

Is Anybody Still a Realist?

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Abstract

Realism, the oldest and most prominent theoretical approach in international relations, is in trouble. Its theoretical core is being undermined by its own defenders, who have addressed anomalies by recasting realism in less determinate and distinctive forms. Realists now advance the very assumptions and causal claims in opposition to which they traditionally—and still—have claimed to define themselves. This expansion would be unproblematic if it occurred through the further elaboration of an unchanging set of core realist premises. Yet contemporary realists increasingly defend propositions that manifestly and fundamentally contradict core realist assumptions by permitting other exogenous causes of state behavior—specifically, varying domestic interests, collective beliefs, and international institutions and norms—to trump the effects of material power. Contemporary realism has thus become little more than a generic commitment of rational state behavior in anarchy—a view shared by all major strands of liberal and institutionalist theory, as well as some strands of constructivism. It has thereby compromised its distinctiveness and thereby its analytical utility as a guide to theoretical debate and empirical research. Unlike many other critics, we propose not a rejection but a reformulation of realism in the form of three assumptions: (1) unitary, rational actors in anarchy; (2) underlying conflict of preferences; and (3) resolution of conflict on the basis of relative control over material resources. This formulation, we argue, is the broadest possible one that maintains a clear distinction between realism and other rationalist IR theories. It also promises to clarify the empirical domain of realism, to generate more powerful empirical explanations, and to permit realism to take its rightful part in rigorous multicausal syntheses with other rationalist theories.

Realism, the oldest and still most prominent theoretical approach in international relations (IR), is in trouble. ¹ The problem is not lack of interest. Realism is the primary theory or major alternative in virtually every major book and article that addresses general theories of world politics, particularly in security affairs. Controversies between neo-realism and its critics continue to dominate IR debates. Nor is the problem realism's purported inability to explain the end of the Cold War, its irrelevance after the Cold War, or politics beyond the "end of history." There clearly remains much global conflict to which realist insights about the role of material power are applicable. Nor, finally, is the problem a lack of empirical support for realist predictions, such as "balancing" or "hegemonic stability." While recent empirical analyses by historians and political scientists rightly question the accuracy of broad variants of such predictions, there can be little doubt that realism—and the specific pathologies it predicts—captures essential aspects of state behavior within an important subset of cases. ²

The central problem is instead that the theoretical core of realism is being undermined by its own defenders, who seek to address anomalies by recasting realism in less determinate and less distinctive forms. The result: Realists now advance the very assumptions and causal claims in opposition to which they traditionally—and still—have claimed to define themselves. Realists like E.H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz viewed their theory as a bulwark against claims about the autonomous influence of democracy, ideology, economic integration, international law, and organizations on world politics. They sought instead to highlight the manipulation, accumulation, and balancing of material power by sober, unsentimental statesmen and especially the limits which the international distribution of power places on such efforts. In contrast, many (not all) recent realists, in an explicit effort to overcome the limitations of Waltzian neo-realism and thereby to extend realism to new aspects of world politics, have expanded it without restraint to include these traditional targets of realist criticism.

This expansion would be unproblematic, even praiseworthy, if it occurred through the further elaboration of an unchanging set of core Realist premises. It would, after all, be quite an intellectual coup for realists to demonstrate that the impact of ideas, domestic institutions, economic interdependence, and international institutions all actually reflected the exogenous distribution and manipulation of interstate power capabilities. Indeed, a handful of scholars have attempted to explore and apply consistent realist assumptions. Yet such efforts appear as the exceptions to the rule. More striking is that most prominent and thoughtful contemporary realists have done just the opposite. Realists increasingly defend propositions that manifestly and fundamentally contradict core realist assumptions by permitting other exogenous causes of state behavior — specifically, varying domestic interests, collective beliefs, and international institutions and norms — to trump the effects of material power.

We argue that this loosening of realist assumptions has undermined realism's analytical utility both to structure theoretical debate and to guide empirical research. Few would deny that consistent adherence to a set of core assumptions is the defining characteristic of a social scientific theory. Contemporary realism, we maintain, has drifted away not simply from its traditional core assumptions, but in many cases from any distinctive core assumptions whatsoever. In some cases, neither critics nor defenders offer a clear paradigmatic definition of realism or its variants. In other cases, realists invoke assumptions *ad hoc*, while conceding that not all realists accept all "core" assumptions. ³ Most often, proposed assumptions are broad enough to be consistent with *any* rationalist theory of state behavior, including those advanced by current liberal, institutionalist and constructivist theorists and once uniformly disparaged by realists as "legalist," "liberal," "moralist," or "idealist." Often these other factors are treated as consistently *more* important than power. This approach—below we term it "minimal

realism”—is based on assumptions that exclude no state behavior short of irrational decision-making or delegation to a fully sovereign world government. In sum, realism—its reputation for parsimony and rigor notwithstanding—currently lacks a consensual foundation of assumptions that meet the minimal standards for a social scientific theory.

A theory of world politics that tries to explain all things in all circumstances is doomed to degenerate—that is, to increasingly make recourse to arguments that do not follow, or contradict, its core assumptions, and are parasitic on the assumptions of alternative theories. Indeed, the *ad hoc* expansion of causal mechanisms and exogenous influences has led to increasingly complex and all-inclusive formulations of realism. Once factors such as shifting state preferences, transaction costs, perceptions, and ideology have been subsumed, if in an *ad hoc* way, into realist theory, it becomes less and less possible to subject the resulting claims to direct empirical testing against any theoretical alternative—such as functional regime theory or liberal theories of regime type and interdependence, or liberal and constructivist theories of collective beliefs. No surprise, then, that empirical debates among realists are either becoming insular: Many involve comparisons solely among variants of realism, with other theories hardly considered at all. Others explicitly compare realism only to extreme positions, such as complete harmony of interests, irrational commitment to ideology, or construction of a world state.

Some who observe the state of contemporary realism might be tempted to reject the approach altogether—and perhaps with it, all “isms” in IR theory—as *inherently* vague, indeterminate, contradictory, or just plain wrong. We disagree. A healthy realist theory is not simply possible; it is indispensable for vigorous theoretical debate and empirical investigation of world politics. While realism is not the only theory in international relations in need of such clarification, its long history and centrality to the field make it an especially important focus of such efforts. Not only does no other paradigm capture the essence of a certain mode of interstate interaction that has quite probably dominated world politics for most of human history; no other paradigm so succinctly captures the enduring role of material power in the relations among states.

Accordingly, we propose not a rejection, but a reformulation, of realist assumptions. This reformulation accentuates the distinctive focus of realism on conflicting interests and material power, while recognizing that the assumptions of a social scientific theory must impose analytical limitations and empirical boundaries—indeed, this is their primary purpose. Our proposed reformulation would, we argue, stem and reverse this disintegration. Moreover, we maintain, it provides theoretical foundations clearly distinct from other rationalist theories, promises to generate superior empirical explanations and predictions, and is better suited to take its rightful part in rigorous multi-causal syntheses with alternative rationalist theories. The replacement of what John Ruggie has termed “monocausal mania” with such multi-causal syntheses, we believe, constitutes the future of IR. It is the next step beyond clashes among “isms”.⁴ The unavoidable first step, however, is a set of well-constructed first-order theories.

This paper proceeds, accordingly, in four sections. First we elaborate the requisite qualities of a basic theory in IR. Second we criticize existing formulations of realism and illustrate theoretical degeneration to date. Third we offer a reformulation of realism. Finally, we conclude by highlighting the practical advantages of a proper formulation of realism for theoretical debate and empirical research.

I. What is a Basic Theory in IR?

While battles among abstract “isms” are often too arid to be useful, the specification of well-developed basic theories is central to the study of world politics. The purpose of such basic families of theories is to categorize more specific theories and hypotheses unambiguously. By linking specific claims to shared fundamental assumptions, basic theory assists us to develop coherent explanations, to structure social scientific debates, to consider a full range of explanatory options, to define the scope of particular claims, to understand how different theories and hypotheses relate to one another, and to clarify the implications of specific findings.

Scholars generally agree that a basic social scientific theory—sometimes termed, in Lakatosian language, a “paradigm,” “research program,” or “basic approach”—is properly defined in terms of a set of fundamental “core” assumptions. While we do not employ Lakatosian theory or criteria, we find the notion of core assumptions useful. Steven Van Evera rightly asserts that realism is “a series of assumptions”; nearly every scholar who has voiced an opinion on the subject over the past quarter century agrees. ⁵ The core assumptions about the world on which a basic theory rests define its theoretical scope and empirical domain by deliberately including and excluding particular causal arguments. While perhaps insufficient to generate point predictions in all cases, such core assumptions must be sufficiently precise to distinguish any one approach from its fundamental alternatives. Around this stable core, scholars may then add a varying set of compatible (Lakatos terms them “auxiliary”) assumptions, which are not unique or essential to the basic theory but facilitate the derivation of more detailed hypotheses. These more specific causal claims are then tested against other formulations to explain a particular empirical phenomenon; the fate of the sum total of empirical confirmation is the proper measure of the usefulness of the assumptions underlying the research program. While the use of differing auxiliary hypotheses may generate multiple, even contradictory propositions, the inviolable constraint on such derivations is that they must reflect, not contradict, the core assumptions of the basic theory. The use of “auxiliary” hypotheses *unconnected* to core assumptions to predict novel facts or clear up anomalies tells us nothing about the veracity of a research program from which they are logically disconnected. When a research program consistently engages in such explanation, our confidence in the underlying core assumptions is weakened. ⁶

The qualities of core assumptions of a basic theory are not arbitrary. We propose that core assumptions must, at a minimum, have four qualities. *They must be coherent, causal, fundamental, and distinctive* .

First and least controversial, a basic theory must be *logically coherent* .It must not contain internal logical contradictions that permit the derivation of opposing predictions. To be sure, given their breadth, basic theories are likely to be incomplete. They may generate contradictory hypotheses based on differing auxiliary assumptions. Yet there should be no outright contradictions among assumptions that permit unambiguous derivation of opposing propositions.

Second, a basic theory must be *causal*.A theory is not simply a description, but a set of causal claims. Waltz rightly warned IR theorists to eschew descriptions of behavior masquerading as theories; for this reason he called on them to strictly separate “structure” and “interaction.” A basic theory, like any theory, must distinguish variables assumed to be exogenous (causes), variables assumed to be endogenous (effects), and background conditions assumed to be stable (constants or controls). In most IR theories, the dependent variable is the patterns and outcomes of interstate interaction, generally levels of cooperation and conflict, or some building block thereof, such as the foreign policies of individual

governments. ⁷ The critical distinguishing characteristic of any given IR theory lies, therefore, in its assumptions about the nature of the independent variables and constant, as well as their relationship to state behavior. While the assumptions in a basic theory may not be entirely determinate, they must include and, perhaps more importantly, *exclude* potential basic causes of state behavior.

Third, a basic theory must be *fundamental*. In contrast to narrower theories or specific hypotheses, a basic theory is comprised of assumptions at the level of fundamental social theory. In other words, it must define the basic nature of actors, their characteristics, the constraints they face, and the nature of their interactions. ⁸ Among the basic categories of social theory, realism—like most IR theories in use today—is a rationalist theory of state behavior, that is, it assumes states act purposively to achieve intended goals. A rationalist basic theory must necessarily make fundamental assumptions—at a minimum—about the nature of actors (their identity, preferences, and beliefs) and the nature of the context or structure within which they make choices. ⁹ These building blocks are then employed to construct explanations of strategic choice and aggregate interaction.

Fourth, most subtle but most important for our purposes, a basic theory must be *distinct*; that is, its assumptions must clearly differentiate it from recognized theoretical alternatives. Formulations of basic theories must make sense not only on their own terms, but within the context of social scientific debates. Fundamental debates are always (at least) “three-cornered,” pitting two (or more) theories against the data. ¹⁰ Thus the appropriate level of generality, the appropriate number of assumptions, and the empirical scope of a basic theory are not qualities intrinsic to a single theory, but depend on the terms of the scholarly debate in which it is employed. To structure and simplify lines of disagreement and potential synthesis within such a debate, any proposed set of core assumptions should subsume one major line of argument but exclude other competitors.

A basic realist theory vague enough to subsume all imaginable competing arguments is unacceptable. Limits must be imposed. In these essay we consider limits imposed by two broad categories of rationalist alternatives to realist theory. ¹¹ The first category, “*institutionalist*” theory, contains explanations that stress the role of international institutions and norms. Examples include the transaction-cost based analyses of functional regime theorists and the more sociological institutionalism of some constructivists. ¹² The second category, “*liberal*” theory, contains explanations that stress variation in underlying state preferences and identities derived from or embedded in state-society relations. Examples include claims by liberals and constructivists about the autonomous impact of economic interdependence, domestic representative institutions, domestic collectively-held ideas/beliefs/norms, and social compromises on the provision of public goods. ¹³

A formulation of realism that includes the assumptions underlying these theories would be a misleading guide to theoretical debate or empirical research. Perpetually underspecified, perhaps internally contradictory, it would almost never be confronted with potentially falsifying theoretical counterclaims. It would evade conflict with any other rationalist theory of IR. One could always save one core assumption by recourse to another. The result would be a generic form of rationalism; as we shall see, many recent reformulations of realism do just this.

II. Realism as a Basic Theory

The “core” of an IR theory, we have seen, must be coherent, causal, fundamental and distinctive. It must avoid internal contradictions; distinguish constants, exogenous and endogenous variables; rest on fundamental premises at the level of social theory; and include assumptions sufficient to distinguish it from major alternatives.

Realism is often portrayed as a basic theory that meets these criteria. Its adherents are said to hold fundamental, clear, and consistent assumptions about world politics that support powerful, parsimonious, and distinctive claims. Despite the impression of coherence, however, there is considerable ambiguity and contradiction among contemporary realists about the proper number, form and content of fundamental assumptions. Nearly all extant definitions (implicit or explicit) of realism, we shall now demonstrate, fail to meet the four basic criteria. We begin with a brief examination of formulations based on intellectual history or description of outcomes, then turn in more detail to the most important category of definitions, namely “minimal” realist definitions.

A. Theories that are not Theories: Intellectual History and Ideal-Types

Some formulations of realism seek to define it by appeal either to intellectual history or ideal-typical predictions. Such definitions need not detain us long, for they are manifestly not coherent, causal, fundamental, or distinctive. While useful for other purposes, they are of limited utility for social scientific refinement and testing.

1. *Realism as Intellectual History: Appeals to Authority rather than Assumptions*

One atheoretical category of realist formulation consists of *appeals to intellectual history*. In such definitions, certain authors are designated as “realist” and their thinking is then used to characterize realism. Such arguments take the form: “Mr. X (Morgenthau, Carr, Thucydides, Waltz, et al.) is a realist. Mr. X said Y. Therefore Y is a realist claim.” Such appeals reappear consistently—sometimes decisively—in contemporary realism. Many recent realists, we shall see, argue that that since classical Realists like Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger, and Raymond Aron appear to have acknowledged the distinction between status quo and revisionist states, or the importance of norms, these factors must be considered realist. [14](#)

Such arguments are of course legitimate as means of illuminating the intellectual history of Realism, as subtle and wide-ranging analyses by Michael Doyle, Ashley Tellis, Michael Smith, Stefano Guzzini and others have shown. Yet social scientists interested in theory testing rightly reject direct appeals to historical authority, exegetical analysis, and semantic self-identification in lieu of explicit assumptions. [15](#) Three important reasons motivate such rejection.

First, *appeals to intellectual pedigree are not causal*. Such definitions offer a circular answer to the question of what realism is: It is what realists believe and realists are those who believe it. This restates rather than resolves basic definitional questions. Such formulations fail to answer the question central to theoretical definition—a question posed even by intellectual historians of international relations, namely: “What assumptions make a theorist realist?” [16](#) Assumptions, not authorities, define basic theories.

Second, *appeals to intellectual pedigree are almost always internally inconsistent, and thereby tend to undermine the distinctiveness of realism*. Both intellectual traditions and individual thinkers tend to

subsume important tensions and contradictions. The intellectual pedigree from Thucydides to the present contains a wide range of arguments. Citing prominent individuals, as do many contemporary Realists, is hardly more reliable. Even individual statements of Realism often contain unresolved tensions and contradictions. Scholars debate whether the arguments of realists from Thucydides to Kennan are in fact coherently realist. [17](#) At best, selective citation out of an incoherent tradition or an individual is arbitrary. The resulting claims rest on semantics not substance.

In this regard, given how often passages from Morgenthau, Carr, George Kennan, or Raymond Aron are cited as evidence that a particular argument is “realist,” it is both striking and ironic that the classical realists acknowledged a division within their own thought between realist and non-realist statements. In *Politics among Nations*, for example, Morgenthau distinguishes consistently and explicitly between realist and non-realist elements. The realist elements rest on “the concept of interest defined in terms of power,” which “sets politics as ...sphere of action and understanding” independent of law, morality, or economics. [18](#) Having developed realism Morgenthau turns explicitly to the role of law, morality, and institutions. While the subsequent passages are often cited as evidence that law and morality are part of a “realist” theory, Morgenthau would have none of this. He distinguishes sharply between the realist analysis of power and political expediency (realism) and other factors:

If the motivations behind the struggle for power and the mechanisms through which it operates were all that needed to be known about international relations, the international scene would truly resemble the state of nature described by Hobbes.... International politics would be governed solely by...considerations of political expediency...In such a world the weak would be at the mercy of the strong.... Actually, however, the very threat of such a world where power reigns...supreme... engenders that revolt against power which is as universal as the aspiration for power itself.” [19](#)

E.H. Carr’s classic, *The Twenty-Years’ Crisis*, and his work overall, contains similarly self-conscious dichotomies. [20](#) There is little to be gained by overlooking subtle syntheses and tensions in order to cite classical realists against themselves. [21](#)

2. Realism as Ideal-Type: Description or Evaluation rather than Causation

Another category of atheoretical formulation of realism contains those based on *descriptions or evaluations of expected state behavior*, rather than a causal theory of the processes that trigger such behavior. Such approaches typically define realism in terms of its generally “conflictual” or “pessimistic” outlook on world politics. This mode of definition dates back to the English school of Martin Wight, Hedley Bull, Ian Clark, and others, who contrasted a “Kantian tradition of optimism” with the “tradition of despair” advanced by Rousseau and the Realists. [22](#) Such simplistic dichotomies, tinged with normative judgement, are unfortunate holdovers from the “realist vs. idealist” debate of the 1930s and 1940s, in which realists claimed that only they represented a “realistic” view, while liberals assumed utopian possibilities.

Today’s realists have grown more sophisticated, yet still occasionally lapse into ideal-typical definition. Such lapses take the form of the view that realism is defined by claims like “states balance,” “states pursue relative-gains seeking strategies,” “states seek relative power,” “states have a tendency to engage in conflictual or aggressive behavior,” or “states are unaffected by international institutions.” Some distinguish “aggressive” and “defensive” realism, which are sometimes defined in terms of outcomes,

that is, whether or not “the international system...generates intense conflict.” ²³

From the perspective of social science theory, such definitions are neither causal nor distinctive. They are not *causal* because, they do not distinguish exogenous and endogenous variables. (This was, we saw above, Waltz’s point in differentiating structure and interaction.) Robert Keohane and Michael Desch, two theorists whose understanding of realism is otherwise quite hard-headed, propose that realism need assume only unitary, rational, nation-states that “pursue a relative power advantage over other states.” ²⁴ Such definitions are not only vague—the definition of power is rarely clarified—we argue, are circular, for precisely the reason Waltz suggests: Seeking “relative power”—“internal” or “external” balancing, for example—is a strategic means to an end, not an end or underlying preference. It is thus properly a prediction, not an assumption, of realist theory. Rather than assuming this conclusion, a realist definition must offer fundamental assumptions about actors and structure that lead to the prediction that states will seek to maintain a relative power advantage.

More fundamentally, ideal-typical formulations do not predict variation and are, therefore, not *distinctive*. Social scientific theories are rarely, if ever, defined by their unique ability to provide an explanation for broad classes of phenomenon. In a typical healthy social scientific debate, a number of competing theories provide robust and a *prima facie* plausible explanations of phenomena known to exist—for example, balancing, self-help, or conflict in world politics. Differences among theories manifest themselves only at a more fine-grained level, namely in *precise predictions about the conditions under which particular patterns of behavior should be observed and the causal mechanisms by which they come about*. Nearly all non-realist IR theories, whether institutionalist, liberal, or constructivist, predict phenomena like alignment, conflict, concern about national security, self-help, relative-gains seeking, weak international institutions, and other “realist pathologies” under certain specific conditions. ²⁵ Where IR theories truly differ is in their respective predictions concerning the precise nature of these conditions and the mechanisms that produce the behavior. In explaining balancing, for example, realists tend to focus on underlying balancing of capabilities, while liberals look to balances of threats, interests, or ideologies, and institutionalists to the role of institutions in stabilizing alliances. To distinguish among these predictions requires more detailed causal theories defined by more than their ability to predict a particular class of outcomes.

