

The Intersection of Realism, Democracy, and War A Comprehensive Analysis of Kenneth Waltz's Perspective

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Abstract: *This study explores Kenneth Waltz's structural realist framework and its implications for understanding the relationship between democracy and war within international relations. While classical realism emphasizes unit-level factors, Waltz distinguishes his approach by focusing on systemic structures, power distribution, and relative capabilities. His five foundational propositions—*anarchy, material capability distribution, polarity, relational capability, and relative gains*—form the basis for analyzing state behavior. Waltz argues that democratic norms and institutions may influence foreign policy but remain constrained by the anarchic nature of the international system, where survival and security dominate decision-making. The analysis highlights the limitations of democratic peace theory, showing that democracies, like other regimes, are subject to systemic pressures that can lead to conflict. Furthermore, Waltz's insights into nuclear proliferation and deterrence underscore the complexities of balancing democratic ideals with security imperatives. By integrating realism, democracy, and war into a unified framework, this work demonstrates that while democracy may shape alliance choices and accountability mechanisms, it does not eliminate the structural drivers of war. Ultimately, Waltz's realist perspective provides a nuanced lens for examining how regime type interacts with systemic constraints, offering enduring relevance for contemporary debates on international security and conflict.*

Keywords: Democracy, War, Realism, Waltz, Conflict

INTRODUCTION

Realism remains a dominant paradigm in international relations, although its origins predate the modern state system, as theorists seek to develop their analyses within the realist tradition. Classical realists share some fundamental assumptions about the nature of international politics, but Kenneth Waltz's structural formulation distances him from their attempts to explain war. Nevertheless, Waltz's insights remain relevant to the contemporary debate over the relationship between regime type and war and have provoked further investigation and refinement. While several realist propositions influence the general understanding, as a theoretical structure of the developed idea, it constitutes an important component that clarifies the comprehension of regime type as a determining factor. A refined interpretation of Waltz's argument highlights the nuanced ways in which democracy influences state behaviour, while also acknowledging its limitations. Democratic norms can indeed shape how states behave, yet their impact wanes in the face of dominating material forces. The accumulation of knowledge on such themes is not fully commensurable with the classic problem because an ensemble of theoretical preconditions lies outside the inquiries of systemic determinism (W. Legro & Moravcsik, 1999).

Realists share a set of broadly agreed assumptions concerning international politics, and any realist claim on the relationship between regime type and war typically falls within the core of realism. For Waltz, realist theory is built on systematic rather than unit-level factors, with loss of autonomy as a key element of analysis that lies outside the set of variables proposed by the most relevant liberation. Regime type enters analysis as something whose changes might alter the likelihood of interactions among states; the conception of power diverges from other approaches in the connection between interest and action. A realist interpretation of democracy within the framework generates a stylized characterization of conditions under which normative structures affecting international violence can be expected to operate.

Realism in International Relations: Foundations and Waltzian Distance

Kenneth Waltz emerges as a distinctive voice within the landscape of political realism, diverging from the traditional tenets of classical realism. His innovative perspective situates international politics within the expansive framework of political realism, which thoughtfully integrates essential insights on international

order alongside the critical roles of systemic structure, power, and capability in the analysis of international relations (W. Legro & Moravcsik, 1999). By emphasising the uniqueness of his approach, Waltz adeptly addresses the intricate interplay between democracy and war. He deliberately distances himself from liberal frameworks, opting instead for a rigorous exploration within realist political analysis. In doing so, he compellingly illustrates the relevance of both political regimes within a systematic model, while proposing insightful determinants and far-reaching implications for the global political order.

Waltz articulates a distinctive realist research agenda that, while divergent in certain respects, finds compatibility with classical realism. At the heart of the Waltzian framework lies a set of five foundational propositions regarding the interplay of states within the international system: first, that states operate in an anarchic order; second, that the hierarchy of states is shaped by the distribution of material capabilities among them; third, that the structure of the international system is influenced by the number of key actors, or “polarity”; fourth, that a state’s capability is inherently relational and cannot be fully assessed in isolation; and fifth, that a state’s decisions regarding national interest hinge on calculations of relative gain or loss compared to others’ capabilities. These propositions serve as a robust foundation for an expansive exploration of global politics, effectively preserving the overarching tenets of realism while allowing for nuanced examinations of various modes of power dynamics, including distinctions among oligopolistic, multipolar, and unipolar balancing behaviours.

