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# PRIORITIZATION THEORY *and* DEFENSIVE FOREIGN POLICY

*Systemic Vulnerabilities in International Politics*

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## Systemic Vulnerabilities in International Politics

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*To Northern Michigan University's Political Science Department:*
*My colleagues and friends*

# Preface

The aim of this book is to articulate a vision of international politics that underscores the fragility of complex interdependence in the international system. Fragility, or weakness, is the essence of my own dissertation which was published as a book in 2015. *Weak States in International Relations Theory: the Cases of Armenia, St. Kitts and Nevis, Lebanon and Cambodia* set out to define weak state systemic behavior and its impact on great power politics. In that book, I theorized that weak states do not always have to bandwagon; rather, these vulnerable states can make good use of great powers to acquire the resources necessary to achieve economic development. Vulnerability describes the inability of states to confront major systemic challenges, not in terms of security, but in the sense of external economic and environmental shocks. These threats erode state autonomy and the ability to remain independent political actors. Seeing that, in light of these particular threats, the function of weak states is survival, they are then able to negotiate their destiny free of balance of power restraints.

While advisors warned me against the study of weak states, it turns out that these units are rather important in International Relations theory. Not only did I define weak states and their relationship to great powers' grand strategy, I hinted at something of even more important to the creation of the international system: weak state behavior may influence great powers and their grand strategies. I referred to this as a game of Go strategy. Great powers cannot help but intervene and compete for influence and attention in weak states due to competition brought on by anarchy. This fact is important to the study of international relations and the balance of power as weak states'

parasitic behavior grinds down the capability of great powers allowing for drastic structural changes; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the United States' invasion of Iraq are just two cases. This fact is ignored by realists. I recall listening to a panel on the Ukraine crisis in spring 2016. The conversation was really about the USA and Russia in isolation, not of their competition over Ukraine. When I asked about the importance of Ukraine to these great powers, one leader in the field kept repeating the same line: great powers *should not* get involved in affairs outside their core interests. I observed that he sounded more like an idealist, discussing matters in the normative realm (they *should*) rather than in a positivist sense of what is. The bottom line is that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enlargement, the conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, control of the South China Sea, and a number of other realms, all involve weak states. These units must be taken seriously as they relate to the competitive structure of the international system.

Weak states manage to persuade great powers to help them with nonmilitary threats: when dealing with economic crises (Mexico 1980s) but also in situations involving health (Ebola), drug trafficking (Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative), terrorism (Iraq and the Islamic State) and even environmental issues (Haitian earthquake). Many a dollar has been spent by great powers on weak states. This was mentioned in *Weak States in International Relations Theory*, but I did not spend too much time theorizing on this fact. Nonetheless, weak states often manage to get great powers to do their job for them, that is, in performing the function of survival.

My dissertation's focus on weak states allowed me to concentrate. However, that concentration forced me to ignore other actors, specifically great powers and their own specific vulnerabilities. Since the 1970s, academics have been discussing the many ways in which states are interdependent, specifically being sensitive and vulnerable to one another's crises. A sudden drop in one state's currency or asset prices can send another into financial crisis; we saw this in the 2008 financial crisis, when the USA's real estate bubble burst and gave way to the European sovereign debt crisis. As I write in June 2016, the Chinese stock market is bleeding out, leading to a mad rush to sell in Asian, European and American markets. Moreover, we are seeing how pollution affects other states through climate change and general health issues. Long before this, the world has been watching drug trafficking networks influence the policies of states. The existence of terrorist networks exerts similar effects.

What I have listed here are a number of systemic vulnerabilities which have impacted the autonomy of states in the international system. While

weak states are more vulnerable to these shocks, great powers also take it upon themselves to neutralize these shocks. Great powers, as well as global and regional hegemons, must take control of these shocks by using power. Great powers and hegemons are responsible for maintaining some stability within a system of their creation; after all, these units have most to gain from maintaining their system. Weak states are free riders in all of this. In this sense, it seems better to be a weak state than a great power, a subject that continues to be one for debate.