B. Theories that are Indeterminate or Indistinct: Minimal Realism and the Perils of Underspecification

Atheoretical definitions by intellectual history and descriptive ideal-type examined above remain relatively rare. Far more common, indeed near universal nowadays, among contemporary realists are formulations based implicitly or explicitly on explicit core assumptions. Yet most of these formulations are what we term here “minimal” definitions of realism, namely attempts to define realism by assuming only the existence of rational self-interested states seeking security or “power” interacting under anarchy. Such formulations, we argue, in no way distinguish realism from almost other rationalist theories of international relations, including nearly all variants of liberal and institutionalist theory. *In sum, they are not distinctive*.

Nearly all recent formulations of realism are minimalist, in that they rely exclusively on some combination of the following five assumptions: (i) states are the primary actors in world politics; (ii) states make rational calculations (i.e., they seek efficient means in light of the strategic environment) to

achieve these goals; (iii) states seek to realize a fixed set of egotistical goals ranging from defending their territorial integrity and political independence to expanding their influence over their international environment (often referred to as “security” and “power”); (iv) states face an anarchic external environment and must therefore engage in “self-help”; (v) to do so, states choose among a set of instruments among which force or the threat of force is the (or one of the) most important.

Most contemporary formulations of realism are sparer. They rest—explicitly or implicitly—on only two or three of these five assumptions. Waltz, for example, claims that “two and only two” assumptions are required: anarchy and a desire for survival.²⁶ Joseph Grieco asserts that we need only assume rational states acting in anarchy to derive classical realist conclusions, such as a strategy of pursuing relative gains.²⁷ Martin Wight bases realism (or “power politics”) on two assumptions: anarchy and “continuous...relations.”²⁸ One often hears realism described as a theory that assumes that in an anarchic international system, “power and interests” determine state behavior.²⁹ Tellis reconstructs a “minimal realist” program from Thucydides to Waltz based on the egotism and self-preservation of states within anarchy.³⁰

As a basis for social science, minimal definitions of realism mark a considerable improvement over definitions of the first two types—ideal-types and intellectual history—if only because they actually rest on explicit assumptions underlying causal processes. Yet while most minimal formulations are consistent and fundamental, they are not causal or distinctive—even if they include all five assumptions above. They are not causal because they do not specify exogenous variables that decisively influence state behavior. More importantly—and in large part as a result—such definitions are not distinctive, for *each of the five assumptions listed above is also fully accepted by adherents to all competing rationalist theories of IR, that is, by nearly all contemporary liberals and institutionalists*.

Nearly all variants of liberal and institutionalist theory are based on systemic arguments about the actions of rational, self-interested states in anarchy.³¹ Nearly all agree, that is, that the world system in anarchic, in that no super-ordinate institution has or can realistically have a monopoly of legitimate force. Stefano Guzzini’s assessment gets to the heart of the matter: “The closest we can get to an assumption that would demarcate realism is the idea of anarchy... the basic idea that there is no international government comparable to national ones. [But] traditional defenders of collective security [as well as “democratic peace” liberals] have the same starting point. Rather than setting Realism apart from other international theories, the assumption of anarchy sets International Relations apart from other disciplines.”³²

Nearly all liberal and institutionalist theories agree, in addition, that states are the major actors in international politics, though it is true that liberals focus on sub-national actors in the process of preference formation. Nearly all agree that states calculate rationally and instrumentally about the realization of self-interested goals. Nearly all agree that states are self-interested, that underlying harmony of interest is rare and, therefore, there are often underlying conflicts among states, in which they seek to influence each others’ behavior. Nearly all agree that governments generally place a very high value on national security, territorial integrity, and political independence. Nearly all agree that a central and often decisive instrument available to states is coercive force. *No* major IR theory assumes that states are irrelevant, externally hierarchical, altruistic, unconcerned with the acquisition of scarce resources like security and wealth, irrational, autistic (uninfluenced by their relative position in the international system), or unwilling to use force.

Consider the most salient variant of institutionalism, functional regime theory. The revolution in the study of international organization over the past generation associated with Robert Keohane and Stephen Krasner is distinguished precisely by its acceptance of the five assumptions above. Keohane seeks to demonstrate that “even in the absence of common government...the pessimistic conclusions about cooperation often associated with realism are not necessarily valid, even if we accept the assumption of rational egotism.” ³³ Keohane does not challenge the commonplace realist claim that states in an anarchic world system rationally pursue some balance of security and external influence, yet they predict that such states have an interest in mitigating military competition through common international institutions, including collective security and arms control. Accordingly, functional regime theory has been applied to “security regimes” by Robert Jervis, Joseph Nye, Jack Snyder, George Downs, Volker Rittberger, Gunther Hellmann, Abram Chayes, Charles Glaser, Celeste Wallander, and Keohane himself. ³⁴

Consider also the most salient variants of liberal theory, “democratic peace” theory, its corollary theories of aggression by “predatory” non-democratic states, “endogenous” theories of international trade policy, and theories of the role of national ideologies. Nearly all accept the same five assumptions. Almost all maintain, as do realists, that states rationally pursue egotistical goals ranging from security to external influence. ³⁵ For example, liberals hardly deny security-seeking; indeed, it is precisely the heavy emphasis placed by democratic polities on security that prevents them from provoking war among themselves. While liberals do disaggregate the unitary state in order to explain the preference formation of state preferences, nearly all assume that once preferences are formed, foreign policy can be analyzed as unitary, rational action in anarchy. ³⁶ Nor, finally, do liberal theories predict universal convergence of interest. For every liberal hypothesis about the democratic peace there is a liberal hypothesis about predatory aggression among non-democratic states; for every liberal hypothesis about the conditions under which states pursue free trade there is a liberal hypothesis about the conditions under which they impose protection; for every hypothesis about the conditions under which compatible national, political or social ideology lead to peace and cooperation, there is a hypothesis about the conditions under which incompatible ones lead to conflict. ³⁷ In sum, liberal theory, like any theory, explains variation in state behavior.

In sum, minimal realism lacks distinctiveness. All of these core assumptions are shared by nearly all other rationalist IR theories—and perhaps even some non-rational ones. Yet contemporary realists seem strangely unaware that minimalist definitions simply do not distinguish realism. As a result, we shall demonstrate in more detail below, modern realist works have a tendency to slide into indeterminate, undifferentiated forms of rationalism. Realism comes to mean little more than states wield “influence” and pursue “interests”—hardly a controversial claim among rational theories of state behavior.

The logical outcome of this trend, viewed in the abstract, is found in Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little’s ambitious and admirably explicit book entitled *The Logic of Anarchy*. Buzan, Jones, and Little seek to “reinstall realism as the leading school of thought in the discipline” by relaxing all its assumptions save that of anarchy. ³⁸ Functional differentiation, international societal interactions, and international institutions can, they argue, all be inserted as “systemic” variables to enrich “realist” theory. ³⁹ The result, as Guzzini again incisively observes, is indeterminacy: “By reconceptualizing Waltz’s conception of structure, the book leaves out Waltz’s general causal theory, and proposes instead

a wider framework of analysis with multiple unweighted causes. [This] accommodates many of Waltz's theoretical shortcomings, but, at the end of the day, it cannot make a convincing case for its restricted realist theory."⁴⁰ Once we reduce realist assumptions to rational state behavior in anarchy, nothing uniquely realist remains.

How could realism have degenerated so dramatically? We believe it is because many scholars have lost sight of the clear set of underlying assumptions that distinguish it from rationalist (and non-rationalist) alternatives. In particular, what is most clearly missing from "minimal realism" is any recognition of the centrality of *conflict* and *power*. At its core, realism is concerned with the implications of variations in relative power—in particular the geographical distribution of material resources—in a conflictual world system. For realists, material resources constitute a fundamental "reality"—that is, they exercise an exogenous influence on state behavior no matter what states seek, believe, or construct.⁴¹

Realists from Machiavelli to Mearsheimer have insisted that this focus on the resolution of conflict through the application of material power is what most clearly distinguishes realist thought from the alternatives. The force of this approach lies in the implication that a state's ability to influence world politics, and therefore its behavior, is unrelated to either its preferences or the institutional norms, but is instead proportional to its control over power resources. "Those who have power use it" Thucydides' Athenians observed, "while the weak make compromises."⁴² What states want or believe is irrelevant. This is what is meant when realists like Morgenthau, Waltz, and Gilpin proclaim that the central premise of Realism is the "autonomy of the political."⁴³ By thinking of power as a universal, unalienable, and measurable intermediary, independent of specific perceptions and preferences, realists seek to simplify the study of world politics.⁴⁴ Therein lies the force of Morgenthau and Waltz's consistent dismissal of ideals, domestic institutions, economic interests, psychology, and other sources of varied state preferences—a position adopted almost verbatim from Niccolo Machiavelli, Friedrich Meinecke, and Max Weber.⁴⁵ Realism, we argue, is only as parsimonious and distinctive as this assumption is true.

Hence the profoundly degenerating nature of contemporary minimal realism. By accepting only the assumptions of anarchy and rationality, recent theorists abandon the realist commitment to notion that state power is exogenous, inalienable, material and, above all, decisive. Moreover, they appear to have lost interest in specifying the precise relationship between capabilities and bargaining power. Yet, as David Baldwin as demonstrated, almost anything can be thought of as a "power resource" in the loose sense that it influences the outcome of conflict. Theories of politics can claim predictive power only insofar as their specification of power is precise and distinctive, as well as independent of the outcome. This is not the case in contemporary realism, with the result that nothing except semantics distinguishes minimal realism from any other rationalist IR theory, including liberalism, institutionalism, and some varieties of constructivism.

C. Indeterminacy and Indistinctness in Practice: Minimal Realism and Empirical Analysis

The frailty of contemporary realism is not just a matter of abstract debate; if it were, we would have little cause to advance this critique. These theoretical weaknesses, we believe, limit studies that apply realist theory to explain world politics. Most such studies in recent years have been based, explicitly or implicitly, on minimal realist foundations. As a result, empirical explanations of foreign policy and international interactions by self-styled realists increasingly invoke a host of factors unrelated to, even contradictory to, core realist premises. Though mistakenly interpreted as support for realism, such studies

in fact often make a better case for liberal, institutional and sometimes even constructivist theories. This degeneration can best be seen in the way recent empirical studies treat two core assumptions of realism: the stability of state preferences and the decisive role of power.

1. Power is Whatever States Want: The Slide from Power to Preferences

The traditional realist view—about which there was, until recently, little disagreement—assumes that state preferences are fixed and uniform. ⁴⁶ For Morgenthau and Waltz, this assumption accounts for the realism's power and parsimony because explanatory leverage can be assumed to come exclusively from the variation in the material environment, not from variation in the nature of units—by which they meant fundamental variation in what states want. Morgenthau speaks for nearly all realists in arguing that realism must “guard against two popular fallacies: the concern with motives and the concern with ideological preferences....History shows no exact and necessary correlation between the quality of motives and the quality of foreign policy.” ⁴⁷ This distinction between preferences and constraints is the true meaning of the prevalent (if otherwise somewhat misleading) metaphor of “images” or “levels of analysis,” in which realism is a structural or “third image” theory and other theories are “domestic.”

What fixed, uniform preferences should be ascribed to states? This question has generated heated debate among contemporary realists, yet without a decisive result. One useful way to view this debate is as a battle over the clarification of Waltz's loose specification of state preferences. Waltz asserted that states may seek anything between a minimal assurance of survival and expansion, the latter presumably to the point of world domination. ⁴⁸ Obviously this is too vague a tool on which to predict either individual state behavior or systemic effects. Yet another exegesis of Waltz need not detain us here; Fareed Zakaria speaks for most contemporary realists when he terms Waltz's writings on such questions “confused and contradictory.” ⁴⁹

The intellectual descendents of Morgenthau and Waltz are divided into two camps, which have dominated debates over realism for more than a decade. “Defensive realists” stress the maximization of security and “offensive realists” stress the maximization of power and influence. ⁵⁰ In the raging battle between these two formulations, realists have overlooked a remarkable underlying commonality, namely the increasing indeterminacy and open-endedness of both formulations. This indeterminacy results from the unwillingness to accept a specification of state preferences more narrow than Waltz's. If state behavior is influenced by the precise point in the spectrum between “defensive” and “offensive” motives at which different states find themselves, each explanation threatens to collapse into an examination of autonomous domestic causes of state preferences. ⁵¹ This, we shall see, results in internal contradictions and *ad hoc* appeals to non-realist factors.

a. Power and Preferences in Defensive Realism

Consider first so-called “defensive realism.” Since John Herz some realists have argued that states are not inherently aggressive, but are concerned merely with providing for their own survival and security under the geopolitical *status quo*. Conflict and competition can emerge, in this defensive realist view, only due to uncertainty about the preferences of foreign governments and the resulting ambiguity about the meaning of strategic actions. ⁵² Uncertainty combined with extreme risk-aversion compels states to judge one another's intentions only by actions. As it is difficult to distinguish the offensive and defensive intent of a given action—say armament, alliance formation, or imperialism—states find themselves in a

perpetual “security dilemma.” The result is ironic: Conflict and escalation feed upon themselves although no state seeks more than the maintenance of the *status quo* —an archetypal example of the distinctively realist claim that aggregate state behavior is unconnected with state intentions.

Despite its popularity, defensive realism suffers from a tendency to degenerate toward generic “rationalism” through the incorporation of non-realist factors, in particular variation in national preferences. As Schweller, Zakaria, Andrew Kydd, and other critics charge, realist predictions like self-help, balancing, relative-gains seeking, or conflict do not follow from the assumptions of anarchy and survival-seeking alone, as Waltz and defensive realists claim. If all governments sought only security, why would they ever place their security at risk through aggression? [53](#) Schweller puts it well: [54](#)

If states are assumed to seek nothing more than their own survival, why would they feel threatened? ... Anarchy and self-preservation alone are not sufficient...Predatory states motivated by expansion and absolute gains, not security and the fear of relative losses, are the prime movers of neo-realist theory. Without some possibility for their existence, the security dilemma melts away, as do most concepts associated with contemporary realism.

As Schweller, Keohane, Jervis, Glaser, Kydd and others have pointed out, if underlying conflict is non-existent and security were their only goal, surely it would not be so difficult for states to take unilateral actions that signal intent and capability or contract into a strong international organization to police disarmament. Even where uncertainty is high and the offensive or defensive character of military assets murky, some underlying conflict of interest is needed to raise the probability of aggression above zero. [55](#)

The obvious reason why states—in this regard quite unlike individuals in civil society—do not accept such invasive arrangements and instead spend an inordinately large amount of blood and treasure preparing for war is that they typically also place a high value on particular, conflicting interests and visions of domestic and world order, which they are prepared to defend and promote with armed force if necessary. It is not the possibility that foreign governments have conflicting preferences that creates the security dilemma, it is the reality of such conflicting preferences.[56](#) To explain the varying patterns of conflict, therefore, defensive realists are driven to, in Zakaria’s words, “smuggle in” varying “domestic pathologies” that drive variation in national preferences. [57](#) This increases the indeterminacy of the explanation and violates the core defensive realist argument that states maximize security not power. Examples are numerous, in a number of cases similar criticisms have been made. Here we consider the work of Jack Snyder, Steven Walt, Charles Glaser, and Joseph Grieco.

It is to Jack Snyder’s analysis of imperialism that we owe the label “defensive realism.” Snyder sets out to explain “overexpansion”—situations in which great powers expand beyond the point where they triggers overwhelming countercoalitions and disastrous counter-pressures. For Snyder, the taproot of overexpansion lies in the misrepresentation of domestic interests such that small rent-seeking groups can profit at the expense of diffuse constituencies—a general tendency exacerbated by deliberate manipulation of ideology and log-rolling among “cartelized” interest groups. The extent to which states are prone to such pathologies is a function, Snyder argues, of the timing of industrialization. [58](#)

Snyder presents this argument as an improvement of realism by integrating domestic factors consistent with it. “My arguments stressing the domestic determinants of grand strategy,” he argues, “are fully

consistent with the defensive version of Realism"—an ascription he defends with reference, as we saw above, to Morgenthau. [59](#) Many have treated his argument as a definitive statement of defensive realism. Yet Snyder's position has also been criticized for its heavy reliance on domestic factors. Zakaria writes: [60](#)

While neo-realism is loosely depicted as leaving domestic politics out, many defensive realists in fact have displayed the opposite tendency, using domestic politics to do all the work in their theories.... in the end we are left not with a novel combination of systemic and domestic determinants, but with a restatement of the traditional *Innenpolitik* case.

At the very least, the shifting terminology of Snyder and his critics demonstrates the conceptual confusion that can result from efforts to redefine realism as including assumptions and causal mechanisms not traditionally connected with it.

More striking is that Snyder does not simply include a theoretically incoherent set of domestic factors chosen at random—a move that Gideon Rose has justified by arguing that realist factors, while not the only factors at work in world politics, are the only *generalizable* factors at work in world politics. [61](#)

Instead, there is little doubt that Snyder promulgates a classically liberal analysis of the impact of shifting state-society relations in modernizing societies on foreign policy. Not only is Snyder's theory historically indebted to John Hobson and the left-liberal and social democratic German *Innenpolitik* school, it is also a closely related to contemporary theories of the democratic peace and the role of domestic institutions in trade policy, both of which rest on nearly identical assumptions about the implications of domestic misrepresentation and rent-seeking for foreign policy. [62](#) In sum, in terms of extending realism, Snyder in fact undermines both its coherence and its distinctiveness.

Similar problems beset Steven Walt's influential analysis of alliance formation. Walt is an effective critic of neo-realism, which he rightly considers too spare to accurately explain balancing behavior. In what is intended as a positive paradigm shift beyond neo-realism, Walt supplants "balance of power" theory with "balance of threat" theory by including hostile "state intentions" alongside military technology, geography, and economic resources in his definition of the external "threat" that triggers alliance formation. [63](#)

Walt convincingly demonstrates that the primary purpose of alliances is to balance, not to bandwagon—an important contribution. Yet, as numerous critics have observed and Walt himself has conceded, combining intentions and power into a dimensions of a single variable, without an *a priori* weighting or other theoretical constraint, tends toward indeterminacy. An example is Walt's analysis of the Cold War bipolar balance in Europe—a "crucial case" for postwar realists and probably the most important single case in the late 20th century. Walt maintains that state intentions, combined with the secondary realist factor of geography, reverses the predictions derived from pure power balancing, thereby leading the West to assemble an overwhelming coalition as country after country sides with the already more powerful US-led coalition. [64](#) By combining intentions and power into a single variable, Walt's "balance of threat" approach excludes virtually no potential cause of rational balancing short of an irrational or fragmented state action. Accordingly, rather than testing his theory against a liberal or institutionalist views, he can only challenge the view that alliance behavior based on apparently irrational commitment to ideology. Yet even ideological commitment can be incorporated in "balance of threat" theory as a source of "state intentions"—as Walt does repeatedly in his book on alliances, as well as his

impressive follow-on study of revolutions and war. [65](#)

Similar slippage from realism to generic rationalism can be discerned in Charles Glaser's subtly optimistic revision of structural realism, which he terms "contingent realism." Glaser's careful analysis begins by adopting the defensive-realist assumption that states seek security, rather than power. [66](#) Under such circumstances, he argues, governments should often be able to signal benign ("security-seeking") intent in various, relatively inexpensive ways, such as arms control, defensive deployment, and unilateral restraint. Conflict and arms races should thus occur only where governments fail to manage the security dilemma, where "offense has the advantage and is indistinguishable from defense," or where governments "fail to communicate their motives." [67](#)

Yet these remaining paths to conflict depend, at least in part, on discarding the initial defensive-realist assumption that all states seek "security" in favor of the open-ended assumption that some are "greedy." Glaser, admirably clear in his assumptions, makes explicit the causal importance of exogenous variation between "security-seeking" and "greedy" states in his discussion of the need to signal motives. "Contingent realism," Glaser argues, "suggests the importance of motives" and renders standard power variables "less important." [68](#) The exogenous causal importance of preferences is also implicit in the discussion of the offense-defense balance, for—as Schweller noted above—absent a positive probability that states gain something from conquest, why would aggression ever be a realistic scenario? This leads Glaser often to invoke "greedy" states—the explanation of which is the most important item on a future agenda for disciplinary research. This may help explain a major anomaly for Glaser's revised realist theory—one that "must be explained by other theories"—namely that the USSR and US continued the arms race throughout the Cold War. [69](#) More broadly, if Glaser's assumptions about world politics subsume the exogenous influence of large variations in power, preferences, and—though he places much less emphasis on it—international institutions, the theory excludes little besides irrational behavior. [70](#)

What remains distinctively realist?

