Correspondence

History vs. Neo-realism: A Second Look

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Paul W. Schroeder

To the editors:

At a time when international relations theorists are increasingly returning to history to confirm or challenge the neo-realist paradigm,[1] Paul Schroeder's article, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory," is an important addition to the ongoing debate.[2] Indeed, in a long and impressive series of scholarly works, Schroeder has consistently contributed to a fruitful dialogue between historians and political scientists.[3] In this latest article, Schroeder examines 300 years of international relations and concludes that neo-realism does not provide an adequate explanatory framework for the "general operation and dynamics of the modern European states system." He therefore advises historians "not to adopt the neo-realist paradigm," and international relations theorists "not to assume that the facts of international history support one" (p. 148).

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1. See, for example, Ted Hopf, "Polarity, the Offense-Defense Balance, and War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 85, No. 2 (June 1991), pp. 475–493; Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 5–51; Markus Fischer, "Feudal Europe, 800–1300: Communal Discourse and Conflictual Practices," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 427–466; Eric J. Labs, "Do Weak States Bandwagon?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1992), pp. 383–416.
2. Paul W. Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 108–148.
3. For example, see Paul W. Schroeder, "Quantitative Studies in the Balance of Power: A Historian's Reaction," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 1977), pp. 3–21; Schroeder, "The Nineteenth Century International System: Changes in the Structure," *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (October 1986), pp. 1–26; Schroeder, "The Nineteenth Century System: Balance of Power or Political Equilibrium," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (April 1989), pp. 135–153; Schroeder, "The Transformation of Political Thinking, 1787–1848," in Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis, eds., *Coping With Complexity in the International System* (Boulder: Westview, 1993); Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

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Despite his protestations to the contrary, Schroeder's main achievement in this article is in providing evidence that, in the aggregate, states do not balance and that balances do not generally form in the international system. This is a noteworthy and important finding. It is inconsistent with one of Kenneth N. Waltz's predictions in *Theory of International Politics,* and should give proponents of that theory cause to reexamine their model and consider possible alternatives.[4] Nevertheless, Schroeder makes a series of conceptual and theoretical errors that inevitably undermine the article's main contribution. If, as Schroeder notes, we have "the right and duty . . . to weigh in from [our] side, evaluating the way historians use theory" (p. 112), then we cannot allow his caricature of neo-realism to stand.

NEO-REALISM AND WALTZ'S THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Schroeder mistakenly conflates neo-realism with Waltz's *Theory of International Politics.* This leads to two related errors. First, Schroeder misunderstands the kinds of evidence that would pose a significant challenge to the neo-realist approach in general, rather than to Waltz's theory in particular. He therefore underestimates the extent to which his rendition of the historical record is in fact consistent with a neo-realist reading of international politics. Second, by mischaracterizing neo-realism as being identical to Waltz's theory, Schroeder omits entire neo-realist literatures, such as the power transition school.

Schroeder begins his article with a list of what he considers the central tenets of neo-realism (p. 111). This is important because the remainder of the article is devoted to looking at whether a 300-year period of European history is consistent with these claims. Although Schroeder's list might represent some of the "theses or generalizations" of Waltz's version of neo-realism, it mischaracterizes the broader neo-realist paradigm in general.

Schroeder fails to recognize that neo-realism is not a theory, but rather an approach or paradigm. As such, neo-realist models derive predictions from a set of core elements. First among these is the assumption that states interact in an anarchic environment, without the protection offered by an overarching authority. Neo-realism is one of several approaches based on this assumption. Neo-realist models predict aggregate state behavior and outcomes by relying on the following additional assumptions: that states are self-regarding; that consequently self-help is the system-mandated behavioral rule or principle; and that threat to survival is the main problem generated by the system. Furthermore, neo-realist models assume that states are the primary actors in international politics; that states select those strategies in which the expected gain is likely to exceed the expected loss;[5] and that states weigh options and make decisions based primarily on an assessment of the external environment and their strategic situation.