Great powers, with all their resources, power and influence, have inherent weaknesses. These weaknesses are all part of today's international system as defined by complex interdependence, but they also emanate from weak states. Because weak states are so exposed to shock, vulnerabilities have time to ripen and become part of the international structure, thereby having what I call systemic reach. While Structural Realism posits that the system is constructed by states' distribution of capabilities, I add that other facets of international politics—vulnerabilities—also create the system and the way states interact with each other. The systemic reach of these threats forces states to act to bolster their chances of survival. I missed this point in Weak States in International Relations Theory.

This study then aims to finish what my dissertation started: to theorize how systemic vulnerabilities shape the international system and hence state behavior. The core of this work posits that positive, long-term, sustainable economic development for all states as the only way to correct vulnerabilities. Creating a pragmatic, stable and sound economic policy for all states who are voluntarily open to the system (barring rogue states and peoples who prefer traditional living), is at the backbone of neutralizing vulnerability. An economically developed nation is more prepared to deal with systemic shock than others because it has the resources to do so. Developed countries are more prepared than others to deal with outbreaks of disease, financial crises, sudden environmental disaster, terrorism and drug trafficking and so on than weaker states because they have the resources to do so. Weaker, more underdeveloped states depend on great powers to bail them out during times of trouble; they know great powers must do so as a part of their hegemonic responsibility.

Using theory and case studies, this work theorizes the structure of international politics in our day. Taking a holistic look at the mechanisms that guide state behavior, I demonstrate the simple fact that as a global community, we are all in this together. While states tend to pursue interests selfishly, the fact remains that one state's trouble can spread

throughout the globe. States only exist to give people the chance to practice self-determination and to survive against other states. These are all normative statements and do not reflect reality. This book is an attempt to describe reality divorced from traditional understandings of the state, taking into account changes in our world. The realists that stubbornly defend their theories (Kassab and Wu 2014) must take these matters seriously.

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## Work Cited

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CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

Threats cause human suffering. If the function of the states is specifically to provide security to survive, would it not be practical to develop a theory that concentrates on the survival of the human species? If states exist to enable human survival, scholars must develop theories which take into account matters that threaten to destroy human civilization. This means including destructive forces in our analysis, alongside creative forces operating within the international system. Standard Structural Realism states that the structure of the international system is defined by anarchy and capabilities (Waltz 2010, 91). States must defend themselves militarily to survive. However, as representatives of people, states must also protect life and property. Non-state, non-military threats to citizens, such as violent political groups, economic instability, environmental disaster, cyber-attacks and outbreaks of disease, also affect the international system as states act to neutralize these sources of individual human suffering. This particular state behavior is shaped by the effort to neutralize non-state threats and, as a result, must be incorporated into any systemic theory.

This book aims to add to the field of International Relations (IR) by proposing the inclusion of non-state threats as a way to examine the evolution of the international system. For most states, the prominence of military matters is long gone. There are now more forces that threaten human existence because of the changes brought on by globalization. Globalization can be defined as "a process (or set of processes) which embodies a



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transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions—assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity and impact—generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction and the exercise of power" (Held et al. 1999, 15). Like any economy, economic transactions may result in negative externalities which pose serious danger to the world. Negative externalities cause human suffering when left unchecked. They may expand globally and result in serious crises such as environmental and health issues, political instability, financial crises and other disorders. The impacts of this are worsened in the structure of anarchy which prevails in the international system. A fundamental lack of rules and regulations to monitor actor behavior encourages states and other entities to operate irresponsibly, exploiting natural and human resources. These activities make the world increasingly unsafe.

Globalization brings people closer together but many fall victim to these negative externalities. While states and governments provide a regulatory role in the domestic economy, there exists no hard governance at the global level. Great powers are responsible for the creation of these regulatory institutions because they encouraged the international exchange of goods, money and services. Great powers, specifically the United States after World War II, set up an international system to encourage global commerce because it benefitted the most from it. Any hegemon or international regime must then build up public goods to ensure the stability and prosperity of the whole system or else the globalized system will fail. It is in the interest of hegemons or regimes to do so for their own survival as systems-creative units. Further, weak states, those states with inherent vulnerabilities, are more open to external shocks that may eventually degrade the entire system, including great powers. The majority of health issues and violent terrorist and criminal actors, for instance, grow in the fertile ground of weak states. For example, violent actors like Islamic State are organized in the weak states of the Middle East and target greater powers in Europe and the United States of America. The international system can then be imagined as a phalanx: the health of system is dependent upon its weakest members. Such changes in its makeup must be incorporated into any abstract theoretical construction of the international system.