We turn finally to Joseph Grieco's much-discussed proposal to define realism in terms of states' concerns about relative gains. This attempt to apply realist theory to political economy provides another "defensive realist" example of how the line between power and preferences can become blurred when realism is not rigorously defined. Grieco posits that states are "defensive positionalists" in search of security—a desire that makes them sensitive to relative rather than absolute gains. States cooperate less—or, more precisely, in different circumstances—than the mere presence of mutual benefits might lead us to expect, since states must "pay close attention to how cooperation might affect relative capabilities in the future." [71](#) Despite much criticism of this formulation and disagreement about whether the gains in question are actually "relative," Grieco clearly captures an essential quality of realism, namely its assumption of underlying conflict—a quality to which we shall return, in what we believe to be a more constructive vein, below. [72](#)

Grieco is of course aware that one cannot define realism in terms of its prediction—relative-gains seeking—and that states do not always forego "absolute" economic benefits for "relative" geopolitical gains. Yet to state the antecedent conditions under which relative-gains seeking occurs, he is impelled to tinker with the assumption of fixed preferences. Since not all states in all situations are equally sensitive to gaps in pay-offs, he argues, we should employ a factor (termed "k") that measures sensitivity to gaps

between pay-offs (relative gains), alongside absolute gains. ⁷³ We can thus restate Grieco's causal claim as follows: When k is high, states are more motivated to seek relative gains (or limit losses). This simply displaces the causal question, however, for we are now impelled to ask: What determines the value of "k"? What motivates states to worry about relative gains? Is this motivation distinctively realist?

In considering these questions, it becomes clear that Grieco's definition of "k", very much like Walt's definition of threat, is at best vague, perhaps non-realist. Grieco generally assumes that variation in "k" is explained by issue-area. Specifically, it is always high in security affairs—an argument endorsed by John Mearsheimer and others. ⁷⁴ Yet, as many critics have pointed out, neither Grieco's analysis of post-Tokyo Round trade policy nor his other work reveal much evidence that "relative gains" in those areas could be exploited to threaten national security hence there is no reason in his framework why there should have been concerns with such gains. ⁷⁵ Indeed, studies of trade policy find that precisely those areas in which Grieco finds unexplained "relative-gains seeking" (in particular, government procurement and industrial standardization) are subject to particularly strong pressure from economic interest groups—the classic liberal explanation for protection. (Conversely, Michael Mastanduno, Stephen Krasner, Jim Fearon, and David Lake, among many others, have demonstrated how economic conflicts may emerge, giving rise to realist and mercantilist dynamics, without any involvement of security concerns. ⁷⁶) It would appear that positing *a priori* a one-to-one correspondence between security-seeking and conflict is unsustainable—as the existence of plausible non-realist theories of security suggests. Once cut loose from the claim that all security conflicts necessarily generate intense underlying conflict (a high value of k), however, the "relative gains-seeking" account of realism no longer imposes any *a priori* theoretical constraint on variation in state preferences (variation in "k")—thereby undermining the predictive power quality of the argument. ⁷⁷

The result is not simply indeterminacy, but a tendency to appropriate arguments from other paradigms. In one place, Grieco lists six sources of the value of "k". Some, to be sure, seem distinctly realist, including power trajectory, fungibility, and power gaps. Others, including whether the relationship is friendly, whether states are challengers or status-quo oriented, and the nature of interdependence in the issue area, seem more distinctly liberal or perhaps even institutionalist. ⁷⁸ The basic problem Grieco faces cannot be surmounted without a tighter definition of realism. It is simply that relative-gains concerns, conflict, inefficient bargaining, and sub-optimal cooperation are predicted by *all* major rationalist theories of IR (and some non-rationalist ones), but for varying reasons and in varying circumstances. Bargaining failures may result from inefficient bargaining under uncertainty, as institutionalists and negotiation analysts maintain, or from particularly conflictual societal preferences, as liberals argue, as well as implications for future power, as realists contend. Without a more precise specification of realism, it is impossible to distinguish the realist theory of relative-gains seeking from these other explanations. ⁷⁹

b. Power and Preferences in Neo-Classical Realism

A new generation of realists, heralded as "neoclassical realists" (NCRs) in a recent review essay by Gideon Rose, offers to resolve the indeterminacy and degeneration in defensive realism. Like defensive realists, they begin by criticizing neo-realism as too abstract, but also challenge the defensive realist assumption that states generally seek security. They, in a more uncompromising way than we, are stern critics of the resulting reliance on domestic explanations. NCR recommends instead that we return, at least as a starting point, to "offensive realism"—that is, that we choose the other pole of Waltz's loose

specification of state preferences, the pole that stresses the natural desire of all states to wield external influence. States, they argue, do not just respond defensively to threats; they exploit power opportunities. States in great power rivalries are actually seeking influence over their external environment—a view of international politics quite different than that based on the simple assumption that “states seek security.” [80](#) The proponents of this view, besides Rose, include Fareed Zakaria, Randall Schweller, and Michael Desch.

At first glance this appears a tighter theoretical position than that of the defensive realists. Yet beneath the surface NCR suffers, ironically, from precisely the same weaknesses for which its proponents fiercely criticize defensive realism: theoretical indeterminacy and creeping reliance on untheorized domestic factors due to an inability to maintain fixed assumptions about state preferences. NCRs argue—in his review essay, Rose makes this a defining characteristic of NCR—that systemic factors matter most, but domestic factors also have an influence on state behavior. Once having admitted domestic factors, however, NCRs—just like the defensive realists they criticize—provide no theoretical explanation why or under what conditions relative power should be given precedence over domestic factors. Moreover, the lack of theoretical structure permits almost any influence—shifts in preferences, power, or institutions—on rational state behavior to be considered as realist. Such *ad hoc* appeals to domestic factors, we argue, undermine, if not eliminate, the distinctiveness of NCR. Arnold Wolfers drew the consequences of this a generation ago: “One consequence of distinctions such as these [between hostile and status quo states] is worth mentioning. They rob theory of the determinate and predictive character that seemed to give the pure power hypothesis its peculiar value. It can no longer be said of the actual world, for example, that a power vacuum cannot exist for any length of time.” [81](#)

This inclination toward indeterminacy and indistinctness is apparent in the empirical work of some of NCR’s latest and brightest defenders. Zakaria, in an insightful analysis of the reasons why the US government moved toward expansion in the late 19th century more slowly and less thoroughly than shifts in relative power predict, begins by rejecting neo-realism on empirical grounds. In his influential critique of Snyder’s theory of imperialism cited above, Zakaria also criticizes defensive realism as theoretically indeterminate, reliant on domestic arguments, and, insofar as testable, empirically incorrect. Zakaria’s own theory begins instead with an offensive realist baseline, but he rejects the traditional Realist assumption of a unitary state in favor of a distinction between domestic state apparatus (state) and society (nation). State power, he argues, depends not just on control over resources, but in the ability of states to extract those resources from society. The tendency of states to expand is a function of international and domestic power of the state. Both, he argues, were necessary for late-19th century US expansion. In short, Zakaria introduces domestic state-society relations. [82](#)

This is a subtle and sophisticated effort to bridge the gap between domestic and international politics, and it is reasonably convincing in advancing a plausible case for “offensive”, rather than “defensive” realist assumptions. Insofar as states are influenced by relative power, they seem to grasp opportunities to wield influence. Yet Zakaria’s argument rests decisively on treating a state’s ability to extract societal resources not as an exogenous factor predictably related to geographical control over material resources, but as a function of particular domestic political circumstances. [83](#) Yet no general theory (or even consistent interpretation) of the sources of shifts in domestic state power, and thus national preferences, is offered. Absent such a theory, any argument about why a particular state can extract more or fewer resources from domestic society (even arguments that imply irrational state behavior) is consistent with

“state-centered realism.”⁸⁴ This is not solely an abstract problem; it is reflected in the exceptionally wide range of influences that Zakaria admits affected “the degree to which national power can be converted into state power” including technological, ideological, institutional, partisan, and racial factors.⁸⁵

Zakaria, moreover, does not introduce domestic factors randomly—such inherent indeterminacy, after all, might have offered a plausible reason, one invoked by Rose, for leaving domestic influences unexplained—but tends to focus on precisely those orthodox liberal factors cited by early 20th century “idealists” and contemporary liberal democratic peace or endogenous tariff theorists. Zakaria returns repeatedly to the core claim of democratic peace theory, namely that legislative or judicial control over the executive undermines its ability to deploy force aggressively, except where the costs are expected to be low. He also repeatedly invokes mutual recognition among republics, economic modernization, public unwillingness to increase taxes for overseas adventures or military procurement, popular opinion on questions like race, and partisan politics. Surely Morgenthau, Carr and Kennan would be hard pressed to recognize in these venerable liberal arguments a renewal of classical realism.

Randall Schweller begins with a brilliant critique of the degenerative tendencies of both neo-realism and defensive realism, but ends by opening himself to the same charge. Like Walt, Schweller proposes that we supplement realist “balance of power” theory by adding consideration of intentions, but he goes further by proposing “balance of interest” theory, which posits that state behavior and international outcomes vary with both the preferences and the power of states. After criticizing Walt for not going far enough to integrate state preferences into his analysis, Schweller asserts the primacy of variation in domestic state preferences between status quo and revisionist states. “The most important determinant of alignment decisions,” Schweller asserts, “is the compatibility of political goals, not imbalances of power or threat.”⁸⁶ Some states (“wolves” and “jackals,” he terms them) have an intrinsic desire for revision or risky gain; others (lambs” and “lions”) are more *status quo* -oriented. To simplify somewhat, the former states tend to “bandwagon for profit,” while the latter tend to balance against threats. In sum, the nature of state preferences can reverse realist predictions.

In defense of the purportedly realist nature of the distinction between status quo and revisionist powers, Schweller invokes Morgenthau.⁸⁷ Yet the divergence between Morgenthau and Schweller is instructive. Morgenthau, in this regard a true realist, introduces “status quo” and “revisionist” policies (he terms them “the policy of imperialism” and “the policy of the status quo,” and adds also the “policy of prestige”), as strategies, not preferences. That is to say, he seeks to show that policies that appear to be the result of distinctive ideologies and goals can be properly understood as tactical forms of a common “struggle for power.” Accordingly in the three chapters devoted to these policies in *Politics among Nations*, such policies are explained exclusively as responses to shifts in relative power due to factors such as “lost wars” and “weakness.” State strategies are endogenous to relative power. By contrast, for Schweller and other contemporary realists, the distinction results from exogenous variation in state preferences, which in turn reflect varied domestic circumstances and state-society relations—precisely the sort of theoretical appeal Morgenthau rejected outright.⁸⁸ As Arnold Wolfers observed, in the argument that “states that seek self-extension tend to be the initiators of power competition and the resort to violence...lies the significant kernel of truth in the idealist theory of aggression.”⁸⁹

A final example of the tendency for power-based explanations of state behavior to rest on exogenous variation in state preferences is found in Michael Desch’s analysis of great power policy in the periphery.

We include this as a characteristic example of realist policy prescription based, albeit loosely, on positive theory. Desch begins by rightly observing that conventional neo-realist analysis remain underspecified without more fine-grained variables. Desch maintains that the true strategic interests of great powers should be limited to areas of “intrinsic” importance, which “contribute to the military strength of...great power[s].” In other words, great powers need pay attention only to powerful countries, that is, those with “large, cohesive, and well-educated populations, strong economies, healthy industrial bases, essential natural resources, high level of technological sophistication, or large standing military forces,” because only such countries influence the global power balance.

It is unclear whether Desch means to imply whether this is the way great powers *actually behave* or whether the way they *should* behave. It is clear, however, that Desch displaces much of the causal weight onto non-realist variables. “Status quo” and “revisionist” powers, he argues, respond in diametrically opposed ways to the same incentives. Like Schweller and Snyder, Desch argues that a status quo powers seeks simply to “maintain the balance of power” in the region, while a revisionist power seeks to “upset the balance of power” by seeking “control for itself.” ⁹⁰ Thus, while realist theory can tell us, for example, that in the 1930s and 1940s, both the Allies and the Axis should consider the Soviet Union, China, and Mexico to be intrinsically important, the two alliances responded in contrary ways. The Axis provoked a world war by seeking to conquer them, while the Allies sought only to defend their independence, even when—as in the case of the USSR—their domestic policies and international alignments were distasteful. In short, the variation explained by non-realist factors in Desch’s analysis is not secondary; it spans nearly the entire scope of possible foreign policy.

We conclude this section by considering Gideon Rose’s effort to impose theoretical coherence on the NCR. He identifies two shared claims. First, all NCR’s insist that systemic factors are more important than domestic ones, though the latter matter too. Second, NCR’s are unwilling to explicitly theorize the sources of domestic political pressures, preferring to rely instead on historical analysis—a position he defends with a citation to Aristotle. This is a curious position, one that defends the distinctiveness of NCR on the basis of its most glaring weaknesses as a theory. In sum, Rose all but concedes that NCR can be no more than a set of *ad hoc* qualifications to and limitations on traditional realist claims. On the first claim, Rose offers neither a distinctive argument why and when systemic factors dominate domestic ones, nor a realist theory of which domestic factors matter and when. Like Waltz, he simply asserts it. On the second claim, he praises neoclassical realism’s “relative modesty about its ability to provide tidy answers or precise predictions [not] as a defect, but rather as a virtue, stemming as it does from a judicious appraisal of its object of inquiry”—in defense of which he cites Aristotle. Again the argument is by assertion; Rose, like Waltz, offers no compelling reason why we cannot generalize about domestic politics—a claim that must come as something of a surprise to those who study comparative and American politics. ⁹¹

B. Power is Whatever States Agree It Is: The Slide from Power to Institutions

The realist assumption that power is the critical exogenous variable implies not only that state behavior (and the power that influences it) remains uninfluenced by state preferences, but that such behavior remains essentially uninfluenced by international institutions. Governments cannot induce changes in their relative power by entering into multilateral commitments, unless those commitments undermine anarchy by coercively constructing a sovereign entity with autonomous control over power resources—that is, unless they involve *conquest*. For realists, institutions ratify and reflect existing power

relations; any reversal of the causal arrow threatens fundamental indeterminacy. The insistence that commitments do not become credible simply by virtue of institutionalization distinguishes realist from institutionalist logic, which adheres to nearly all the same assumptions as realism—underlying anarchy, states as rational egotistical actors, substantial conflict of interest—but argues that governments can contract among themselves to mitigate the major disadvantages of anarchy. ⁹² Yet recent realist writings not only treat international institutions as autonomous forces in world politics, but advance claims that demonstrate confidence in the autonomous power of international institutions that go far beyond conventional regime theory. After rejecting it for centuries, it appears that realists are suddenly embracing “legalism.” Here we consider the work of Joseph Grieco, Charles Glaser, Randall Schweller, and David Priess.

One example of the slide from realist to institutionalist assumptions is found in Joseph Grieco’s attempt to employ realist theory to explain European integration and, more generally, the formation of international regimes. Grieco is rightly troubled by the apparent inability of realism to account for the EU agreement at Maastricht in 1991 to move to a single currency—Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). ⁹³ For Realists, who cannot accept liberal arguments about positive-sum exchanges or institutionalist arguments about the role of regimes in creating credible commitments, this outcome appears anomalous: Why should small and large states concerned with “relative gains” ever cooperate to form an international institution, let alone one that fundamentally undermines their sovereignty?

In an original move, Grieco proposes to extend realism by proposing the “binding hypothesis.” In this view, a weak state, rather than forming a balancing coalition against or submitting to the will of a larger state, might instead enter into a commitment to allocate voting rights within international institutions so as to redistribute power from the powerful to the weak. EMU, he argues, was a Franco-German bargain in which Germany surrendered power in order to satisfy the French and Italians.

Yet by introducing an autonomous role for international institutions, this form of realism becomes at least indeterminate and perhaps also incoherent. It tends toward indeterminacy because if governments can balance against a powerful country, submit to its demands, or contract with it, few rational strategies or outcomes are excluded. Moreover, as the outcome appears to bear no clear relationship to power—Grieco presents no realist theory specifying the conditions under each alternative is likely—it is not possible to predict the likelihood of any choice *a priori*. Traditional realism predicts that powerful states benefit more from cooperation, while Grieco proposes that weak states gain more. In a synthesis, anything in between would be equally possible. Grieco himself notes the indeterminacy of the resulting empirical predictions. “It will be of intense interest to students of international politics,” he concludes, “to observe whether institutions [i.e. Grieco’s binding hypothesis] or underlying differentials of power [i.e. the realist argument] will have a greater impact on the future course of European monetary affairs.” ⁹⁴

Why, in particular, is a strong state’s commitment credible? For example, short of actually transferring financial or military power into the autonomous hands of international officials—something that *no* international organization does to a significant degree—how can the stability of EMU consistent with the realist premise that power stems from control over material capabilities? A relative-gains analysis is also quickly forced to concede a substantial positive-sum component to European monetary cooperation. ⁹⁵ How else are we to explain why monetary integration, purportedly created to strengthen the influence of France and Italy remained stable although it, Grieco concedes, actually resulted in “an

accentuation of German influence”? Or why a powerful government (in the case of EMU, Germany) accepted such an arrangement, rather than imposing a solution, institutionalized or not, on weaker countries?

Grieco’s theoretical analysis is subtle enough to perceive the problem, but the only way out is to invoke existing liberal, institutionalist, or cognitive, rather than realist, explanations. Grieco seems to accept that the historical record does not support the realist notion that Germany was balancing against the US. [96](#) Perhaps, he speculates, the Germans miscalculated the outcome, gained something from the transaction, or were forced to grant a *quid pro quo* in exchange for German unification. [97](#) Only the last, if that, could be reasonably construed as a realist (relative-gains) claim and—though this takes us beyond our discussion of realism—most scholars have concluded that it is disconfirmed by the historical record. [98](#) In sum, Grieco’s effort to extend realist theory leads him to place such great confidence in international regimes—far greater confidence than those of functional regime theorists—that he reverses the causal arrow of realist theory. Institutions are no longer a *function of* state power, nor even a factor *alongside* state power, but a *determinant* of state power. [99](#)

Like Grieco, Randall Schweller and David Priess attempt a realist explanation of institutions, but argue that traditional realism affords a role for institutions that has previously been denied by neorealists. They offer, in passing, one of the tightest formulations of realist assumptions in the literature based on states as actors within anarchy, conflictual relations, and material power as the arbiter of disputes—quite similar to that we propose below. [100](#) Yet when they turn to explaining variation in international institutionalization, they include as additional “independent variables” variation in underlying state intentions, in the types of states involved (e.g., democratic vs. non-democratic), and in issue-specific patterns of interdependence. [101](#)

This leads Schweller and Priess to focus primarily on hypotheses that bear little connection with the distribution material capabilities. In a unipolar world, they hypothesize, “which order arises and how it is maintained will depend primarily on whether the hegemon assumes the role of a liberal leader or a non-liberal despot.” [102](#) In a bi-polar world, “several different institutional patterns” are possible, “depending on state interests.” [103](#) In a multipolar environment, institutions are likely to be most widespread and effective where great powers are “satisfied with the established order.” [104](#) This view is essentially indistinguishable from a liberal view of institutions that highlights the underlying distribution of preferences; the polarity of the world system and the more specific distribution of power seems not to matter at all. Does any connection remain with the assumptions Schweller and Priess propose at the start of the article as shared “by all realists”, namely that “the nature of international interaction is essentially conflictual” and “power is the fundamental feature of international relations”? [105](#) In the end, it seems that Schweller and Priess can defend the integrity of their argument as “realist”—or as following from a coherent set of assumptions—only by repeated assertion that “traditional realists” treated institutions as important. We have already discussed and dismissed such appeals to authority. [106](#)

Finally, the slide from power to institutions is evident in Glaser’s proposed “contingent realism,” which we examined earlier in another context. Glaser argues that formal international institutions—in particular, alliances and arms control regimes—can help structure credible cooperation to overcome the security dilemma. While Glaser does not insist on an important role for international institutions in

making cooperation possible, he concedes the overlap with functional regime theory: [107](#)

Institutions...that provide information and reduce transaction costs...do not pose a problem for structural realism. Nothing about the roles performed by this type of institution conflicts with structural realism's basic assumptions.