Democracy and War: Waltzian Interpretations and Distinctions

Realism does not dismiss the possibility of war occurring between two democracies; indeed, even the most passionate democracies often refrain from military action against nations with differing political systems. A realist perspective invites us to look beyond the simplistic divide of democratic versus non-democratic states, recognizing that when a nation is embroiled in conflict, whether against a fully established democracy or one in the process of embracing democratic values, it confronts a distinctly different kind of engagement. To truly understand the significance of this democratic versus non-democratic distinction, one considering the expansion of the relatively small number of democratic countries must appreciate that the consequences vary greatly and require thoughtful, separate analysis. Grounded in realist assumptions about the structural dynamics that shape international behavior, such as state interests, it becomes evident that the effects of democratic norms and institutions on the global stage depend profoundly on the broader international context. Waltzian realism artfully illuminates the specific aspects of state behaviour and circumstance that influence wartime policy, regardless of the nature of governance (Olavi Patomäki, 2016).

In Kenneth Waltz’s framework, the diffusion of peace-promoting norms occurs among nations with supportive institutions, though this is limited to specific conditions. At the international level, accountability mechanisms for decision-makers develop through systemic

alliances. Interestingly, democracies often behave similarly to other states, prompting questions about democracy’s impact and the distinctions between democratic and autocratic regimes, particularly regarding freedom. While public participation is essential for accountability, it does not fully bridge the gap between autocracies and democracies (Epes, 2006). Ultimately, the type of regime accounts for only a small part of a nation’s ability to respond to external pressures, suggesting that national interests primarily shape experiences, even in politics with robust democratic frameworks.

Two key aspects of government operation influence democracy. Statesmen prioritise policies that ensure survival, while democracy addresses domestic public pressure. In crises, decision-making can resemble that of autocracies, focusing on state capabilities. Regime type affects the spread of reforms both within and outside democratic boundaries. According to Waltz’s realist theory, checks and balances emerge before widespread democracy, leading to various forms of governance (Waltz, 2009). For nations pursuing democratisation, the history of international interactions shapes early regime orientation and the subsequent democratic phase. The level of development at the start of democratization shifts from securing nation-state status to enhancing democratic functioning. Thus, initial national behaviour is more crucial in determining the democratization path than the quality of the domestic political system.

War Dynamics under Realist Theory: Expected Balances and Civilizational Constraints

Realism offers a cohesive framework for analyzing the intricate dynamics of war between states, each guided by their competing assessments of relative capability. Waltz’s assertions about the prevailing conditions remain relevant: states judiciously evaluate the use of force, carefully weighing the balance of power. When circumstances shift in favor of one state, or when adversaries exhibit vulnerabilities, it is primarily the limitations of capability that come into play (Niou&Ordeshook, 1989). The considerations of relative gains shape the anticipated timing of interstate aggression, influencing the implementation of coercive diplomacy or the emergence of serious threats during shifts in the balance of power. In both peacetime and wartime, as well as during the formation of alliances, a complex web of motives, including the pursuit of security, interweaves throughout international relations. In this context, the concept of deterrence remains a pivotal strategy, essential for safeguarding national survival.

Waltz’s exploration of civilizational constraints on balance-of-capability calculations extends beyond the realist core while remaining compatible with it. Anarchy, as an organising principle, implies the absence of a universal agreement on the types or intensities of threats a priori, allowing for significant heterogeneity among states. The level of civilisation influences these distributions, shaping the potential array from which threats emerge across different epochs characterised by varying technological, economic, or ideological clustering and diffusion; a single event possesses universal significance only under tightly constrained and specific conditions. Increased economic interdependence can heighten both the emphasis on war

extraction and the downward geography of state-building, resulting in a more rapid overall shift in balance (H. Thornton, 2000).

Synthesis: Integrating Realism, Democracy, and War in a Unified Framework

Kenneth Waltz serves as a foundational figure in the realm of realist thought, offering a comprehensive articulation of structural realist principles which significantly advance the discourse surrounding international relations (Mearsheimer, 2001). His pivotal work transitions the debate beyond mere discussions of whether the realist framework is applicable to contemporary political dynamics. Instead, he engages in a nuanced analysis of how and under what conditions democratic governance influences the likelihood of war. By doing so, Waltz introduces a theoretically grounded perspective that underscores the complexity of the relationship between democracy and military conflict (Waltz, 1979). Waltz's core propositions are essential for understanding the interplay between democratic states and warfare. He posits that the international system is structurally anarchic, meaning that no overarching authority exists to regulate interactions among sovereign states (Waltz, 1979). Within this anarchic framework, state actors emerge as central players whose behaviours and strategies are significantly shaped by the distribution of power and resources. This distribution fundamentally influences how states identify and pursue their national interests, leading to actions that are strategically aimed at promoting these interests (Waltz, 1979).