To incorporate non-state threats, I intend to combine two systemic theories: Structural Realism and complex interdependence. Globalization and the challenges described by complex interdependence call for a modification of any systemic theory. The modification must include non-state threats and negative externalities brought on by increased interconnected-

ness. Instead of seeing the international system as composed by the distribution of capabilities, I propose the inclusion of the opposite side: the distribution of vulnerabilities. The distribution of vulnerabilities admits the systemic reach of non-state threats and specifically the state behaviors caused by their proliferation. Vulnerabilities in a systemic sense endanger the security and welfare of entire countries, leading to state action. This requires serious study.

Currently, the state is no longer in full control of outside forces such as economic shock, environmental degradation, disease, political violence and cyber-attack. Regardless, the state is still conceptualized as protecting citizens from these external and systemic phenomena. Today, the problems "out there" are now "in here." The divide between "us and them" is no longer relevant as it was a century ago.

Further, and important to conceptualizing the international system, these vulnerabilities and resulting state behaviors may decrease military capabilities and overall power projection. The ability to reinforce the structure of the international system, for example, may lead states to ignore vulnerabilities or use capabilities irresponsibly. Such occurrences result in systemic change and may serve as a foundation for global disorder. The hypothesis suggested thus becomes: if vulnerabilities construct state behavior, then we must consider the forces that threaten them as part of the international system. States and their militaries are impotent to non-military threats and must cooperate to survive; either that or surrender to a hegemon who has the power to provide public goods unilaterally. Vulnerabilities force states to act; they cause certain behaviors that limit state autonomy and sovereignty.

This book intends to develop a new framework of analysis that elegantly illustrates the many vulnerabilities that influence state behavior. This calls for the formulation of two main concepts as they relate to the international system: systemic vulnerabilities and systemic reach. Systemic vulnerabilities are simply external shocks emanating from the system. These shocks have systemic reach, in that they affect the international system and its components. Combining these two concepts, we have the main theoretical contribution of the book: the distribution of vulnerabilities. The distribution of vulnerabilities forms one half of the international system, alongside the traditional Structural Realist notion of the distribution of capabilities. Both forces generate the international system as they construct the behavior of states. The resulting study aims to create a theory necessary to analyze the twenty-first century international system.

## Perceptions of Threat and Theories of International Security

Scholars have long put forward frameworks of analysis which seek to describe global security from a unit perspective. For much of the twentieth century, theorists adopted a statist ontology. For instance, states are made unsafe due to the behavior of other states. This is a reductionist argument that parades as systemic theory. While useful to a certain degree, such an incorrect starting point ignores major developments and changes in international politics. This work, by contrast, presents itself as systemic rather than unit specific. This is because describing the international system requires the use of systemic, rather than state-specific terms. Further, the issues described in existing literature are great power-specific, which is ultimately regrettable as these represent minority members of the system. What is ignored is the systemic power of threats that not only infiltrate states, but spread across states, nesting within weaker units across regions which then allow them to incubate, strengthen and inhabit the globe. The systemic reach of these non-state actors is significant and so must be considered in any theoretical approach in the twenty-first century.

Theories of International Relations have given prominence to the study of security. As a result, the concept of security has been a source of debate for students of IR since the 1970s due to the rise of non-state actors and non-military concerns. However, much of the focus of theory has been on states and their militaries. Consequently, theories of international politics have been dictated by this statist/militarist emphasis. The result has been a long history of statist theories and their many critics. Essentially, the field of IR is governed by a single dialectic: the realisms versus every other theory. In other words, all theories of IR find themselves in either a pro-realist camp (neoliberal institutionalism and thin, Wendtian constructivism) or an anti-realist camp (feminism, Neo-Gramscian theory, post-structuralism, post-colonialism and post-modernism). Structural Realism, then, is the master theory as all other theories originate from it and no general alternative has risen to replace it.

Due to the urgency of national security, security specifically of the nation state (see Buzan 1991, 65) has dominated the field of International Relations since its use by Woodrow Wilson and David Davies in the early twentieth century. It was generally accepted then that "International" Relations would be limited to the study of war, peace and the nation state.