Indeed, Glaser's central argument—formal international institutions are employed where the transaction costs of decentralized signaling and coordination are high—is in fact the core prediction of functional regime theory. Glaser defends the distinctively realist nature of the argument on the ground that it refuses to accept that international institutions “change state motives...to altruism” or “grant tremendous control to an international authority.” Yet both of these arguments have been absent from scholarly debates for nearly half a century. Neither is advocated by contemporary liberals or institutionalists—and perhaps only by a handful of constructivists. [108](#) Having incorporated both the autonomous impact of international institutions, as stressed by contemporary regime theorists, and the influence of varying state preferences stressed by liberal theory, as we saw earlier, realism degenerates into generic rationalism. Does anything distinctively realist remain?

C. Power is Whatever States Perceive It to Be: The Slide from Power to Beliefs

At the core of political realism is the ontological autonomy of material power in international relations—the wellspring of the label “realism.” Thus Ben Frankel writes in the introduction to a massive reconsideration of realism: “A key element of realism...is the assumption that there are things out there that exist independently of our thoughts and experience. When we admonish an individual to be realistic we urge that individual to give up beliefs or notions that fly in the face of reality.” [109](#) Realism's central analytical leverage, parsimony, and distinctiveness, we saw above, derives from its ability to explain social life simply through variation in the objective power context (or structure) which actors (with similar fixed preferences) find themselves, rather than the perceptions and beliefs of those actors of the world around them.

While recent realists speak of international power, there is often a shift to *perceptions* of power when it comes to explanation. If the perceptions and beliefs of statesmen consistently fail to correspond to material power relationships, then power no longer plays a central analytical role. Except in some cases where the nature of information, perceptions, and beliefs can be traced back to the distribution of material power—as in Waltz's argument about the instability of multipolarity—explanation inevitably shifts to exogenous determinants of beliefs and perceptions, and the parsimony, power, and purity of a realist explanation is lost. [110](#) Insofar as recent realists do theorize this issue, they begin a slow slide into propositions drawn from the terrain of liberals, constructivists and psychological theorists. [111](#) A few prominent examples drawn from the work of William Wohlforth, Steven Van Evera, Jack Snyder, Thomas Christensen, and Randall Schweller illustrate. [112](#)

The slide from power to perceptions is perhaps most clearly apparent in William Wohlforth's analysis of Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War. Wohlforth incisively challenges objective power analysis arguing the only useful approach—a methodological move he shares with Zakaria—is to focus on how actors perceive power. “If power influences the course of international politics, it must do so largely through the perceptions of the people who make decisions.” [113](#) Yet this has theoretical implications, too. The story of the Cold War, Wohlforth contends, is not that of national reactions to an objective power

structure, but reactions to (often mistaken) perceptions of power. Objective power shifts, he argues, “can account neither for the Cold War nor its sudden end.” Either objective measures of power are “not even roughly accurate indicators” of true power or “power does not matter” at all. ¹¹⁴ The problem here is clear. Power no longer acts as the exogenous driving variable in explanation since perceptions and power diverge. Instead, Wohlforth seems to reverse the arrow, “if one wants to know whether change in ideas is caused by changes in power relations, one must investigate changing ideas about power.” ¹¹⁵

How does Wohlforth account for these ideas/perceptions? His explanation of the end of the Cold War provides some insights. Wohlforth advances the intriguing conjecture that revisionist powers that perceive themselves as declining will not seek to alter the *status quo* but instead, may choose reform. But given that the USSR should have and did perceive relative decline in earlier periods dating back to Khrushchev why did it act differently in the 1980s? Three reasons, none specifically realist, seem central. First is the USSR’s declining (relative) economic performance in the face of the “scientific-technical revolution,” which sparked a desire to “reform socialism.” This factor Wohlforth treats as at least in part due to change in the nature of ideas about effective economic results; he does not simply argue that those who supported Soviet global influence came to the conclusion that it was growing too costly, but also that fundamental reform required a qualitatively different domestic policy open to Western markets and technology. ¹¹⁶ Second is the “revolution” in East Central Europe and the overwhelming balance of power against the USSR. ¹¹⁷ Here, however, Wohlforth exacerbates the difficulty faced by Walt: Having attributed Soviet decline to the weakness of its alliance, Wohlforth must offer a realist explanation for the ever more overwhelming coalition against the USSR. In a realist world, all other things being equal one would expect foreign governments to side more closely with the USSR as it declined, withdrew and mellowed. Wohlforth goes even further than Walt, explicitly conceding that revolutions in Eastern Europe altered “state interests” and “began to call socialism’s vitality into question.” As with Walt, Wohlforth offers no theory, let alone a realist one, of when and why changes in regime type or state intentions should matter. ¹¹⁸ Finally, he points to the different role the U.S. played in the 1980s *vis-à-vis* earlier periods of Soviet relative decline. In contrast to the past, the United States no longer “buttressed” the Soviet perception of well-being by treating it as a rising power whose interests had to be accommodated. ¹¹⁹ Power in this instance reduces to whatever one’s enemy acknowledges it to be, a theme more constructivist than realist.

While Wohlforth enriches our understanding of the Cold War shift by showing that a simple realist explanation cannot explain Soviet policy and that more differentiated theory offers intriguing and creative conjectures, his empirical findings compel him to expand the analysis to the point where almost any source of domestic beliefs, perceptions, and ideas seems consistent with “realism.” As in the case of Walt, Zakaria, and others, Wohlforth is unable to distinguish such an explanation from any non-realist theoretical alternative; he tests his explanation only against traditional realist theory. Indeed, when Wohlforth makes the exogenous sources of shifting ideas explicit, they tend to confirm many core predictions of liberal theory, whereby conflict declines in response to economic modernization, democratic transition, and shifting state intentions.

A similar slide from power to perceptions can be found in the work of Steven Van Evera, arguably the most influential among the younger generation that has revitalized theoretical debates in security studies. Van Evera’s magisterial two-volume study of the causes of war—half of which has been published, all of which has been widely cited in draft—aims explicitly to improve realism by moving beyond aggregate

measures of power in two ways. The first, as in the work of Walt, Snyder and Wohlforth, is to focus on more fine-grained measures of objective power, such as the offense-defense balance—an idea that has been tremendously influential in the field and to which we shall return in a moment. The second and in the end more decisive for Van Evera is to focus on perceptions of power structures. ¹²⁰ To an even greater extent than Wohlforth and Schweller, Van Evera explicitly rejects a random, psychological or irrational interpretation of such perceptions, or a Waltzian interpretation that treats them as an indirect consequence of power structures. Instead he attributes perceptions to the generalizable effects of militarism, nationalist ideology, manipulation by elites, and self-serving bureaucratic procedures. Van Evera, while acknowledging the power of realist theory, highlights its weaknesses and redirects us to consider a broader range of factors.

Yet if exogenous shifts in relative power, domestic preferences, and perceptions and information problems can all influence state behavior, what remains theoretically distinct about realism? Van Evera recognizes that this a potential problem: “The Realist family includes causes lying in the structure of international power and in the misperceptions of that structure, although rather limited room is allowed for misperceptions.” ¹²¹ The general determinants accorded causal primacy by Van Evera, very much like those stressed by Jack Snyder—inequalities of domestic power, biased representation of domestic interests in favor of elites, uncontrolled state elites, and aggressive ideology—are at the core of other major IR theories. Each argument is related to biases in collective national mentalities or to the political power of special domestic interest groups which mislead or coerce the less powerful in order to pursue policies to their narrow advantage—as liberals and some constructivists maintain.

What could be more classically liberal, for example, than Van Evera’s claims that misperceptions “originate with the world’s propagandists, spin-doctors, and professional obfuscators, whose self-serving falsehoods become national misperceptions” and that “publics misperceive because they are misled by national leaders, state bureaucracies, or propagandists”? ¹²² Van Evera’s influential essay, “Primed for Peace,” explains post-Cold War peace in Western Europe with reference a series of classically liberal factors. His central proposition: Economically modern, politically democratic, nationalistically satisfied governments with civilian control over the military, open education, and generous social welfare systems will not provoke war. ¹²³ Such arguments are more sophisticated than, but quite reminiscent of, the interwar writings of Norman Angell, Lionel Robbins, and Leonard Wolff. Little is gained and much is lost by terming these arguments realist.

Van Evera’s other proposed extension of realist theory, the offense-defense balance, has become a component in many realist accounts of power, as we have seen. While some argue that the offense-defense balance is an objective characteristic of military technology or the balance of forces, analysts increasingly attribute it to exogenous perceptions and beliefs. ¹²⁴ Both the promise and perils of grafting such perceptual factors onto realism are evident in the influential co-authored work of Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder.

In an innovative effort to overcome the dichotomy between defensive and neo-classical realism, Christensen and Snyder introduce perception and misperception of the offense-defense balance. ¹²⁵ In contrast to Waltz, however, Christensen and Snyder do not treat perceptions either as endogenous to power or as a random product of uncertainty. Instead, Christensen and Snyder argue that the skewed perceptions resulted from the lessons of past wars and the relative domestic power of civilians and the

military. Instead of material power, perceptions and domestic preferences become the central exogenous variable. We believe that this approach offers an intriguing conjecture for understanding the alliance choices of the great powers before the world wars. Christensen and Snyder's aspiration to synthesize different theories and levels of analysis is, moreover, a progressive step—a point to which we return in the final section.

Yet Christensen and Snyder defend their synthesis as a new and better variant of realism. It remains unclear whether, as a general theoretical claim, it is either coherent or realist. They instruct us sometimes to invoke power and sometimes the perception of power, or to combine the two in explaining alliance behavior, but do not offer a theory of when or how much each matters. How such a result could be generalized remains unclear, unless—as sometimes seems the case—Christensen and Snyder mean to leave the traditional realist analysis of power behind entirely and focus entirely on democratic peace and strategic culture. Moreover, as with Van Evera, the domestic arguments they graft onto realism are not random, but draw disproportionately on core, well-explored liberal or constructivist claims. "Realistic" policies—those that accurately adapt to relative power and military capability incentives—are expected to follow only when there is civilian control over military elites and states are not captured by "inappropriate" lessons from past wars. ¹²⁶ In sum, Christensen and Snyder's innovative argument, like those of Wohlforth and Van Evera, aspires to refine realism by expanding the notion of power to include the offense-defense balance, yet by relying on perceptions not endogenous to power. Is this synthesis uniquely realist?

A final example of the slide from power to perceptions is found in the work of Randall Schweller, whose claims about status quo and revisionist states we already considered above. Schweller seeks to craft a realist argument by arguing that the key cause of changes in state behavior during the period before World War II was an exogenous shift from multipolarity to tripolarity in the 1930s. Yet Schweller concedes that this shift was not based on an objective calculation of power resources. He explicitly argues, "statesmen act on their subjective understanding of the distribution of power, and this sometimes diverges from the objective situation." ¹²⁷ The shift to tripolarity, Schweller argues, was not an objective fact outside of the control of actors. Instead, Germany's leap from a lesser power to major power "pole" occurred as a result of Hitler's rise to power in 1933. Tripolarity was a product of Hitler's beliefs and his resulting strategy and military build-up. Similarly, Schweller argues that today Germany and Japan are not polar powers because they choose not to have military power based on their beliefs about its efficacy. ¹²⁸

Thus Schweller displaces the causes of international structure, and thence state behavior, to the domestic level. Moreover, Schweller, unlike liberal theorists, offers no theory to explain why states perceive things in particular ways. Why, for example, did Hitler take the view he did? And in analyzing the post-war world, Schweller would appear to join ranks with culturalists like Thomas Berger and Peter Katzenstein—both self-styled critics of realism—in arguing that German and Japanese anti-militarism results from the socially embedded lessons of World War II, not extant strategic opportunities and constraints. The fact that both governments are democratic surely plays an important role as well. In sum, Schweller has again reversed the causal arrow of realism. The international power structure is no longer a parameter to which states must adjust and to which analysts therefore give primacy, but a result of the ideas and actions of medium powers. Internal and external balancing are causes, not consequences, of the structure of international power.

III. Realism: A Reformulation

We believe that the preceding analysis is unambiguous. Much of what is presented today as validating and extending realist assumptions fails to do so. In addressing the theoretical vagueness and empirical weakness of Waltzian neo-realism, about which nearly all contemporary realists are in agreement, leading scholars have sought to graft onto realism exogenous variation in national preferences, beliefs and perceptions, and the international institutional and informational context. Empirically, these factors do not simply supplement or divert traditional realist predictions based on power; they override and often reverse them. Theoretically, they rest on fundamental assumptions about state behavior that differ fundamentally from those of realism. The resulting amalgams are nonetheless presented as improved variants of realism.

Three persistent problems, we have seen, result. First, *such formulations of realism tend to be ad hoc and thus barely, if at all, falsifiable*. They generally fail to specify the weighting of various types of factors, and thus the conditions under which additional influences supercede traditional power capabilities. If the analyst can sometimes invoke power and sometimes preferences, perceptions, or institutions, without theoretical constraint, what could falsify such an explanation? How can we know what any empirical result tells us about the veracity and domain of underlying realist assumptions?

Second, *new variants of realism are indistinguishable from liberalism, institutionalism, and constructivism at the level of assumptions and empirical observations*. The only premises shared by these various arguments are “minimal realist” assumptions of systemic anarchy, state rationality, and the priority of survival. These are not sufficient to define a paradigm, because they are shared by nearly all institutionalist, liberal and constructivist theories. By introducing domestic “capacity,” “interest,” “intentions” or just plain “k” not simply to help explain the power and behavior of states, realism’s strongest contemporary advocates has reduced it to a generic form of rationalism. As Waltz observes, “you can’t just add variables to a theory, you have to show how they can be incorporated as one element of a coherent theory.” ¹²⁹ Contemporary realists are left with little against which to test their theories except simpler variants of realism, extreme irrationality, or the potential for a world state. Is it surprising, then, that defensive and neo-classical realists rarely uncover any significant evidence against “realist” claims about domestic politics?

Third, *the particular causal factors introduced as extensions of realism are not distinctly realist or random, as defenders of new realist theory suggest, but lie at the core of alternative liberal, institutionalist and constructivist theories*. The new arguments advanced by contemporary realists are not particularly closely connected with the premises of traditional realism, despite the effort to stretch definitions of terms like “threat”, “power” and “state” to accommodate them. Nor are such arguments simply random historical observations beyond the reach of empirical generalization, as Rose asserts in his review essay. Instead, evidence that purports to confirm new forms of realism actually supports predictions at the very core of competing liberal, institutionalist, and (sometimes) constructivist theories. Such predictions include the exogenous importance of variation in *status quo* and revisionist intentions, in domestic political representation, in patterns of economic interdependence, in collective national ideologies and values, in perceptions of power, and in international institutions. Though these traditional targets of realist criticism bear ever increasing explanatory weight in recent realist scholarship, we are left with the misleading impression that realism is being confirmed and extended.

Unlike some other recent critics, we do not believe that these problems, evident even in the very best work discussed above, disqualify realism from further serious consideration. While nearly all current formulations of realism are inadequate, we believe that the core insight of realism—the enduring importance of the rational manipulation and constraint of relative power capabilities in influencing the outcomes of interstate bargaining over scarce resources—is fundamental to any convincing understanding of world politics. We do not concur with John Vasquez’s proposal that realism be treated as a failed paradigm or with the assertions of some rational choice theorists that we should abandon “isms” altogether in favor of the language and concepts of formal theory. [130](#)

Yet realism is in need of reformulation. The only way to combat the manifest tendency toward indeterminacy and degeneration is for realists to define realism more precisely. Such an effort requires a more developed and sharply delimited set of core assumptions. We attempt to do that here by returning to realism’s distinctive emphasis on conflict and material power capabilities. [131](#) A basic social theory of any kind, we argue, requires assumptions that delineate the identity and reasoning capacity of actors; their preferences and beliefs; the repertoire of strategies available; the components of the social structure or system; and the relationship between individual characteristics and collective outcomes. [132](#)

We propose three “core” realist assumptions that fulfill these requirements. While no single assumption is entirely original, we have not seen this formulation of any single assumption, let alone all three. We submit that these three assumptions are necessary and sufficient to define realist theory. They constitute, moreover, the broadest and most general possible formulation that preserves the traditional core of realism while distinguishing it clearly from existing liberal, institutionalist and constructivist theories. They thereby fulfill all four basic criteria of a paradigmatic theory set forth in the opening section of this essay: Taken together, they are coherent, causal, fundamental, and distinctive.

A. The Identity and Reasoning Capacity of Actors: Rational, Unitary States in Anarchy

Most realists accept the assumption that the key actors in world politics are nation-states, which are unitary and rational. While we think a commitment to a unitary rational actor is essential, the first half of this definition—the nation-state—seems unnecessarily restrictive. To be sure, in modern international relations the state is generally accepted as the dominant political jurisdiction, able to pursue a unitary foreign policy. For this reason, we therefore rightly refer to states as the primary international actors. Yet one could replace them as appropriate with tribes, domains, principalities, city-states, regional political unions, or whatever other “conflict group” enjoys a monopoly of legitimate force within territorial jurisdictions in a given world system. What is essential in realism is not the particular identity of the actors, but the ability to draw some sharp distinction between anarchy and hierarchy. Realism need only assume the existence of a set of “conflict groups,” each organized as a unitary actor, which rationally pursue distinctive goals within an anarchic setting. Each actor must have one sovereign *within* a given territorial jurisdiction, sufficient to impose unitary action, and anarchy (no sovereign) *between* jurisdictions. Realists assume, moreover, these sovereign conflict groups are rational and self-interested, that is, they select a strategy by choosing the most efficient available means to achieve their ends. [133](#)

As we have seen, however, the assumption of hierarchical states interacting rationally in an uncertain and anarchic world, taken alone, does little to distinguish realism from other major rationalist traditions of IR

theory, such as liberalism and institutionalism. Even “second image” liberal theories, which recognize domestic conflict over preference formation, tend to assume rational, unitary conduct of foreign policy. What differentiates realism involves specific substantive claims about the nature of state preferences and international structure, to which we now turn. [134](#)

B. The Nature of State Preferences: Fixed and Uniformly Conflictual Objectives

What assumption about state preferences would permit contemporary realism to avoid indeterminacy and degeneration while maximizing its explanatory domain? [135](#) We propose that realists assume that *state preferences are fixed and uniformly conflictual*. In other words, states are engaged in perpetual international bargaining over control of scarce goods. The extent of that scarcity—and therefore the expected intensity of the conflict of interests—is fixed and uniform.

Recall from our earlier analysis that the power of realist analysis comes in large part from the assumption that state preferences are fixed, while the major focus of current realist debates the most useful specification of such fixed preferences. We have seen that proposed realist assumptions about state preferences—states seek “security,” “power,” or some combination of the two—are unsatisfactory. At best each represents only one variant of realism; at worst each simply does not support even the most basic realist claims. The Waltzian claim that states seek some combination of “security” and “power” is hopelessly indeterminate, since tremendous variation in the motivations of states remains within the definition; as Wolfers observed many years ago, only self-abnegating behavior is excluded. [136](#) The defensive realist assumption that states seek “security” under the *status quo*, we have seen, does not permit us to derive much conflictual behavior. Some underlying conflict of interest must be assumed. Moreover, this assumption needlessly limits realist dynamics to security affairs—a point we return to below. The offensive realist claim that “states seek power” is closer to what we propose, but still needlessly vague, since the term “power” refers to both ends and means, that is, both autonomous control over political decisions and possession of the material resources necessary to enforce such control. [137](#)

An explicit assumption of fixed and uniformly conflictual preferences is the least ambiguous and most parsimonious assumption consistent with traditional realist theory. Only where the level of underlying conflict of among state preferences (a high value of Grieco’s “k” or Mearsheimer’s “fundamentally competitive” world) are realist considerations likely to predominate. [138](#) In this regard it subsumes offensive realism, yet without the ambiguity and potential circularity of asserting that states seek “power.” While some may view this assumption as overly narrow, it is in some ways broader than the assumptions realists usually employ. It does not, for example, exclude the arguments of defensive realists, or imply that all international interactions are zero-sum, for the assumption of “fixed, uniformly conflictual preferences” subsumes two possibilities. Either state preferences *actually are* conflictual or—as even realists commonly thought of as “offensive,” such as Mearsheimer, contend—state preferences are *on the average* conflictual and high uncertainty prevents governments from distinguishing true threats. [139](#) In the latter case, governments must make worst-case assumptions, acting “as if” preferences were fixed, uniform and conflictual. Either way, we can assume conflict of interest.