A critical aspect of Waltz's analysis is his focus on the conditions under which democratic theories of war can be effectively developed. He argues that the realist specification of foundational principles is vital; only when the liberal assumptions inherent in democratic theory are positioned as credible do substantive inquiries about the nexus between democracy and war become relevant (Mearsheimer, 1990). This indicates that a realistic examination must first establish the legitimacy of democratic structures before engaging with claims regarding their peaceful or warlike tendencies. As Waltz delves deeper into the implications of democracy for international conflict, he asserts that the characteristics of democratic states—such as open political discourse, public accountability, and institutional checks and balances—may influence their propensity for conflict. Nevertheless, these attributes do not guarantee peace; rather, they interact with the anarchic nature of the international system and can lead to various outcomes, including war (Waltz, 1979). Thus, while democracy may present a façade of peace-promoting qualities, Waltz warns that the anarchic international system's influence may still propel democratic nations towards conflict under certain conditions.

Moreover, Waltz's realist perspective challenges the notion that democracy inherently leads to a more peaceful world. He highlights that states operate under the same anarchic pressures regardless of their internal political organisation, suggesting that the drive for security and survival remains paramount. Consequently, the pursuit of national interests may prevail over democratic ideals, particularly in situations of perceived existential threat (Waltz, 1979). Kenneth Waltz's contributions to realist

thought provide a critical lens through which to analyse the relationship between democracy and war. His arguments illustrate that while democratic structures may embody principles that aim for peace, the essential characteristics of the anarchic international system can complicate this ideal, leading to a nuanced understanding of conflict dynamics. By grounding his analysis in structural realism, Waltz enables a more profound exploration of the conditions under which democracy can influence state behaviour in the international arena, ultimately asserting the complexities inherent in the quest for peace in a world characterised by enduring anarchy (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 1990).

In his seminal work, Waltz addresses the complex issue of democratic warfare, positing the idea that the characteristics defining democracy should be evaluated at the unit level rather than from a systemic perspective. This conceptual framework is pivotal because unit-level democracy alone does not necessarily provide a sufficient explanation for the decision-making processes of individual states. The international environment, described as anarchic, inherently compels states to operate within a self-help system, where future conditions remain largely unpredictable (Waltz, 1979). Consequently, all states find themselves in a position of vulnerability, particularly concerning the formidable risks associated with nuclear extortion. The dynamics of anarchy in international relations imply that states must prioritise their survival and security, leading them to adopt measures that may not always align with democratic ideals. Waltz argues that this anarchic system means that the absence of a central governing authority creates an environment where each state must rely on its own capabilities to protect its interests. As a result, even democratically governed states may resort to aggressive or militaristic policies when their security is perceived to be at risk (Waltz, 1981). This predicament challenges the traditional notion that democracies are less likely to engage in war, suggesting that the pressures of an anarchic global order can supersede democratic norms.

Moreover, the phenomenon of horizontal proliferation, where states acquire nuclear weapons capabilities, has been presented as a potential mechanism for restraining conflict. In theory, the spread of nuclear weapons could create a deterrent effect, whereby the high costs of nuclear war discourage states from engaging in open conflict. However, while this may contribute to a lower likelihood of war between nuclear-armed states, it does not fully eliminate the underlying threats posed by nuclear extortion. Waltz emphasises that the presence of nuclear weapons may serve to stabilise certain rivalries, but it simultaneously perpetuates an atmosphere of mistrust and insecurity, exacerbating the competition among states for power and influence (Waltz, 1983).