Such attention was relevant for the time. Today, however, I suggest that the issue is not the meaning of security, but the term itself.

Security tries to define something it is not. Security denotes threats of war, conflict, violence, destruction, weaponry all culminating in the conception of a zero-sum game. Notions of zero-sum security actually drive arms races and increased feelings of insecurity. As a result, security does not describe a state's struggle to survive at all. Furthermore, the surge of threats to human and state survival derived from changes in the international system gives rise to new state behavior, as units strive to neutralize threats and other dangerous phenomena. This section takes us through the development of the concept of security in International Relations, starting with state-centric notions, culminating in the development of the Copenhagen framework. The intention here is to illustrate the weakness of the concept in preparation for positioning systemic vulnerability as a replacement.

To begin, traditional realist notions of security tend to emphasize the role of the state as a guarantor of survival. Realists postulate the principal functions of states to be survival, autonomy and protection from other states. Kenneth Waltz suggests that the duty of all states, great or weak, is such given the anarchic nature of the international system (Waltz 2010, 88). Anarchy, which describes the absence of an overarching order, generates the requisite for security (ibid.). Internal balancing (domestic military accumulation) and external balancing (alliance construction leading to balance of power) endeavors to ensure security against threats from other states existing in the same system (Herz 1950; Jervis 1976). The security dilemma is the underlying structural need to produce security and insecurity simultaneously.

Waltz has certainly made an impact in the field of International Relations, but for many his concept of security remains incomplete. In *Redefining Security*, Richard Ullman contests the realist view. Ullman argues in contradiction of this "narrow" definition of security. He suggests a wider, or broader, slant to the study of security, one that emphasizes additional aspects of human life as opposed to Waltz's state/military-centric attitude. Ullman therefore theorizes security as any obstacle to state autonomy and the deprivation of human life (Ullman 1983, 130). This proposal borrows from a Hobbesian interpretation of security in terms of relations of people inside the state rather than the state. Ullman highlights the trade-offs of cost versus prevention and the opportunity costs of certain policies over others. For example, policies that supplement the military may lead

to arms races that only increase insecurity for all and erode standards of living: every dollar spent on the military is one lost on social programs. He expresses this through the term "negative sum" because the security dilemma makes everyone worse off rather than better off (ibid., 140). In summation, broad notions of security acknowledge threats or insecurity to be anything that degrades human life and reduces state autonomy. A state's budget is limited and so policies that enhance military security can be used for other purposes, especially when, as on many occasions, military security can be negative sum.

Feminist formations of security are similar to Ullman's theoretical contribution. Marilyn Waring contends that realist and state designs of security as attained through massive military stockpiling, which supposedly guarantees survival, actually produces insecurity on the individual level. Every dollar that goes to military spending is one that could have assisted human development. Waring points out that non-state threats, like diseases, environmental degradation and economic insecurity could be prevented if funds were spent more wisely (Waring 1998, 169). Therefore, realist and state conceptions of security are not only wrong-headed but dangerous to the longevity of the human race and individual enjoyment.[1]

Realists, such as Stephen M. Walt, have replied to these reproaches, arguing that broadened notions of security are overstretching the concept. Security cannot mean everything because if so it would explain nothing. Walt defends the realist position in that security must be limited to state and military affairs even if it was stuck in the zero-sum contradiction. To Walt, broadened notions of security create a residual category, lacking simplicity and explanatory power (Walt 1991, 212).

From Walt's criticism arose the Copenhagen School of security studies. This framework combines the previously unbridgeable traditional and broadened conceptions of security. In *People, States and Fear*, Barry Buzan illustrates that the concept of security is simply bad. Buzan begins his book by arguing for the habilitation of "the concept of security—we cannot rehabilitate it because it has never been in working order" (Buzan 1991, 2). His main contention is that the concept of security is too narrow and state focused that it ignores other threats and trends in international politics (ibid., 10). He understands that security must answer the question "security of what?" and ultimately employs a multifaceted approach. Buzan suggests we use an analytical approach, looking to several referent objects such as the individual, the state and the system. While dynamic and intriguing, this process is cumbersome. He is interested in making the