A second reason why this assumption need not imply that all interstate interactions are necessarily zero-sum is that positive-sum conflicts and tractable collective action problems may coexist alongside zero-sum conflict in a single interaction. In such circumstances, this assumption implies that realism explains interstate interactions only insofar as preferences are fixed, uniform and zero-sum (or appear so

under uncertainty), that is, only where redistribution of a scarce resource is involved. Other aspects of these interactions will require other theories. Note that we are *not* asserting that realism is the *only* theory that explains state behavior in such conflictual situations—asymmetrical interdependence or preference intensity, institutional context, and various process-level theories may also explain the outcome—only that realism does *not* explain state behavior *outside* of such circumstances. While most realists concur with Mearsheimer’s assertion that the most important aspects of world politics have an important zero-sum element and therefore believe realism to be the most powerful and fundamental of IR theories, such a claim thus requires empirical demonstration.

Over a considerable domain of world politics, it nonetheless seems plausible to expect uniformly conflictual state preferences to exist. One reason, advanced most clearly by Morgenthau, is that human beings often seek control over their environment—a generic *animus dominandi*. In short, they are acquisitive, controlling animals. (In a world of self-abnegating saints, anarchy would obviously have very different implications.) To the assumption of an *animus dominandi* must be combined—this is often overlooked—the assumption that whatever goods individuals and their states seek internationally are scarce. In a realist world, such goods must at least be scarce enough that governments are prepared to deploy costly means—war, military spending, trade restrictions, and other tools of statecraft—to impose and enforce control over them. ¹⁴⁰ Gilpin acknowledges Realism’s assumption of “scarce resources and conflict over the distribution of those resources.” ¹⁴¹ This, we believe, is the assumption that gives the classical realist critique of 20th century statecraft its distinctive flavor, and links it to modern neo-realism. As Carr put it:

The utopian assumption that there is a world interest in peace which is identifiable with the interest of each individual nation helped politicians and political writers everywhere to evade the unpalatable fact of a fundamental divergence of interest between nations desirous of maintaining the *status quo* and nations desirous of changing it. ¹⁴²

Of course this is not to assume that in such a world, rational states are necessarily prone to engage in *actual* conflict with one another, since such an outcome may be deterred by domination, bribery, or balancing.

C. Structure: The Primacy of Material Capabilities

The first two assumptions, namely that states (or other hierarchical conflict groups) are unitary actors in international politics and that they hold conflicting preferences, imply that realism is concerned primarily with the determinants of distributive interstate bargaining. These assumptions, however, remain insufficient to distinguish realist theory, for two related reasons. First, they characterize only agents, but not the structure of their interaction. We need an assumption to help determine the factors that shape the outcome of rational interactions among actors with conflictual preferences in anarchy. Second, the first two assumptions describe a world of constant background conditions. What then provides the leverage for explaining the variable outcomes we observe in world politics? Accordingly, we require a third and pivotal assumption, namely that *the outcomes of interstate bargaining are proportional to relative power, understood as the distribution of total material resources*.

Given the ambiguity and sophistication with which the term power is employed in recent debates, both in IR and in political science more generally, this assumption requires careful elaboration. The sources of political “power” when power is defined as influence are many. The factors that basic bargaining theory

identifies as potential influences of negotiated outcomes are myriad, spanning the entire spectrum of political science. They include the nature and intensity of preferences; the informational and institutional environment; the nature of the agenda; the opportunities for linkage; ideas and beliefs; and the resources at the disposal of each government. With so many potential causes, David Baldwin has argued, explanations of influence over bargaining outcomes run the constant danger of losing all generality; explanations often become issue-specific, even transaction-specific, and thereby indeterminate. If it loses all fungibility, the concept of power loses all explanatory power. ¹⁴³ This tendency, we have seen, is reflected in recent realist writings. As realists turn to variation in preferences, perceptions, and institutions, the nature and origins of state power, long central to realist debates, is increasingly neglected. The result, as we saw above, is that realist specifications of power have grown more indeterminate, often invoking *ad hoc* specifications of power, if any at all.

The most distinctively realist of the factors that influence bargaining power—and the only factor clearly distinct from the intensity of state preferences, beliefs and perceptions, the nature of international institutions, or the normative environment stressed by other major IR theories—is the total material resources within the state’s territory. We believe that this is the broadest specification of the exogenous determinants of power that both preserves the traditional realist concern with the independent role of power and prevents theoretical degeneration. It sharply distinguishes realism from liberal, institutionalist, and constructivist explanations, which predict that domestic extraction of resources varies with state preferences, perceptions, or information. Instead, in a realist world, states choose to extract a given level of resources in response to a particular strategic situation. Realists predict that all states faced with a similar strategic situation will extract the same relative level of domestic resources. The willingness to extract resources from the total—Waltz terms it “internal balancing”—is not a *cause* of the distribution of structural power, but its *consequence*. ¹⁴⁴ Thus *underlying* state power is proportional to the share each state controls of total economic and technological resources.

There is some reason to believe that control over international bargaining outcomes might be proportional to the relative total resources of actors. Bigger states possess more resources. If a given conflict is absolute—the equivalent of total war—and actors are therefore willing to use all available resources to prevail, the smaller state will run out of resources first and be overwhelmed. This, the Third Punic War or World War II, is the realist archetype, an easy case. Similarly, the more such resources a state has at its disposal, the less it values expenditure of any given increment on the margin. The same absolute increment of expenditure—whether of blood or treasure—may thus be insignificant to a large state but crippling to a tiny one. With similar underlying preferences, therefore, a large state will be more willing to expend resources and will therefore prevail. ¹⁴⁵

The precise specification of the material resources that define state power, and the way they are translated into influence, is a critical subject for debate among realists. The specification may vary across circumstances. As Baldwin has argued, the more fungible a particular type of capability—that is, the more broadly applicable a single specification of power—the more powerful and parsimonious a realist explanation. Yet variants of realism may assume different levels of fungibility. ¹⁴⁶ Many recent advances in realist theory—van Evera terms such arguments “fine-grained” realism—can be interpreted in terms of fungibility. Some power resources may, such realists argue, be better designed for offense or defense, some project only across certain geographical areas, some may be particularly appropriate to certain issue areas. Similarly, some analysts might argue that international economic bargaining power is a

function, ultimately, of the vulnerability of a country to sanctions or boycott, which might be argued to be a function of its total share of production of a good—an argument often used, for example, in the context of commodity cartels like OPEC. [147](#) What is distinctively realist about all these arguments, however, is the assumption that power on the margin is a function of a specified set of overall material resources.

The assumption that the distribution of material resources is the structure that determines the interaction among states also has implications for the particular strategies states are likely to choose. In contrast to a variety of approaches in international relations that emphasize the role of issue-specific coordination, persuasive rhetoric, relative preference intensity, international institutions, or norms in shaping bargaining outcomes, realism stresses the ability of states, absent a common international sovereign, to coerce or bribe their counterparts. This is consistent with the assumptions above. If underlying state preferences are assumed to be zero-sum, there is generally no opportunity (absent a third party at whose expense both benefit) for mutually profitable compromise or contracting to a common institution in order to realize positive-sum gains. Nor can states engage in mutually beneficial simple political exchange through issue linkage. The only way to redistribute resources is, therefore, to threaten punishment or to offer a side payment.

It follows that the less costly threats or inducements are to the sender and the more costly or valuable they are to the target, the more credible and effective they will be. Each state employs such means up to the point where making threats and promises are less costly to them than the (uniform) benefits thereby gained. [148](#) Those governments able to advance the most cost-effective threats and side-payments at least cost will benefit most from international bargaining. Realism argues that the ability of a given state to make threats and offer inducements is determined by the material resources within a state's jurisdiction, relative to those of other states.

Consistent with the realist assumption of pure zero-sum conflict among state preferences, we have focused up to now on pure distributional bargaining. Yet realism, even in this spare form, can incorporate a distinct, very limited form of positive-sum reasoning. Whereas preferences concerning underlying substantive issues may be zero-sum, it might reasonably be assumed that all states have a fixed and uniform preference to minimize the political costs of bargaining itself—the blood and treasure squandered in warfare, sanctions, and other forms of coercion. If so, states have a shared incentive to bargain efficiently. It is on the basis of their recognition of this shared incentive, we would argue, that realists from Thucydides to Morgenthau stressed the importance of “moderation” in statecraft. [149](#)

Assuming rational behavior, the ability to bargain efficiently turns, among other things, on the level of uncertainty about power resources and preferences, which, according to realists, are themselves either random (in the case of preferences) or a function of the distribution of resources (in the case of power). By focusing on the latter possibility, realists can predict the efficiency of bargaining—and perhaps the outbreak of war—as a product of the power structure. Charles Glaser and others, following Robert Jervis, argue that the extent to which offensive and defensive forces can be clearly distinguished has a similar influence on systemic stability. Waltz argues that warfare is more likely in a multipolar world than it is in a bipolar world due to the difference in complexity—a position clearly distinct from the institutionalist focus on regimes or the liberal focus on signals stemming from particular domestic political arrangements; other realists have argued the opposite. While these empirical claims are hotly debated, we can surely agree that they are distinctively realist, because they emphasize the exogenous impact of the

distribution of material resources. For realists, opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation are limited to the efficient manipulation of *means*. Underlying preferences across the substantive *ends* at stake remain zero-sum or randomly distributed behind a veil of uncertainty; thus they do not offer an opportunity for joint gains.

This assumption offers, nonetheless, the basis for a coherent, clearly defined realist analysis of cooperation. The assumption that states bargain by threats and inducements based on total material resources captures, for example, some variants of hegemonic stability theory (HST), which stress the ability of strong states to overcome opposition to cooperation. We return to this below.

IV. Broader Implications: The Practical Benefits of Reformulating Realism

We have argued that realists can avoid theoretical degeneration and isolation only by reformulating realism more precisely. This requires a return to some basic verities. We believe that the three assumptions proposed above—hierarchical states act rationally under anarchy, state preferences are fixed and uniformly conflictual, power defines the structure which determines the outcomes of state interaction—constitute the broadest theory consistent with maintenance of a clear distinction between realism and its competitors. It is a formulation more intuitively plausible than existing “minimalist” definitions because it actually supports *prima facie* predictions favorable to the expected “pathologies” of a realist world, such as internal balancing and alliance formation on the basis of power capabilities, close attention to future control over resources (“relative-gains seeking”), and the dominance of great powers. It is broadly consistent with the pre-modern realism of Thucydides, the early modern realism of Machiavelli and Hobbes, the classical realism of Morgenthau and Carr, the structural realism of Waltz and Gilpin, and today’s defensive and offensive realism—though it does not assume that every argument these thinkers advanced, particularly those they themselves did not treat as such, is by definition realist.

At the same time, this quadripartite definition—unlike any among the existing paradigmatic formulations or applied variants of realism reviewed above—meets all four criteria of a social science theory set forth in the first section of this essay. Our formulation is internally *consistent*, in that it involves no contradictory assumptions. It is consistently *causal*, in that it clearly distinguishes exogenous variables, endogenous variables, and constants; and it does not seek to define realism in terms of the behavior it predicts. It is theoretically *fundamental*, in that it contains the assumptions necessary to any rationalist theory, while focusing causal analysis on one fundamental determinant of rationalist social behavior, namely resources. Finally—and most importantly, given our criticism of existing formulations—it is clearly *distinct* from existing liberal, institutionalist, and constructivist theories. Any exogenous role in world politics for domestic political institutions, economic transactions, ideational influences, and international institutions is clearly excluded, though such factors may of course be important intervening variables.

Are claims and counterclaims about proper paradigmatic formulations of any practical import to political scientists and historians conducting empirical research about world politics? Some may maintain that they are of solely semantic significance. Like those who advanced the formulations we criticize above, however, we maintain that proper definition of basic theories matters. Such theories shape theoretical debates, structure empirical research, and underlie pedagogy. We believe that consistent adherence to our proposed reformulation promises the following four practical benefits. By linking hypotheses more

closely and consistently with assumptions, it would: (A) clarify what is at stake in empirical investigations; (B) permit more decisive tests among existing theories; (C) define more sharply the empirical domain of realist theory; and (D) lay a superior foundation for synthesis between realism and other theories.

A. Assumptions and Hypotheses: Clarifying What Is at Stake

A research program based on our reformulation of realism here would more accurately reflect the theoretical implications of new empirical findings. Testing theories is a way of evaluating the assumptions that underlie them. The proper identification of those assumptions is the most important reason why the semantics of paradigmatic debates matters. A casual reading of recent realist research would lead one to believe that realists have successfully found innovative ways to build on core realist assumptions in order to explain new aspects of world politics.

In some cases, this is true. Recent realist innovations by the theorists discussed here—greater attention to geopolitical distance and offense-defense dominance in alliance formation (Walt), investigation of the offense-defense balance and the possibilities for unilateral signaling (Van Evera and Glaser), the renewal of “offensive” realism (Zakaria), the emergence of a distinctively realist interpretation of the end of the Cold War as a response to geopolitical decline (Wohlforth), the refocus of realist theory on conflict (Grieco)—refine and enrich our understanding of the relationship between material power and state behavior in a conflictual and anarchic world system. In addition, other realist works—John Mearsheimer’s provocative predictions about the future of Europe, Dale Copeland’s study of major power war, Joanne Gowa’s analysis of “security externalities,” Christopher Layne’s analysis of unipolarity, and Robert Gilpin’s mercantilist analysis of international economic order, for example—remain true to the traditional realist focus on power. ¹⁵⁰ These modifications and applications demonstrate the enduring vitality of realism. News of its obsolescence is premature.

Yet many other arguments recently appended to the realist corpus invoke in fact long-standing liberal and institutionalist claims based on fundamentally non-realist assumptions about the exogenous impact of variation in preferences, beliefs, information, and institutions, not material resources. If assumptions rather than semantic self-identification be the judge, can there be any doubt that Van Evera’s arguments about the economic, political, and cultural modernization of post-Cold War Europe, Snyder’s neo-Hobsonian argument about logrolling coalitions, or Schweller’s distinction between status quo and revisionist states are quintessentially liberal (or “liberal constructivist”) claims? Is not Zakaria’s central claim—that extraordinary dependence on legislative and popular support decisively constrained late 19th-century U.S. foreign policy—akin to the claim in the democratic peace literature, namely that democratic leaders are blocked from making war by legislative and popular pressure? Is not Grieco’s argument that EMU credibly commits major sovereign powers to an international institution in order to balance out the gains from cooperation a quintessentially institutionalist proposition? Little is gained by distinguishing realism as a theory, only to reintroduce non-realist arguments by loosening the specification of core concepts. Acceptance of a reformulated realism would clarify what is in fact a realist argument and what is not, and thereby refocus scholarly debate on the enduring issues of world politics raised by realism’s skepticism of intentions, ideology, and institutions.

More broadly, we believe that a central issue in IR today—as it has been for two hundred if not two thousand years—is to assess the relative influence on world politics of, and the interactions among, three factors: the distribution of material resources, the distribution of preferences, and the distribution of

information, beliefs, and norms. (This is true, we submit, regardless of the language one uses to describe theories—formal or informal, traditional or modern.) These three categories of potential influence—power, preferences, information/ideas—roughly correspond to the three major categories of modern rationalist international relations theory, namely realism, liberalism, and institutionalism. (Constructivist arguments, less well-defined, spread over the second and third categories, sometimes without the underlying assumption of purposive behavior shared by these theories.) These theories also correspond to the three basic determinants of actor behavior in fundamental rationalist social theory: resources, tastes, and beliefs/information. [151](#) By structuring empirical research in IR around the relative importance of (or, as we shall see in the next section, the interaction among) these three factors, therefore, we render major IR theories more consistent with each other and with basic social theory.

B. Decisive Tests among Competing Theories: The Virtues of Limits

A proper formulation of realism would, moreover, encourage more direct testing of realist hypotheses against liberal or institutionalist competitors. We noted above repeatedly the curious insularity of most contemporary realist writings, whereby there is a striking reluctance to test realist hypotheses against any but the most extreme non-realist theories. Walt, Van Evera, Rose, Schweller, and Zakaria, among others, contrast their arguments either against other versions of realism, or against theories that presume irrational state behavior. In sum, loose formulations of realism *discourage decisive empirical testing against fundamentally competing rationalist views*.

A clear formulation of realism restores the possibility of decisive tests among theories. This has the potential to open a number of new and compelling areas for empirical confrontations among theories that are currently blocked by contemporary minimal realist formulations. Consider the following:

- **Imperialism:** By combining power and preferences in his explanation of imperialism, Snyder—as Zakaria incisively observes—blurs the relative importance of the two. It would be most useful to assess how much each contributes to imperialism—a task for which Snyder’s book offers a useful point of departure.
- **Alliances:** Walt, by structuring his analysis of alliance formation as a dichotomous contest between the “balance of threat,” on the one hand, and irrational ideology, on the other, subtly discourages empirical investigation between realism and alternative explanations. How much of alliance behavior can be explained by capabilities, geography, and technology and how much by the decidedly non-realist category of “intentions”? The results of such a fine-grained test would certainly be of interest to scholars and policy-makers alike.
- **Expansion of Influence :** An examination of neo-classical realist studies of expansion, including those by Zakaria and Schweller, to determine the relative influence of power vacuums, on the one hand, and “strong” domestic states or “revisionist” aggressors, on the other. Both Schweller and Zakaria begin to move in this direction, but since neither explicitly separates, develops, and tests non-realist theories, it is impossible to discern the relative influence of each from their conclusions. [152](#)
- **Cooperation:** Grieco, by structuring discussions of cooperation around the dichotomy of “absolute-gains seeking” and “relative-gains seeking,” discourages investigation of competing sources of conflictual behavior. Are liberals correct to attribute conflict to deadlocked preferences, realists right to invoke security externalities, or institutionalists justified to blame coordination (bargaining) failure? Current realist theory, which combines all three into “relative gains seeking,”

evades this question.

- Causes of War and Peace: In their studies of hot and cold wars, Van Evera and Wohlforth focus simply on power and perceptions of power. In doing so, they neglect alternative, more parsimonious explanations offered by constructivists and liberals for the perceptions that they conclude are at the heart of world politics.
- Hegemony: David Lake has isolated three different variants of hegemonic stability theory, each grounded in a separate aspect of international leadership. Using our theoretical labels, he isolates a liberal variant stressing variation in preferences resulting from differential competitiveness, an institutionalist variant stressing the provision of institutional infrastructure for efficient cooperation, and a realist variants stressing the hegemonic provision of resources that permit “follower” governments to defray the short-term costs of adjustment, in exchange for which the hegemon gains influence over the terms of future cooperation or benefits from security externalities. The latter variant is, in our view, distinctively realist—despite the existence of long-term mutual benefits—since the solution to the bargaining problem involves overcoming a conflict of interest, albeit short-term, by employing material threats or inducements related to total capabilities to induce compromises. [153](#) There has been little attention paid to the extent to which the cooperation observed in major cases of hegemonic leadership can be explained by realist, as opposed to liberal and institutionalist variants? [154](#)

We believe such more fine-grained empirical debates—and many more—would be rekindled if a reformulated realism gained wider acceptance. Indeed, they would become theoretically inescapable.

C. The Benefits of Boundaries: Defining the Proper Explanatory Domain of Realism

One advantage of our reformulation is that it offers a more plausible *a priori* definition of the predicted empirical domain of realist theory. [155](#) Assertion of blanket preeminence undermines the credibility of a theory. Acceptance of assumptions that impose hard *a priori* limits on the empirical domain a theory is a sign of theoretical maturity. We have seen that the indeterminacy in recent “minimalist” formulations of realism stems in large part from the efforts to extend it to explain phenomena—from European integration to the underlying sources of “aggressive” or “predatory” state preferences—to which it may very well not be suited. No single theory can or should claim to explain all of world politics, or to be empirically preeminent under all circumstances. In the case of realism, such limits would unequivocally signal the abandonment of the sort of universalistic ambitions that fueled claims about “isms”—“realism” vs. “idealism”, “systemic” explanation vs. “reductionist” description—over the past half century of IR theory.