Waltz's framework creates a nuanced understanding of the interplay between democracy and war within an anarchic international system. The insistence on examining democracy at the unit level rather than in a systemic context illuminates the complexities of state behaviour in global politics. While the principles of democracy may shape internal governance and influence foreign policy, they do not provide immunity against the strategic calculations driven by self-help dynamics. States,

regardless of their democratic foundations, remain susceptible to the realities of an anarchic world where nuclear threats loom large, and the preservation of security takes precedence over ideological commitments to peaceful conflict resolution. Thus, even democratic states are compelled to navigate the treacherous waters of international relations with caution and pragmatism (Waltz, 1993). Ultimately, Waltz's insights into the nature of democratic warfare elucidate the limitations of democratic peace theory and underscore the enduring relevance of power dynamics in shaping state interactions in the realm of international security. As states continue to grapple with the challenges posed by nuclear proliferation and the uncertainties of an anarchic system, the tensions between democratic ideals and the imperative to ensure national security will persist as a defining feature of global politics.

The relationship between democracy and interstate war can be classified into two distinct categories, each highlighting a different mechanism by which democratic governance can impact a state's decisions regarding war. The first category pertains to instances in which democratic features of a nation influence its choices regarding alliances, and these alliances subsequently affect the nation's likelihood of engaging in conflict with external parties. In contrast, the second category focuses on scenarios wherein a state's participation in an existing military conflict is evaluated. To elaborate on the first category, it is crucial to understand that democracies often have specific decision-making processes and norms that guide their foreign policy. These nations may seek alliances with other democratic states, partly due to shared values and mutual interests (Russett, 1993). This phenomenon, known as the "democratic peace theory," posits that democracies are less likely to go to war with one another, given their common political ideologies and established communication channels (Doyle, 1986). Consequently, when a democratic state forms alliances with other democracies, it might reduce the risk of conflict against those allies, promoting a more stable geopolitical environment.

Moreover, the nature of the selected allies can further influence a democratic state's propensity to engage in conflict. For instance, alliances formed with authoritarian regimes may result in different strategic considerations. These partners might have opposing interests or may engage in aggressive behaviour that complicates the democratic state's position, thereby increasing the likelihood of war with third parties (Maoz & Russett, 1993). Hence, the interplay between a democracy's characteristics and its choice of allies plays a vital role in shaping its options for military engagement. Conversely, the second category encompasses cases where a state's involvement in an ongoing military conflict necessitates consideration of other factors beyond its democratic status. In such scenarios, the operational dynamics of the conflict, including military strategy, public opinion, and the nature of opposition forces, can substantially influence the decisions a democratic state might make. For example, entrenched military engagements might lead leaders to prioritise national security over democratic principles, often resulting in decisions that could conflict with the democratic ethos (Mansfield & Snyder, 1995). Moreover, the inherent challenges that democracies face, such as the need to maintain public support for military

actions, can complicate conflict involvement. Leaders in democratic states may have to navigate the tensions between military objectives and public opinion, which often demands accountability and transparency (Lyall, 2009).

Furthermore, democratic states might also grapple with the problem of legitimacy-whether their military actions are justified in the eyes of their citizens and the international community. In summary, the relationship between democracy and interstate war is complex and multifaceted. It involves a two-pronged approach where the democratic elements of a state can significantly shape its alliance choices and the resultant impact on war propensity, while also acknowledging that ongoing conflicts introduce additional variables that can complicate decision-making. In understanding these dynamics, scholars can better appreciate the varied implications of democratic governance on international relations and conflict (Putnam, 1988). Thus, the interplay between democracy, alliances, and conflict highlights the critical need for a nuanced analysis of how democratic states navigate their roles in global affairs.

CONCLUSION

The influential perspectives on realism, democracy, and the potential for war that Kenneth Waltz outlines in his oeuvre still hold considerable weight and relevance in contemporary global affairs. Any theory poses a challenge to the analyst tasked with spelling out its meaning. Waltz draws on the foundations of realism, proceeds to the question of war and states, and introduces the theme of democracy as that notion interconnects with the study of war and peace.

With such a theoretical framework firmly in place, it is possible to delineate precisely the various branches of scholarship engaged with a causal analysis of either the effects of democracy on the likelihood and character of war, or the observed propensity of particular democratic states either to go to war with one another or to refrain from so doing-a challenge so central to the discipline of international relations since the classic work of Kant. Building on the foundational proposition that structured realist theory would maintain a theoretical purity based upon systemic characterizations of national behaviour, yet holding firmly to the core realist belief that the war observation, expressed at the level of systems under the relevant sets of parameters, nevertheless remained an empirical one subject to causal analysis, Waltz proposes an operating definition, delimitations of the requisite variable set and alternative propositions describing the expected proposition of the behaviour of states across different international architectures, including transitional arrangements.

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