War, and Numbers*. Edited by Bruce M. Russett, 19–48. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE, 1972.

Singer and coauthors explore the question of whether power parity or power preponderance better explains the warlike nature of the international system.

Extensions

Systemic theories are notoriously indeterminate: as Arnold Wolfers memorably pointed out, anarchy, like the temperature of a house, rarely produces predictable behavior on the part of the relevant actors unless it is so hot—for example, on fire—that it compels them to leave. Short of that level of compulsion, just about anything is possible. Some theorists—especially neoclassical realists (see Neoclassical Realism)—have sought to resolve this indeterminacy by augmenting systemic theory with state-level or individual-level theories, while others have sought to explain related foreign policy outcomes. Pollins and Schweller 1999 finds a remarkable degree of correspondence between systemic economic cycles and the foreign policy behavior of the United States, for example, while Christensen and Snyder 1990 offers a systemic explanation of the spread of the First World War. Braumoeller 2008 uses systemic theory to resolve a long-standing disagreement between proponents of the "spiral model" and the "deterrence model" in the study of international conflict, finding that deterrence failures are far more common than conflict spirals.

Braumoeller, Bear F. "Systemic Politics and the Origins of Great Power Conflict." *American Political Science Review* 102.1 (2008): 77–93.

Braumoeller connects his own systemic theory (Braumoeller 2012, cited under Tests of Systemic Theories) to the deterrence and spiral models to create a two-stage model of international conflict, showing in the process that—in the 19th century, at least—failures of deterrence were far more common than conflict spirals.

Christensen, Thomas J., and Jack Snyder. "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity." *International Organization* 44.2 (1990): 137–168.

Christensen and Snyder argue that Kenneth Waltz's neorealism, combined with some elements of security dilemma theory and perceptual theory, explain why World War I spread as quickly and as far as it did rather than remaining localized.

Pollins, Brian M., and Randall L. Schweller. "Linking the Levels: The Long Wave and Shifts in U.S. Foreign Policy, 1790–1993." *American Journal of Political Science* 43.2 (1999): 431–464.

Pollins and Schweller find that the “Long Wave” in the global economy explains the regular alternation between introversion and extroversion in US foreign policy mood.

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