The proper empirical scope of a theory follows from its assumptions. The three assumptions we propose suggest a domain that differs quite substantially from that claimed by contemporary realists. Most realists today assert either that realism always enjoys priority or, according to Mearsheimer, Grieco and others, that it dominates other theories wherever security issues or the threat of military force is involved. [156](#) (This follows from the , unnecessarily narrow definition of realism as dealing with the search of states for security.) Our definition implies, by contrast, that realism is most useful in cases of severe conflict of interest, that is, cases in which the intensity of underlying interests for at both parties are high, relative to the costs of exercising power. If the underlying preferences at stake are not intense, relative to the cost of exercising power, there is little incentive to coerce or induce. Low conflict tends to characterize security disputes among advanced industrial democracies—explaining, perhaps, the suppression of realist politics

among them. Preferences must be intense and conflictual for both actors, otherwise relative preference intensity is likely to dominate the outcome, as when a much smaller country prevails in a war due to much more intense concern about the substantive stakes. (Recall, in this regard, that realism must assume relatively uniform preferences. [157](#)) In short, realism should therefore apply only where intense conflicts of interest arise over interests deemed sufficiently vital that all governments involved are willing to sacrifice a large proportion of national material resources in order to prevail. In other words, as Steve Van Evera has observed, realist politics requires at least one committed “aggressor” and, we add, at least one country determined to resist. It is only within the set of countries that select into this subset, a recent analysis by Fearon suggests, that deterrence theory can properly be tested. [158](#) Realist claims are limited, therefore, to interactions among states motivated by overlapping nationalist claims, economic interests, or political demands sufficiently strong as to induce maximal application of force.

One empirical implication is that realist theory does not, as realists have long argued, apply across the board to security affairs. Consider, for example, the Boer War, Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland, and more recent peripheral conflicts in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Chechnya, in which “a strong preference for the issue at stake can compensate for a deficiency in capabilities.” [159](#) Our formulation of realism explains why realism fails to explain these cases. In such cases, realist theory is not disconfirmed, but is simply inapplicable and inappropriate, since its assumptions are not met, since at least one party did not feel that the issues at stake were of paramount importance. In such a case, Liberal theory—which stresses the relative intensity of underlying preferences—may well provide a better guide to the outcome. [160](#)

The result of specifying the proper domain of realist theory is thus not only to constrain realism, but also to facilitate empirical verification of realist claims that have previously appeared to be disconfirmed. As in the wars mentioned above, tests of realism to cases in which its assumptions obtain, thereby eliminating false negative tests. In this regard, a leaner realism may be meaner. We agree, moreover, with Zakaria and Rose’s complaint that non-realists, often unaware of the subtle long-term effects of shifting power structures, sometimes test simplistic variants of realism or implicitly incorporate power factors into their analysis without recognizing them. By clearly separating domestic changes induced by international power concerns from those induced by societal trends or international institutions, stronger support for realist claims might emerge from such cases. [161](#)

Some may yet suspect that we slyly seek to narrow realism’s empirical domain to insignificance. In fact we believe the opposite is the case. Far from limiting the domain of realism *a priori*, we seek to encourage realists to maintain their traditional trans-historical aspirations. As Gilpin puts it: “The nature of international relations has not changed over the millennia ... If somehow Thucydides were placed in our midst, he would...have little trouble in understanding the power struggle in our age.” [162](#) In some ways our formulation is in fact broader than conventional ones. We view our reformulation as an open invitation to propose realist explanations for phenomena in world politics most realists ignore or even exclude *a priori*.

We seek to expand realist thinking along a number of dimensions. The hierarchical political units in question may be tribes, cities, provinces, not just states. We do not limit realist analysis to concerns about “security.” Political units motivated by *any* of the general human motivations identified by realists from Thucydides to Morgenthau—fear, greed and honor—may find themselves embroiled in conflicts so

intense that threats and inducements based on total resources are credible. The scarce goods in question may be agricultural land, trading rights, and allied tribute, as in the time of Thucydides; imperial dominion, as observed by historians from Ancient Rome through the Renaissance; religious identity, dynastic prerogatives, and mercantilist control, as in early modern Europe; or national and political ideology, as in the 20th-century.

Our formulation of realism applies, moreover, equally well to economic or ideological conflict, since “economic and technological competition,” Waltz observes, “is often as keen as military competition.” [163](#) In addition to realist arguments about “security externalities” advanced by Waltz, Grieco, Joanne Gowa, and others, there is no reason to exclude from the realist domain the use of commercial or financial sanctions, boycotts, and inducements to achieve economic ends—commonly termed “mercantilism”—regardless of whether the outcome is connected with security. [164](#) Similarly, we see no reason to exclude the realm of ideas and culture. Barry Posen and John Mearsheimer have recently argued that nationalism can be the product of international security competition and is not simply the product of mass culture and perceptions. [165](#) Such moves would, we believe, strengthen realist theory. Realists need only confirm in each case that underlying conflict of interest is intense and symmetrical, and that the cost of deploying power is proportional to total material resources.

Finally, we think that our reformulation, despite its assumption that the substantive purposes of states must be assumed to be conflictual, opens the door to the use of richer bargaining models that include a carefully delimited measure of positive-sum interaction. This is because we assume that states generally share an interest in reduce the transaction costs of interstate interaction—defense spending, coercive destruction, economic warfare—even if underlying conflict of substantive preferences persists. There is thus room to expand a realist analysis in a direction suggested by Glaser, in which sending costly signals of intent, as well as actually employing resources to coerce or induce changes in foreign behavior, play a central role in realist analysis—thereby generating “optimistic” as well as gloomy predictions. [166](#)

D. Toward Multicausal Explanation: A Firmer Foundation for Theory Synthesis

Some readers may object that debates among uncausal explanations of world politics are unnecessarily limited. Is it not unrealistic to maintain that patterns of important, complex events in world politics are the result of any single factor? Doesn't excessive attention to “isms” encourage sectarian and semantic battles between schools that would be better treated as elements in a broader rationalist approach to IR? Is not a more eclectic form of theory synthesis the real goal of defensive and neo-classical realists, however they label their empirical claims?

We agree. Multicausal explanation in IR is desirable, even imperative. But multicausality without a rigorous structure only muddies the waters, encouraging *ad hoc* argumentation and obscuring the results of empirical tests. We believe that one of the major advantages of our reformulation of realism is that it offers an easily operationalizable and more internally consistent method for synthesizing realism with other theories than existing formulations, which we term here the “two-stage” or “two-step” method. [167](#) In doing so, it tells us even more about the proper empirical domain of realist theory.

Our reformulation of realism allows it to be incorporated into the powerful simplifying guide that rationalism offers for integrating analysis of preferences and power: the “two-step.” As Gordon Tullock and others have argued for decades, both a science of preferences and a science of interaction are

necessary to explain rational behavior and social outcomes. ¹⁶⁸ Analysis of world politics, in which (most rationalist theories agree) states are the relevant strategic actors, requires that the strategic logic of realism be clearly distinguished from the domestic and transnational logic of preference formation. Liberal theories focus on exogenous variation in underlying state preferences (not policies or strategies), which are explained as a function of domestic and transnational state-society relations. The three main variants of liberal theory—republican, commercial, and ideational liberalism (or “liberal constructivism” ¹⁶⁹)—examine how different societal influences on state policy form and are transmitted to governments. Both realist and institutionalist theory, by contrast, take certain (differing) configurations of state preferences as given and focus on the impact of exogenous variation in external systemic constraints—resources in the case of realists and information in the case of institutionalists. The analyst concerned with state preferences will find comparative advantage in liberal theory; the analyst interested in explaining interaction and its outcomes where preferences are fixed and dominant strategies do not follow directly from the configuration of preferences, realist or institutionalist theory may be more useful. Stephen Krasner’s well-known metaphor captures this insight: If institutionalism explains whether governments reach the Pareto-frontier and realism explains their position along it, liberalism defines the shape of the Pareto-frontier itself. We note in passing, however, that realist theory is not the only theory that can explain bargaining outcomes: institutionalist and liberal theories, for example via transaction costs and preference intensity, may do so as well.

The “two-step” is a more defensible and internally consistent approach than that commonly employed today. Waltz, Keohane, and many leading scholars—including those whose work we analyze in this paper—recommend that we synthesize theories by considering realism first (with preferences assumed to be invariant) and then introducing competing theories of domestic politics, state-society relations, and preference change as needed to explain residual variance: “liberalism...makes sense...within the explanatory constraints imposed by realism.” ¹⁷⁰ Yet this conventional procedure, as both of us have argued elsewhere, lacks any coherent methodological or theoretical justification. Methodologically, it overtly introduces omitted variable bias by arbitrarily privileging realist explanations of any phenomena that might be explained by both realist and liberal theories, without ever testing the latter explanation. The studies by Schweller, Zakaria, Snyder, Walt and others offer a clear example: We never discover how much a preference-based explanations of state behavior might explain on their own, because only extreme variants, such as irrational commitment to ideology, are tested, while more widely accepted variants appear only as appendages to realist claims. Theoretically, the conventional approach contradicts its own assumption of state rationality and fixed preferences, which implies precisely the opposite: It is impossible to model strategic interaction without first determining preferences independently of the strategic circumstances. If these preferences vary across states and issues, a liberal theory is required to explain how they vary. ¹⁷¹

As a result, scholarship is moving toward the “two-step.” In area after area of empirical research into world politics—the study of deterrence, hegemony, alliance formation, international negotiation, economic sanctions, European integration, multilateral cooperation—scholars have retreated to what Keohane terms the realist “fall back” position: First the analyst observes or explains the pattern of state preferences (using liberal theory), then where appropriate, then she employs a bargaining model to consider the role of threats and inducements, based on material capabilities, informational asymmetry, and preference intensity, and to help explain the resolution of conflicts. Some scholars add yet another step, institutionalization or institutional choice, to the end: States define national preferences, bargain to a

substantive agreement, then seek to institutionalize that agreement. [172](#)

While use of the “two-step” model to explain static bargaining outcomes follows, in our view, directly from the rationality assumption shared by realism and many other theories, it is important to recognize that as one moves away from static decisions toward long-term change, the explanatory domains suggested by the two-step—liberalism explains preferences while realism or institutionalism help explain interaction—becomes increasingly dependent on specific empirical attributes of the situation. From Otto Hintze to Charles Tilly, realists have made a case for preference and identity formation via the “second image reversed,” arguing that conflict and war have definitively shaped states and their desires, such that the very identity and preferences of states adapt over time. [173](#) Similarly, institutionalists both of a regime and constructivist variety argue that over time institutions can also shape preferences. [174](#) This dynamic view of preference construction may allow for much more complex claims about the relationship between realism and its competitors in the “two-step.” [175](#)

Still, by clearly specifying the assumptions about state preferences involved, our reformulation of realism encourages acceptance of the “two-step” synthesis as a first-cut explanation of discrete episodes of state behavior. This would, we believe, permit realists who seek to investigate domestic factors to draw more explicitly on vibrant bodies of relevant non-realist theory, such as the literature on the democratic peace, economic interdependence, ideas in foreign policy, and credible commitments. The similarities between theories of domestic political institutions in foreign economic policy and in the study of the democratic peace, for example, should present an opportunity for greater exchange of ideas across the IR sub-field as a whole. At the same time, a clearly defined realist theory about the role of material resources in shaping the outcome of interstate conflict offers a salutary correction to those liberal and institutionalist theories that ignore or attempt to implicitly smuggle power into their analysis. [176](#)

V. Conclusion

Is anybody still a realist? Of course. Were it otherwise, the study of world politics would be in a truly sorry state. Realism remains one of the most vital of IR research traditions. As we noted above, there are recent realist writings—recent work by Dale Copeland, Joanne Gowa, Christopher Layne, John Mearsheimer, Barry Posen, and Kenneth Waltz, for example—entirely consistent with core realist assumptions. Perhaps even more importantly, many aspects of the works discussed above make innovative and valuable contributions to the development of realist theory, properly defined, as well as contributing, albeit less explicitly, to the development of other theoretical traditions. There is much to be said in defense of the empirical insights and mid-level theorizing in the works we have criticized above; each clearly belongs among the most fruitful advances in recent IR scholarship.

Yet many fewer scholars and arguments are realist than widespread use of the label suggests. We are thus critical of the discourse and theory development much of contemporary realism, because contemporary discourse greatly overstates the extent to which recent empirical results validate realist assumptions about world politics. This has occurred because realists, in an apparent effort to explain phenomena for which previous formulations of realism lack a plausible account, have generated “minimal” formulations that are generically rationalist rather than distinctively realist. Such formulations exclude few, if any

causes of rational state behavior (and often little irrational behavior) in world politics, thus evading—sometimes preventing outright—any disconfirmation through comparative theory testing. Recent realists increasingly invoke fundamental causes of state behavior that their predecessors dismissed in principle—notably the preferences of states derived from domestic political institutions, economic interests and social modernization, the influence of societal beliefs and perceptions, and the power of international institutions to bind states. The resulting explanations, we argue, no longer meet the minimal standards of rationalist social theory or serve as reliable guides to the true theoretical significance of empirical findings. In short, there is a great deal less realism today than meets the eye.

To combat this slide into theoretical indeterminacy and degeneration, we have proposed a refocused and more robust definition of realism. In doing so we reassert the two elements that have traditionally made realism distinct and important — fixed, conflictual preferences and the centrality of an autonomous structure of world power. As compared to existing variants of realism, we argue, this reformulation is more coherent internally, more consistent with fundamental rationalist social theory, more clearly distinct from competing explanations, and more likely to encourage decisive empirical tests. Most importantly—because we believe therein lies the future of IR theory—it is more appropriate for multicausal synthesis with other rationalist (liberal and institutionalist) theories, whether in a “two-step” model of the kind we explored or in other ways. Conceptual synthesis, not conceptual stretching, is the future of realism. [177](#)

We propose this formulation in the hope it will clarify realist research, to be sure, but also in the hope it will clarify broad theoretical debates in IR. Such debates are currently regressing back to the ideological debates of the 1940s, when all who believed in self-interested behavior by rational security-seeking states called themselves “realists” and labeled their interlocutors “idealists.” Others left out of this dichotomy—notably those who stress the rational pursuit of varying national preferences and the rational construction of international institutions—are increasingly rejecting the notion of “grand theories,” such as realism, altogether. This insularity, we believe, threatens to divert analysis from the central and enduring historical, policy, and social scientific issues raised by international politics—many of which involve debate among theories that accept that foreign policy is made by rational security-seeking states acting within an anarchic, conflictual world system. In such debates, realism should signal far more than a commitment to rationality and anarchy; it is a commitment to a *particular* rationalist theory of state behavior in anarchy, one that stresses material power and conflict. In order to have a healthy debate, however, a clear set of basic first-order theories, and related empirical research, is required. We hope that this essay will contribute to exactly that development in realism, a theoretical tradition that has been and should continue to be central to the study of world politics.

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Endnotes

Note 1: Acknowledgements. [Back](#).

Note 2: For empirical critiques see Vasquez 1993, 1997; Schroeder 1994, 1995. For rejoinders, see Waltz 1997; Christensen and Snyder 1997; Elman and Elman 1995, 1997; Schweller 1997; Walt 1997. [Back](#).

Note 3: Frankel 1996, ix-xx. [Back](#).

Note 4: For a view that one theory must dominate, see Kapstein 1995. [Back](#).

Note 5: Van Evera, cited in Frankel 1996, xiii; Walt 1997. On criteria for theory assessment, Lakatos 1970; Frankel 1996, xiii-xv. Let us be clear. Beyond the notion that a “core” of distinctive, non-contradictory assumptions must lie at the heart of any theory, we are not invoking Lakatos or Lakatosian criteria for judging such paradigms. Nor do we seek to pick any quarrel with those who do. To be sure, Lakatos himself was skeptical about applications of his criteria to social science. It seems to us that if it does apply to IR, it is probably at the a deeper level—rationalism vs. socialization, for example—not at the level of competing rationalist theories, none of which makes a reasonable claim to universality. Even this has been questioned. Yet our argument does not depend on holding a specific fine-grained philosophy of science. Beyond this conjecture, we leave the finer points of comparing “research programs” on Lakatosian terms to those more qualified than ourselves. E.g., Elman and Elman 1997; Vasquez 1997. [Back](#).

Note 6: See Lakatos 1970, 131-32. More specifically, when the conceptual apparatus grow more swiftly than the expansion in new predictions, we lose confidence in the research program. Lakatos terms this “degeneration”. For a debate about criteria, see Vasquez 1997; Elman and Elman 1997, 924. [Back](#).

Note 7: We reject the Waltzian distinction between “theories of foreign policy” and “theories of systemic outcomes,” as well as the claim that the determinants of the former are domestic, those of the latter “external” to the state. Though certain theories may have certain strengths, there is no reason in principle why realist models should be unable to explain individual foreign policies: if a balance of power system emerges, it seems plausible to predict that each state is pursuing a strategy consistent with this outcome. Waltz himself, as has often been noted, uses them in that way. Economists have long since rejected any deeper distinction. We believe that most theorists conflate this distinction with the more fundamental distinction between “preferences”, on the one hand, and “resources” and “information”, on the other. The latter distinction, one grounded in basic rationalist social theory, we view as fundamental. See Zakaria

1995, 1998; Elman 1996; Tellis 1995, 75-80. For a discussion of the components of a general rationalist explanation, with an example drawn from international relations, see Coleman 1990, 11-13, 28-29.

[Back.](#)

Note 8: Coleman 1990. [Back.](#)

Note 9: Alexander 1987. Coleman 1990, distinguishes purposive and rational explanations, on the one hand, from those that presuppose expressive behavior.. Imitative behavior—sometimes termed the logic of appropriateness—if not motivated indirectly by rational adaptation, might constitute another category. See Finnemore 1996, 28-31; March and Olsen 1989. [Back.](#)

Note 10: Lakatos 1970. [Back.](#)

Note 11: There are of course a variety of arguments outside of these two categories. [Back.](#)

Note 12: For examples of each see Keohane 1983, 1984; Krasner 1983; Axelrod 1984; Oye 1986; Ruggie 1983; Cox 1986; Finnemore 1996; Wendt, forthcoming. For some of the linkages among these different schools, see Finnemore and Sikkink 1998. [Back.](#)

Note 13: Keohane and Nye 1977; Doyle 1986; Cooper 1968; Moravcsik 1997; Kupchan 1994; Katzenstein 1996, 1996b. In this paper we do not attempt to explore the tensions between individualism and holism that exist across these different accounts. We also do not consider whether realism may *also* be degenerating into non-rational explanations — i.e. ones not based on a model where actors attempt to efficiently match means to ends. [Back.](#)

Note 14: We cite examples from the work of Randall Schweller, Fareed Zakaria, Jack Snyder, Ashley Tellis, and many others below. Even Guzzini, perhaps the most sophisticated epistemologically of recent intellectual historians of realism, slips into such reasoning, for example when he criticizes Keohane for distinguishing Institutionalism from Realism by arguing that “ideas on the instrumental role of institutions are certainly taken into account—nearly all the classical Realist writers were after all international lawyers....many Realist writers believed...in the idea of a Concert.” Guzzini 1998, 156. [Back.](#)

Note 15: Doyle is a fine example of a scholar who rises above this. In his intellectual history of liberalism and other IR theories, he stresses the ambiguity and complexity of the intellectual pedigree; in his path-breaking empirical work on the democratic peace, he uses a more rigorous definition. [Back.](#)

Note 16: Doyle 1997, 200. Also Guzzini 1998, 187-188. [Back.](#)

Note 17: We are concerned here with social science. Yet those with different concerns may see indeterminacy as a virtue. Guzzini recommends that we should turn back to older theorists to recapture a sense of the “indeterminacy of politics, and of politics as a practical art and not an abstract model.” Guzzini 1998, 187, also ix. Michael Doyle has recently distinguished three separate theoretical strands within the classical realist tradition: Machiavelli's "fundamentalism," which emphasizes the importance of individual ambition; Hobbes' "structuralism," which emphasizes the importance of the international system; and Rousseau's "constitutionalism," which emphasizes the importance of unit-level factors such as the nature and strength of state-society relations. All three strands, he argues, have their origin in Thucydides' "complex" realism, which incorporates variables from each level of analysis. Modern

fundamentalists such as Hans Morgenthau are the heirs to Machiavelli, and modern structuralists such as Waltz are the heirs to Hobbes. The authors treated here, by contrast, are if anything the heirs to Rousseau; as such, they are still realists, but "remarkably complicated one[s]." Doyle's concludes by warning that if we "want to retain the range of insight embodied in the works of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Rousseau ...we need to reject a monolithic conception of a Realist model." Doyle 1997, 195, also 137-160. For analyses stressing the contradictions among "classical" realists, see Smith 1986; Kagan 1995; Gellman 1984; Schmidt 1998, 221. [Back.](#)

Note 18: Morgenthau 1973, 5, 7-8, 12. Still the most penetrating critique is Tucker 1953, Osgood and Tucker 1967. Morgenthau 1973 argues further: "The intention of this book...is to present not an indiscriminate description of political reality, but a rational theory of international politics....The realist defense of the autonomy of the political sphere...does not imply disregard for the existence and importance of these other modes of thought....Real man is a [pluralist] composite...Recognizing that these different facets of human nature exist, political realism also recognizes that in order to understand one of them one has to deal with it on its own terms. The contingent elements of personality, prejudice, and subjective preference...democratic control...and popular emotions cannot fail to impair...foreign policy. Yet a [rational] theory must abstract from these irrational elements." [Back.](#)

Note 19: Morgenthau 1973, 205. [Back.](#)

Note 20: Carr 1964, e.g., 93-94. [Back.](#)

Note 21: Even intellectual historians must, for example, be free to pose the critical question whether the arguments advanced by Thucydides, Machiavelli, or Kennan are internally consistent. Appeals to intellectual pedigree, even if they could be made causal and coherent, would enslave contemporary analysts to the past. In a world of such definitions, theories cannot be improved or clarified over time. Yet some arguments in the realist tradition, Doyle convincingly observes, are "anachronistic." By defining a paradigmatic theory in terms of intellectual history, we impede our ability to improve on existing formulations. Surely social scientists should reserve the right to propose more coherent, powerful or useful definitions—as we seek to do here—and criticize them on their own terms. Clear assumptions about causal mechanisms, not the weight of bygone authorities, differentiates theory from assertion. Doyle 1997, 195; Guzzini 1998, 156. [Back.](#)

Note 22: Wight 1991; Schmidt 1998, 27. [Back.](#)

Note 23: Brown, Lynn-Jones and Miller 1995, xi. Thus there is, for example, a tendency to define the realist variant "offensive realism," for example, as a system in which states are compelled to act "aggressively." [Back.](#)

Note 24: Desch 1996, 361. [Back.](#)

Note 25: Katzenstein 1996; Rosecrance and Stein 1993. See the literature on "security regimes" cited below. [Back.](#)

Note 26: Waltz 1979, 121. [Back.](#)

Note 27: Grieco 1997, 127. [Back.](#)

Note 28: Wight 1946, 68 [Back](#).

Note 29: Krasner 1998; Keohane 1984, 14; Walt 1992; Gilpin 1986, 304-305; Schweller 1996, 101; Keohane 1986b, 163-169; Keohane 1986, 7-16. Doyle seems to move in this direction by basing the analysis on states in anarchy, but warns us against seeking to develop a coherent theory. In the end Doyle seems to rest his definition on “What makes all [the separate strands] Realist?...Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau...all agree that the prince or state either does or should command all force...or...loyalty...There is thus no room for other loyalties and other interests....They remain in a state of war.” Doyle 1997, 200. [Back](#).

Note 30: Tellis 1995, 3. [Back](#).

Note 31: Non-rationalist theory takes the somewhat different view is that actors behave according to a “logic of appropriateness” where they do not calculate in instrumental ways but simply conform to internalized rules imposed by society. See Finnemore 1996, 28-31; March and Olsen 1989. Of course, adherence to such rules may represent a longer-term rationality that recognizes violations can incur costs as does the information search and calculation time absorbed by a cases by case calculation. [Back](#).

Note 32: Guzzini, 1998, viii-ix, with bracketed comments by these authors. See also Keohane and Axelrod 1986; Milner 1992. [Back](#).

Note 33: Keohane 1984, 13. The fact that institutionalists hold this view may be, in part, a tribute to realism. The fact that Institutionalists conclude that states may contract into international norms in no way denies the anarchy assumption. Keohane does later (Chapter Seven) explore the possibilities of relaxing the assumption of rational egotism by entertaining the possibility of altruistic or moral behavior, but this is neither necessary to nor the core of his argument. Guzzini sums it up: “The simple fact that units are self-regarding does not exclude them from being part of a hierarchical system...There is no market economy without a political order...This invites a domestic analogy...Waltz is caught in a dilemma. Either the market and the international system are structurally similar, and then neo-realism must think about the equivalent to domestic hierarchy, as many International Political Economy theories do. Or they are not, and not applicable to the international system. In both cases, Waltz’s theory does not hold.” Guzzini 1998, 141. [Back](#).

Note 34: Jervis 1982; Snyder 1990; Downs 1994; Rittberger 1993; Hellman and Wolf 1993; Chayes 1995; Wallander 1997. Mearsheimer argues, incorrectly in our view, that institutionalism “largely ignores [and] does not deal with...security issues” because it “is of little relevance in situations where states’ interests are fundamentally conflictual.” Mearsheimer 1995, 342. [Back](#).

Note 35: Some call into question the fundamental nature of the rationality assumption. See Finnemore 1996b. [Back](#).

Note 36: We return to this “two-stage” or “two-step” analysis below. Active transnational relations is a theoretical possibility within Liberal theory, but nearly all Liberals concede that policy must pass at some point through a representative state. We may observe a “disaggregated” or even conflicted state, but rarely an irrational one. [Back](#).

Note 37: Moravcsik 1997; Legro 1996. [Back](#).

Note 38: Buzan, Jones, and Little 1993; Guzzini 1998, 226. [Back.](#)

Note 39: Buzan, Jones, and Little 1993. [Back.](#)

Note 40: Guzzini 1998, 226. [Back.](#)

Note 41: Frankel 1996, xii-xiv. [Back.](#)

Note 42: Thucydides, V/89. [Back.](#)

Note 43: As Morgenthau 1973, in language to be echoed almost verbatim by Waltz 1979, puts it: “The major signpost that helps political realism find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power. This concept...sets politics as an independent sphere of action apart from other spheres, such as economics, ethics, aesthetics, or religion. The difference between realism and other schools of thought is real and it is profound....The political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere, as the economist, the lawyer, and the moralist maintain theirs.” [Back.](#)

Note 44: Critical is that the focus on power simplifies and strengthens realist claims because it rules out the possibility that the extractive capacity of a state, and hence its power, varies according to a shifting structure of domestic priorities, institutions or domestic political compromises—that is, with variation in the intensity of state preferences. Were power resources endogenous to variable preferences, states would tend to expend resources to get things they really want, as liberal IR theory and conventional bargaining theory in fact claim they do. Liberals criticize realists, for example, by citing conflicts like the Vietnam War as examples where the balance of interest proved more important than the balance of power; in other words, cases where the level of capability each society was willing to commit, not the overall balance of capabilities, determined the outcome. [Back.](#)

Note 45: Smith 1986. [Back.](#)

Note 46: The assumption that states act “as if” preferences were uniform or fixed can hold for either of two reasons. State preferences may actually be fixed and uniform. Or other governments may be uncertain about preferences and must make worst-case assumptions, acting “as if” they were fixed and uniform. We return to this point in our reformulation of realism below. [Back.](#)

Note 47: Morgenthau 1973, 5-7; Waltz 1979, 29, also 65-66, 79, 90, 108-112, 196-198, 271; Grieco 1997, 165; Schweller 1994, 100; Becker 1976. [Back.](#)

Note 48: Waltz 1979. [Back.](#)

Note 49: Zakaria 1998, 28-29. [Back.](#)

Note 50: Snyder 1991; Zakaria 1995, 1998; Frankel 1995, 185-187; Frankel 1996; Schweller 1996, 114-115; Desch 1996, 365; Mearsheimer 1994/5, 11-12n; Walt 1998. The terms are somewhat elastic. Brooks 1997, alters the names, Grieco 1997, 166-167, views almost all as defensive. [Back.](#)

Note 51: This is not to suggest that the only difference between offensive and defensive realists is preferences. For example, the two may also disagree on whether the offense/defense balance is important in world politics. The distinction is employed differently by different theorists. [Back.](#)

Note 52: Herz 1950; Jervis 1978; Mearsheimer, 1990, 1994; Zakaria, 1995; Walt, 1988; Glaser 1995; Posen 1984. [Back.](#)

Note 53: Glaser 1995; Waltz 1959, 203-4; Kydd 1997, 114-54; The following list of motivational-realist propositions are drawn exclusively from these works. Kydd 1997, 153-54. For a related point about how satisfied states can convince others of their benign intentions through costly signals, see Schweller 1996, 104. I also pointed out that "neorealists have mistakenly conceptualized the security dilemma as a Prisoners' Dilemma (PD) rather than a Stag Hunt....When security is the goal, as in the security dilemma, states will seek to succor, not sucker, their neighbors (the CC payoff)." Ibid. The logic is straightforward: by resisting the temptation to sucker others, the state demonstrates to all that it is not a greedy expansionist. [Back.](#)

Note 54: Schweller 1996, 91, 119, who cites Fukuyama 1992, 254-255. Also Schweller 1998, esp. Chaps. 1 and 3. For a similar argument from a non-realist, Moravcsik 1997 [Back.](#)

Note 55: It is, of course, possible that governments fear one another *entirely* in error—a position consistent with an uncompromising assumption that states learn nothing about one another through direct observation or interaction. Yet such extreme assumptions seem unrealistic to most contemporary realists—including both defensive realists and their critics. [Back.](#)

Note 56: For examples, see Moravcsik 1997; Schweller 1998. [Back.](#)

Note 57: Zakaria 1995. [Back.](#)

Note 58: Snyder 1991. [Back.](#)

Note 59: Snyder 1991, 12, also 19-20, 64. Snyder does find states balance against aggressors. But this has little to do with why states overexpand, a tendency that should be inhibited by the very balancing that repeatedly occurs. Thus realism is only compatible with his account in those situations where states do not overexpand, not for the cases where his coalition argument predicts overexpansion. Hence Snyder (317-19) contrasts realist and domestic coalitional theories and makes the case for a synthesis. [Back.](#)

Note 60: Zakaria 1995, 463; Zakaria 1998, 32-33, 181-183. We do not adopt Zakaria's criticisms of Snyder and other defensive realists for methodologically laxity, smuggling in normative idealism, or overlooking the role of uncertainty. This criticism strikes us as overdrawn. Yet Zakaria is correct to point to *ad hoc* appeals to statesmanship, judgement, misperception, misunderstanding of the "true interests" of the state, or international moral consensus. [Back.](#)

Note 61: Rose, forthcoming. [Back.](#)

Note 62: Moravcsik 1997; Zakaria 1995; Frankel 1996. [Back.](#)

Note 63: Walt 1987. [Back.](#)

Note 64: Walt 1987. [Back.](#)

Note 65: Walt 1996, Chapter 2. [Back.](#)

Note 66: Glaser 1995, 380n [Back.](#)

Note 67: Glaser 1995, 394. [Back.](#)

Note 68: Glaser 1995, 394-397; Glaser 1997, 191 [Back.](#)

Note 69: Glaser 1995, 414. [Back.](#)

Note 70: On “contingent realism” and international institutions, see below. Andrew Kydd 1997 takes Glaser’s analysis one step further, arguing that the effects of the security dilemma can be mitigated by observing domestic regime type, national ideology, and domestic policies. While Kydd may be right that such factors shape decisionmaking under uncertainty, it remains unclear why such arguments are realist. [Back.](#)

Note 71: Grieco 1993, 138. [Back.](#)

Note 72: Criticism of Grieco’s argument by Robert Powell, Duncan Snidal, Stephen Krasner, Robert Keohane and others (Baldwin 1993) has focused on the possibility that it is an improperly specified claim about absolute-gains over time or that the prediction of conflict does not follow from the assumption of relative-gains seeking, not the slide into invoking national preferences. For an earlier version of this critique, see Moravcsik 1997. [Back.](#)

Note 73: Grieco 1990, 43-5; Grieco 1993, 129, 323; Grieco 1997, 166-168. Grieco argues that security-seeking, concern about relative power, and concern about independence all follow from the anarchy assumption, but the intervening steps are not made clear. [Back.](#)

Note 74: Mearsheimer 1995, 342. [Back.](#)

Note 75: Keohane 1993, 280ff; Liberman 1996, 155-158; Moravcsik 1997. [Back.](#)

Note 76: Krasner 1985. [Back.](#)

Note 77: From a methodological perspective, since “k” cannot be observed directly and it is difficult to differentiate security from power seeking—hence the security dilemma—it is difficult to know how this theory could be tested, absent a theory of the determinants of k. There has been, to our knowledge, no attempt to measure k independently of state behavior. Mearsheimer 1994, 347-348. [Back.](#)

Note 78: Grieco, 45-46. [Back.](#)

Note 79: Krasner 1993; Keohane 1993; Moravcsik 1997. If such bargaining failure cannot be attributed to concerns about *ex post* cheating, Grieco argues, it confirms realist claims. Grieco concedes the existence of a competing liberal explanation in a long footnote, but then drops the point. Grieco 1988, 486-488. [Back.](#)

Note 80: Rose 1998 seeks to offers a canonical statement of this new tradition. He makes of virtue of necessity on this point by arguing that the rejection of any determinant theory of domestic politics is a defining principle of NCR. [Back.](#)

Note 81: Wolfers 1962, 42. One is thrust back, like Waltz 1979 on an *assertion*, rather than a derived conclusion, about the primacy of systemic concerns; some defensive realists, such as Schweller, reject even this. [Back.](#)

Note 82: Zakaria is empirically convincing in demonstrating the absence in US policy of a “defensive realist” concern with threats and the existence of an “offensive realist” tendency (if in comparative perspective somewhat muted) to exploit external power vacuums. Even so, a critic might note that Zakaria specifies “state-centered realism” so as to include both external and domestic factors, but specifies “defensive realism” so as only to include external threats, while treating *their* recourse to domestic explanation as a slide into a *Innenpolitik* explanation. The broader specification of his own argument gives it an advantage. If NCR cites domestic factors, would it not be proper to factor Snyder’s log-rolling coalitions or Van Evera’s exploitable resources and nationalist institutions, for example into a defensive realist explanation of the motivations behind US policy in this period? [Back](#).

Note 83: Zakaria cites Otto Hintze and Morgenthau in his defense. Even if appeals to intellectual history were legitimate, both theorists in fact demonstrate how far realists have moved away from their roots. Zakaria’s argument differs from the far more parsimonious claim by Otto Hintze, whom Zakaria cites approvingly, that domestic structure adapt to international imperatives. For Hintze state structure reflected international circumstances, not the reverse. Morgenthau, as we shall see below, did not believe that his claims about moral restraint were realist. Morgenthau’s notion of “power” treated such elements as “military preparedness,” “national morale,” and the “quality of government” as determinants of national power, but rejected appeals to public opinion. Instead, he stresses that “the government must realize that it is the leader and not the slave of public opinion. [Public opinion is] continuously created and recreated by informed and responsible leadership.” See Morgenthau 1973, 133-135, 205, Chapter 9. We find in Morgenthau no equivalent to Zakaria’s appeal to modernization: the changing balance between federal and state governments in late 19th-century America brought about by industrialization, cultural, and political change progressively loosened constraints on the executive (as well as creating positive pressure) that allowed US policy to shift its priorities from domestic to international relations. [Back](#).

Note 84: Zakaria, like Walt, argues that the realism can be modified in this way “without great loss of parsimony.” (1998, 35) Yet Zakaria offers no theory of domestic state power, only a measure of it, namely the state’s ability to extract resources. The assertion that there are a multitude of exogenous reasons why some states can extract resources for foreign policy and others cannot be considered a parsimonious theoretical alternative to or extension of realism. (For a similar study, which notes the importance of organizational, intellectual and domestic political factors in the shaping of power, see Aaron Friedberg 1988, 18.)

Exploitation of semantic ambiguity by employing the same term (“state”) to designate an entire national unit in international affairs and the governmental apparatus *vis-à-vis* domestic society at home does not make shifts in domestic preferences any more of a realist variable. Zakaria, we have seen, finds himself in a similar situation when he combines the states objective resource base and its willingness to extract power into a single variable “state power.” The empirical power of Zakaria’s explanation stems almost entirely from the orthodox neo-realism claim that states exploit power imbalances through expansion. Since it is tautologically true that the state must have resources with which to conduct a foreign policy, the fact that the US did not expand except where the government was willing and able to deploy resources to this end is not a test of any theory. This is clear from Robinson and Gallagher’s classic analysis of British imperialism. Changes in the “official mind,” for Robinson and Gallagher, were not a distinctive cause of imperialism, but a transmission belt through which any domestic or international cause of imperialism must pass. Examining the beliefs of government officials is a method, not a theory.

At the core of the problem is a misunderstanding shared by Walt, Zakaria and others concerning the nature of parsimony in scientific explanation—a misunderstanding that rests in turn on the generic problem identified by Giovanni Sartori as “conceptual stretching.” Both Walt and Zakaria explicitly measure the parsimony of a theory by assessing whether the range of empirical factors can be subsumed under what Walt terms a “few...principle ideas”: “threat” for Walt, “state power” for Zakaria. The number of principle ideas determines the parsimony of the explanation. As Sartori observes in his classic article, however, it is *always* possible to subsume more causes under broader but thinner concepts and claims, such as “states follow their interests.” The more relevant measure is what King, Keohane and Verba term the “efficiency” or “power” of an explanation, which is related to the number potential empirical factors that *are excluded* by a causal concept; a truly efficient explanation excluding many causes and explains many phenomena. In this view, Walt and Zakaria’s respective efforts to seek to explain more by shifting from narrower to broader concepts—we argue, concepts so broad that they exclude no form of rational foreign policy behavior—seems extremely unlikely to increase parsimony. Cf. Zakaria 1998, 188; Sartori 1970, 1033-53; King Keohane & Verba 1994. [Back.](#)

Note 85: In an otherwise highly complementary review, historian Walter McDougall calls our attention to precisely this empirical indeterminacy: “However well [Zakaria] addresses the matter of means, he does skirt the matter of ends. Some may ask why the powerful state was built in the first place, and whether real or perceived interests of business lay behind it. Others may wonder how average Americans persuaded themselves that global power was now their necessary and proper destiny. Zakaria hints at a cultural paradigm shift when he writes that “the reason for the long absence of highly developed foreign policy institutions was...America’s anti-statist tradition”.... Something, after all, moved the once anti-imperialist newspaper *The Chicago Times-Herald* to conclude that “the people now believe that the United States owes it to the world to accept the responsibilities imposed upon it by the fortunes of war. That phrase bespeaks a new moral consensus about America’s role that cannot be explained by classical or defensive realism, or by Zakaria’s notion of the rise of the state.” Walter McDougall “American Empire: Review of Fared Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America’s World Role*,” *New York Times Book Review* (3 May 1998), 25. [Back.](#)

Note 86: See Schweller 1998, 22, 88; Schweller 1995, 255-257. Andrew Kydd terms this view “motivational realism.” Kydd 1997. This, it should be noted, violates Rose’s definition of neo-classical realism, namely the assertion that systemic factors are more important. [Back.](#)

Note 87: Schweller 1995. [Back.](#)

Note 88: Morgenthau 1973, 50-51. In Schweller and Priess 1997, Schweller cites Kissinger and Aron. Unlike modern liberal theorists, who look to democracy, interdependence, and ideas to explain the propensity of states for aggression, or modern institutionalists, who look to the clarifying role of international institutions, Schweller offers no theory of why some states favor the status quo and others are revisionist. This weakens not only Schweller’s theory but his methodology, because it leads Schweller to measure preferences by behavior. Thus World War II may have happened because each country pursued its interests and played its predicted role (e.g., Nazi Germany as a revisionist “wolf” the United States as an indifferent “ostrich”) but we only know those interests and their balance based on the actual behavior observed, thus conflating preferences with action. See Schweller 1998, 31-38. [Back.](#)

Note 89: Wolfers 1965. [Back.](#)

Note 90: Desch 1996, 369. [Back.](#)

Note 91: Like most realists, he does not explicitly compare realist claims to those based on liberal or institutionalist theory, so it is difficult to know how such a conclusion was reached. Rose cites Aristotle to say: "actions which political science investigates, admit of much variety and fluctuation....We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects...to indicate the truth roughly and in outline...for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits." Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I:3, in McKeon 1941, 936. [Back.](#)

Note 92: For the most thorough-going statement, see Mearsheimer 1994. [Back.](#)

Note 93: Moravcsik 1998. Liberals and institutionalists have relatively little trouble explaining this outcome. Liberals argue that EMU was perceived by governments as a Pareto-improving set of policy adjustments and distributional bargains in an era of convergence toward lower inflation, and as an effort by numerous groups, including some inside Germany, to gain control over the Bundesbank. Institutionalists add that institutions established the credibility of the commitment to the set of agreed policies. [Back.](#)

Note 94: Grieco 1996, 304. [Back.](#)

Note 95: Grieco 1996. [Back.](#)

Note 96: Grieco 1996, 286. [Back.](#)

Note 97: Grieco 1997, 186. [Back.](#)

Note 98: For a review of the evidence, see Moravcsik 1998, Chapter 6. There is now a consensus that the German commitment to move to EMU began months, even years, before reunification, and did not weaken when reunification was complete. [Back.](#)

Note 99: Grieco 1996, 287-290. If institutionalized cooperation is held together, as institutionalists argue and Grieco seems to accept, by interests, information, ideas, and institutions rather than a preponderance of coercive power, there is no basis in realist theory to suggest that it will alter the policy of any state. There is even less to believe it can redistribute state power. In distributing these gains, governments negotiate then commit to common international decision-making arrangements that are expected to assure a particular distribution of future benefits. States, whether "weaker" or "stronger," are more likely to support agreements where they gain more. How does this differ from the account of international monetary cooperation offered by functional regime theory? [Back.](#)

Note 100: Schweller and Priess 1997, 6, also 3. On this basis they conclude—rightly in our view—that realism and institutionalist regime theory "assess the effectiveness of institutions in contradictory ways." It is unclear how their analysis removes such contradictions. [Back.](#)

Note 101: Schweller and Priess 1997, 10-14. [Back.](#)

Note 102: Schweller and Priess 1997, 16. [Back.](#)

Note 103: Schweller and Priess 1997, 18. [Back.](#)

Note 104: Schweller and Priess 1997, 22. [Back.](#)

Note 105: Schweller and Priess 1997, 6. [Back.](#)

Note 106: Schweller and Priess 1997, 2, 6-8, 10, 23. [Back.](#)

Note 107: Glaser 1995, 410ff. [Back.](#)

Note 108: Glaser 1995, 411. For example, Mearsheimer's detailed analysis of collective security, as opposed to regimes and concerts, does not cite a single advocate of collective security through military means after the 1950s. Robert Keohane criticizes those who would limit the concept of regime "to situations with genuine normative content, in which governments followed regime rules *instead of* pursuing their own self-interests when the two conflicted. If this were chosen, the concept would be just another way of expressing ancient "idealist" sentiments in international relations. The category of regime would become virtually empty. ...This poses a false choice between using "regime" as a new label for old patterns and defining regimes as utopias. Either strategy would make the term irrelevant." Keohane 1984, 60n. [Back.](#)

Note 109: Frankel 1996, xiii. [Back.](#)

Note 110: Jervis 1988. Empirical deviations — the "sub-optimal" transgressions of what states should do but do not — are still troublesome for realism if sheer uncertainty -- a lack of information — is the cause of the deviant perception. Still Bayesian theory suggests that even in such situations action is based on some set of prior subjective beliefs and the question then becomes were those priors shaped by power or not. In all the cases cited below lack of information does not seem to be the problem. [Back.](#)

Note 111: Of course, none of the empirical deviations — the "sub-optimal" transgressions of what states should do but do not — contradict realism if it is simply a problem of a lack of information, which in hindsight, analysts possess. [Back.](#)

Note 112: Even a stalwart of modern realism, John Mearsheimer, lapses occasionally into a reliance on perceptions and ideas. In his blistering critique of institutionalism, Mearsheimer asks why realism has not taken hold among many American scholars and policymakers. His answer: American political ideology and values. He implies that such beliefs have prevented America from acting in its own interests (i.e., vis-à-vis extant power structures) in the international arena. Realism here appears as normative theory, while explanation for actual behavior seems to be found elsewhere, in this case political culture. Mearsheimer 1995. [Back.](#)

Note 113: Wohlforth 1993, 2, 1-17. [Back.](#)

Note 114: Wohlforth 1995, 41. [Back.](#)

Note 115: Wohlforth 1995, 21 . [Back.](#)

Note 116: Wohlforth 1995, 37. [Back.](#)

Note 117: The existence of such a large coalition appears to suggest, following Walt's argument, that in large part that Western states during the Cold War were balancing against intentions, not power. Wohlforth 1995, 23, 34, 38-39. Also problematic is the fact that Wohlforth's treats Soviet policy—it's

withdrawal from Eastern Europe, for example—as designed to alter Western perceptions of the Soviet threat, rather than to alter the balance of power *per se*. Following Walt, this could perhaps be explained within a more fine-grained realist argument by including geography in the definition of “power”. If so, however, it is unclear why Wohlforth feels power cannot be measured objectively. [Back](#).

Note 118: It remains unclear whether Wohlforth means to argue that regime-type actually shifted East European policies, or shifted Soviet perception of its relative power. Either way, the connection to relative power capabilities, even understood in a more fine-grained sense, remains to be clarified. [Back](#).

Note 119: Wohlforth 1995, 21-22, 32-35. [Back](#).

Note 120: Van Evera, forthcoming, vol. I, 8 (manuscript). [Back](#).

Note 121: Van Evera, forthcoming, I, 9 fn. 12 (manuscript). [Back](#).

Note 122: Since Van Evera explicitly rejects psychological theories of perception in favor of making perceptions a function of domestic political organization, this argument might also be categorized not as an explanation in which power slides into a liberal theory of preferences, rather than theories of perceptions. Each of Van Evera’s four master variables are consistent with the liberal tradition: (1) “militarism” (strength of professional militaries defending organizational interests, explains offensive posture); (2) “national myth-making” (self-glorifying myths among elites and publics with propaganda in education systems); (3) “non-evaluation” (suppression of official evaluations due to lack of competing centers of analysis and pathologies of large bureaucracies); (4) “non-strategy” (governments do not promulgate strategy to avoid criticism “for the same reasons” as they promulgate national myths). [Back](#).

Note 123: Van Evera 1990/1. [Back](#).

Note 124: Christensen and Snyder, 1990; Christensen 1997; Van Evera forthcoming; Hopf 1991; Levy 1984, 222. For an argument that balance need not be perceptual see Lynn-Jones 1995. [Back](#).

Note 125: Christensen and Snyder 1990, 144, 166; Christensen 1997, 65; Christensen and Snyder 1997, 920-21. [Back](#).

Note 126: Christensen and Snyder 1997, 920. Christensen and Snyder defend this synthesis as a progressive problem-shift that does not contradict realism’s core because Jervis’ security dilemma theory entailed perceptual arguments. As we have seen, intellectual history is not valid evidence of foundational coherence. [Back](#).

Note 127: See Schweller 1998, 19, 88, 164-8. See Chapter 4 for references to Hitler’s ideas outlined in *Mein Kampf*. The COW data cited by Schweller on pp. 28-29 suggest that Germany’s power boost occurred from Hitler’s expansion in armed forces and materiel, not any underlying shift in power. [Back](#).

Note 128: In addition to his interpretation of Hitler, Schweller’s account of World War II hinges, for example, on Stalin/the Soviet Union misperceiving the balance of power by viewing Britain and France as powerful enough to stop Germany—due, paradoxically, to the inflated prestige of democracies. Schweller 1998, 19 seeks to render this consistent with realism by arguing that structure still matters because it rewards those who perceive it correctly and punishes those who do not. Yet two problems remain: First, there are important empirical anomalies in the operation of the hypothesized selection

mechanism. The Soviet Union fundamentally misperceived the balance of power, yet came out of WWII as a superpower. This, we have seen, leads Schweller to bring in as a primary factor the distinction between status quo and revisionist states. Schweller 1998, 32-33. Second, this explanation remains underspecified, because it begs the question of how we are to distinguish theoretically between circumstances in which power shapes policy and circumstances in which preferences and perceptions guide policy. [Back](#).

Note 129: Waltz 1997, 916. [Back](#).

Note 130: Lake and Powell forthcoming. On the latter issue, we believe that realism, properly understood, is entirely consistent with the language of formal models. [Back](#).

Note 131: And so we part company with Guzzini's incisive critique of Realism for not "taking its central premises seriously enough." Guzzini proposes that Realists accept that their central concepts are "social constructions...Realist expectations...hold, not because they objectively correspond to something out there, but because agents make them the maxims that guide their actions." Guzzini, *Realism*, 227. Such concessions are, to put it charitably, premature. Until it can be shown that there is no important domains in which realism applies, we are skeptical of such attempts to resolve theoretical contests by fiat. One example must suffice: For a plausible realist interpretation of conflict in the known world over the past 10,000 years, see Diamond 1997. [Back](#).

Note 132: oleman 1990, 21-2, especially on the micro-macro transitions. [Back](#).

Note 133: Waltz, 1979, 94; Gilpin 1981, 18; Krasner 1985, 28; Morgenthau 1973, 7-8; Gilpin 1996, 7; Doyle 1997, 200; Keohane 1986. [Back](#).

Note 134: E.g., Legro 1996; Moravcsik 1997; Johnson 1993; Wendt 1992; Keohane 1984. [Back](#).

Note 135: By state preferences, we mean to designate the values of different outcomes or "states of the world" that might emerge from interstate interaction. These are to be clearly distinguished from state "strategies"—the transient policies, bargaining positions, and tactics that states may adopt. As distinct from state strategies, state preferences are defined over outcomes and are therefore "pre-strategic"; by definition, they are uninfluenced by shifts in the strategic environment, e.g. shifts in relative power. Preferences are akin to "tastes" that states bring to the international bargaining table—though they themselves may of course result from other forms international interaction than those being studied, as do national preferences resulting from economic interdependence. This distinction is critical. We are not pinning on realists the view that all state policies are in conflict; we are proposing as an assumption that underlying goals are in competition.

Realists seem aware that there is a critical distinction here; some, like Waltz, are very clear. The response has traditionally been to distinguish a "theory of foreign policy" from a "theory of international politics." We have addressed this issue above. As Colin Elman points out, Waltz's own book is full of such examples of a "theory of international relations" predicting adaptation of individual states, Waltz's own protestations notwithstanding. The newer realists offer a bewildering array of contradictory examples and claims about precisely what these two types of theories explain. Zakaria, for example, argues that theories of foreign policy explain "reasons" but theories of the international system explains "results." He suggests the example of alliance formation, in which a theory of foreign policy is required to explain "the search for allies," but a theory of international politics is required to explain "the formation of

alliances.” This would be correct if the search for particular allies was something states preferred independently of their strategic circumstances, as Liberals sometimes argue, but if it is a strategy, as realists generally believe, the claim is false. Neo-realists predict, for example, that a set of countries facing a proximate, preponderant power will both search for allies and find them. Zakaria’s more concrete example seems to contradict his claim: A theory of international politics, he argues, explains the inevitability of post-World War II Sino-American détente, but a theory of foreign policy explains why it took twenty years. Note that the roles are reversed: the systemic theory explains the reason (and much of the result), while the foreign policy theory explains (part of) the result. Gideon Rose, in his review essay of neo-classical realists, argues—consistent with Zakaria’s example, but not his theoretical claim—that the difference is one of precision. Note, however, that if the “motives” that need to be explained are preferences, then two theories *are* required. Barring some long-term process of natural selection, any variation in preferences cannot (by definition) be explained by strategic interaction. This is why we argue below that *either* an assumption of fixed preferences, the traditional hallmark of realism, or a strong Liberal or Liberal constructivist theory of variation in preference, is a necessary precondition for applying Realist theory. [Back.](#)

Note 136: Wolfers 1962. [Back.](#)

Note 137: Glaser 1995, 398ff. [Back.](#)

Note 138: Mearsheimer 1994, 339. [Back.](#)

Note 139: Mearsheimer 1995, 337; Labs 1997; Gilpin 1986, 304-305; Krasner 1993; Grieco 1988. [Back.](#)

Note 140: The distinction between Morgenthau and Waltz on this point has been overstated. Waltz’s classic and widely accepted criticism of Morgenthau in *Man, the State, and War* is based largely on a misreading. Waltz criticizes Morgenthau for seeking a first-image explanation, then not providing variation at the first-image level. True, one can find a few very early quotations where Morgenthau hints that men might seek domination for its own sake, as well as to acquire resources or assure security. E.g., Morgenthau 1946, 192-93. Yet Morgenthau is quite clear that the *animus dominandi* is universal; hence it should be seen as an assumption, not a variable, in his analysis. Hence Waltz’s criticism of Morgenthau for not providing a genuine first-image explanation is true, but irrelevant. Morgenthau ends up drawing precisely the same dichotomy as Waltz. “Both domestic and international politics,” Morgenthau wrote, “are a struggle for power, modified only by the different conditions under which this struggle takes place in the domestic and in the international spheres.” Morgenthau 1973, 31-33. The critical difference involves the anarchic structure of the international system. [Back.](#)

Note 141: Gilpin 1986, 304-305; Krasner 1993; Grieco 1997; Keohane 1984, 7. Such a uniform assumption of conflict led Morgenthau to paraphrase Max Weber in claiming that “the goals that might be pursued by nations in their foreign policy can run the whole gamut of objectives any nation has ever pursued or might possibly pursue,” yet realism can predict state behavior, because all interests are “defined in terms of power.” Morgenthau 1973, 5. [Back.](#)

Note 142: Carr 1964, 53. [Back.](#)

Note 143: Baldwin 1979. [Back.](#)

Note 144: This follows also from the core realist assumption that state preferences—both for

“international” and “domestic” goods—are fixed and identically conflictual. This is not to deny, of course, that states have other goals; all states face an internal budget constraint—a trade-off between guns and butter. Realists assume that the nature of these budget constraints, whatever their specific content, varies only with the total available material power. [Back.](#)

Note 145: This assumes, of course, that the marginal value of benefits does not change accordingly. If benefits were also of declining interest to a large state, the effect might be cancelled out. The assumption of fixed preferences must thus be a strong one. [Back.](#)

Note 146: Baldwin 1979; Van Evera forthcoming, vol. 1, chapter 1 (manuscript). [Back.](#)

Note 147: Keohane and Nye 1977. [Back.](#)

Note 148: Coleman 1990, 29. Coleman argues that all transactions on this basis are examples of exchange, whether they include a straightforward *quid pro quo*, or a bribe or even a threat. Yet Coleman concedes that coercion—“where the superordinate agrees to withhold an action that would make the subordinate worse off in exchange for the subordinate’s obeying the superordinate”—a case is a “somewhat special” case of exchange. Where the threat involves an action the superordinate would otherwise do, it is in essence a form of extortion. See also Oye 1992. [Back.](#)

Note 149: This classical realist focus on “security-seeking” and “moderation” in statecraft is consistent with the notion, advanced by Hedley Bull, that all states feel a basic concern for norms of the “society of states.” It is also consistent with basic bargaining theory, which normally analyzes outcomes on two dimensions: distribution and efficiency. (Raiffa 1982; Fearon 1995) Negotiation analysts typically ask both how the benefits of agreement are distributed (i.e., who “won” and “lost” the bargaining) and how Pareto-efficient the outcome was (i.e., whether potential profitable bargains were “left on the table” or dissipated through high transaction costs). Realists disagree to a greater extent about the determinants of interstate bargaining efficiency than the determinants of distributional outcomes. Realists debate amongst themselves, for example, whether bipolar or multipolar distributions of power leads to higher bargaining costs, say in the form of warfare. Competing claims rest on varied auxiliary assumptions concerning risk-propensity of actors, the impact of the distribution of power on the distribution of information, and likely strategic responses to uncertainty. [Back.](#)

Note 150: Mearsheimer 1995, Copeland 1996, 1998; Gowa, 1994; Layne 1995; Gilpin 1981, 1984, 1987. [Back.](#)

Note 151: Coleman 1990. A number of theorists argue that rational explanation demands a prior knowledge of (or assumptions about) actor preferences *and* beliefs. See e.g., Elster 1987. [Back.](#)

Note 152: E.g. Zakaria 1998, 88. [Back.](#)

Note 153: Lake 1993. [Back.](#)

Note 154: Lake 1988. There may also be another variant, in which the values and beliefs of governments are altered through socialization. See Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990. Such arguments may be consistent with liberal, institutionalist or wholly different constructivist assumptions. [Back.](#)

Note 155: See also Stein 1990. [Back.](#)

Note 156: Grieco 1988, Lipson 1993; Mearsheimer 1985. [Back.](#)

Note 157: More specifically, the expected value of the benefits to be gained by a state that adopts a particular strategy must be higher than the expected costs of the threat (or inducement) *and* the concession demanded from the target state must be less than the expected cost of the threat (or value of the inducement). If either does not obtain, then more powerful states would not be able to employ threats and inducements cost-effectively—and therefore credibly—to realize foreign policy goals. In principle, this may occur because the expected gains are high or the expected costs of strategic action low, but since—according to assumption one—the expected gains are assumed to be constant, the critical variation in realist theory is all on the side of the costs. Still the terms “expected” suggest that there may be considerable room to “multiply” power by exploiting risk-aversion and uncertainty. If the costs of being targeted are extremely high or states are risk-averse *vis-à-vis* major losses, as seems plausible, a small power bilateral advantage may keep a wide range of decentralized actors in check—as has been the case in many empires. [Back.](#)

Note 158: Fearon forthcoming. [Back.](#)

Note 159: Morrow 1988, 83-84; Mack 1975; Osgood 1957. [Back.](#)

Note 160: Moravcsik 1997. [Back.](#)

Note 161: Wohlforth forthcoming, Chapter Three. [Back.](#)

Note 162: Gilpin 1981, 184; Tellis 1995. [Back.](#)

Note 163: Waltz 1993, 57. [Back.](#)

Note 164: Gilpin 1981; Mastanduno 1993. Since, as we have seen, many non-realist theories (e.g. the democratic peace) focus on security maximization, security seeking is, we argue, neither necessary for realism, nor does it contribute in any important way to a sufficient definition of realism. [Back.](#)

Note 165: Posen 1993, Mearsheimer 1995. [Back.](#)

Note 166: Glaser 1995, 1997. Such an analysis would still need to explain why governments cannot ameliorate the inconveniences of anarchy through bilateral and multilateral contracts, as institutionalists argue they do. [Back.](#)

Note 167: Legro 1996, Moravcsik 1997. [Back.](#)

Note 168: Tullock 1962; Barry 1970; Moon 1975. [Back.](#)

Note 169: Risse-Kappen 1996. [Back.](#)

Note 170: Keohane 1990, 192; Matthew and Zacher 1996, 46; Brooks 1997, 471-2. [Back.](#)

Note 171: Only where the pattern of preferences are consistent with the realist assumptions above—preferences are intense, symmetrical, and zero-sum—is it proper even to consider realist theory. In any other case—say a situation where preferences are compatible or where the collective action problem is informational—realism is not simply incorrect; it is completely inappropriate. Thus in

classical bargaining theory, the locations of ideal points and outside options (preferences) are almost always relevant, whereas linkage to threats and inducements are only relevant under specific conditions. See Snidal 1986; Morrow 1988; Moravcsik 1992; Lake and Powell forthcoming; Levy 1990. [Back](#).

Note 172: Fearon 1997, Moravcsik 1998, Garrett 1993. [Back](#).

Note 173: Hintze 1975, Grieco 1997; Layne 1995b, 326-27. [Back](#).

Note 174: Wendt 1992, Keohane 1989. [Back](#).

Note 175: Still, our formulation of realism implies that any such dynamic claims must be grounded in a static rationalist model that treats the processes of preference formation explained by liberal theory as prior to realist, institutionalist and (systemic) constructivist claims. [Back](#).

Note 176: Moravcsik 1997 [Back](#).

Note 177: In many ways, to be sure, what we advocate is a move back in the direction of neo-realism while remaining agnostic on the debate between defensive and offensive realists. By assuming the existence of conflict, we take no position on whether such conflict is a function of predatory aggressors, uncertainty, or imbalances of power. Yet at the same time our formulation purges neo-realism of its most egregious weaknesses: its excessive and unnecessary focus on military security; its vague and incomplete specification of state preferences; its unwillingness to explicitly concede the rationality of states; its questionable assumption that anarchy necessarily implies the cost-efficiency of coercion; its tendency to introduce domestic explanations *ad hoc*; and its untenable conception of the primacy of realism over other theories. For all its faults, however, neo-realism had two advantages that subsequent attempts to integrate domestic politics have sacrificed: It generated testable propositions and was clearly distinct from the alternatives. These we have sought to preserve. [Back](#).