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4. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).
5. It is sometimes suggested that Waltz's particular version of neo-realism is based on an evolutionary model of competitive selection, and consequently does not rely on assumptions of rational choice. This is overstating the case. While Waltz asserts that states that consistently fail to heed systemic constraints and opportunities will be weeded out, the central predictions of his model rely on the assumption that statesmen are "sensitive to costs" and are likely to respond efficiently

A broad critique of the neo-realist approach would have to show that predictions produced by theories based on these assumptions were inaccurate. So, for example, a general critique of neo-realism would have to demonstrate that, in the aggregate, states were not acting "as if" they were rationally responding to external constraints, and that chosen policies were more costly for the state's security as a whole than alternative strategies which might have been selected.[6] Such findings would steer us away from neo-realist arguments, toward domestic or individual-level explanations of state behavior. In our opinion, Schroeder does not provide such a challenge. In most of Schroeder's historical examples, unitary state actors react to changes in their strategic situation, respond to the perceived intentions and capabilities of other states, choose strategies consistent with their position in the global power structure, and pursue policies that are likely to provide them with greater benefits than costs. No evidence could be more compatible with a neo-realist reading of international relations. For example, Schroeder specifically points out that hiding is a "method of handling [external] threat" (p. 117, note 25). He does not argue that hiding is generated by domestic pressures or the cognitive/motivational biases of key leaders. Rather, consistent with neo-realism's notion of a rational, unitary actor, he claims that hiding is one way in which states, typically the weakest ones, try to ensure national survival. Further, consider the following cases which also allegedly prove neo-realism wrong:

1) During the 1785 crisis in the Reich, states rationally responded to external threats—each state selected the strategy perceived to have the greatest chance of protecting its security. But strategies could only be chosen insofar as they were appropriate to the state's capabilities. For example, some of the smallest states reacted to external threats by resorting to international law and trying to form their own union because, given their position in the system, they did not have the resources "to stop Prussia or Austria by force" (pp. 118–119).[7]

2) From 1793–1813, states reacted to perceived changes in France's aggressive intentions and power capabilities. "Once France's real revolutionary power became apparent," states altered their foreign policy strategies accordingly (pp. 120–121). While states often pursued strategies other than balancing, Schroeder argues that their foreign policies were nonetheless a function of changed perceptions of the external environment.

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to changing international conditions and incentives. For more on this point, see Kenneth N. Waltz, "Reflections on *Theory of International Politics:* A Response to My Critics," in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neo-realism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 331; Robert O. Keohane, "Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond," in ibid., pp. 166–167, 173; Jack S. Levy, "Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping A Conceptual Minefield," *International Organization,* Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 297–298.

6. A general critique of neo-realism could also show that states acted "as if" they were other-regarding, or that the system-generated problem was cheating rather than survival.

7. Many analysts of small states recognize that small states, because of their relative resource capabilities, often pursue foreign policies that focus on bolstering international institutions and guaranteeing international rights. See, for example, Annette Baker Fox, "The Small States in the International System, 1919–1969," *International Journal,* Vol. 24, No. 4 (Autumn 1969), pp. 751–764; Michael Handel, *Weak States in the International System,* 2nd ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1990), pp. 265–276.

3) Prior to World War II, alignment decisions were "promoted" by "Germany's growing power and political success" (p. 123). Schroeder does not cite evidence that bandwagoning, neutrality, hiding, or appeasement policies were a result of domestic political constraints or the cognitive/motivational biases of particular leaders. Rather, these various strategies were a reaction to external conditions, namely an increasing German threat. Moreover, states that had previously bandwagoned with Germany switched their foreign policy orientations in lockstep with changes in the progress of the war rather than due to any unit-level influences (pp. 123–124).

4) In the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain could isolate itself from international politics because of its "world position" (p. 145). Britain's "insular position, naval supremacy, industrial and commercial preeminence [and] fiscal strength" meant that such an isolationist strategy would not constitute a grave risk to national security. Thus, Britain "exerted less influence in Europe" (p. 144) because of its position in the international system.

Schroeder argues that his cases demonstrate that there is no "long-term fit between neo-realist theory and international history." Yet, in each of these cases, he does not compromise the neo-realist conception of a unified, rational actor operating within an external environment of competition and opportunity.

In addition to these cases, Schroeder reviews instances where states perceived the gains from territorial expansion to be worth the risks of bandwagoning.[8] The reasons why territorial spoils were considered vital to power, security, warfare, and economic well-being throughout much of the Westphalian era are beyond the scope of this letter. Suffice it to say that this type of bandwagoning for territorial rewards *is* consistent with neo-realist premises that state behavior is driven by power as well as by threat, and that states select that policy that promises a net gain.[9]

The second consequence of Schroeder's unfortunate conflation of neo-realism with Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* is his omission of entire neo-realist literatures. An accurate list of the paradigm's elements would be consistent with a wide range of theories, all of which could be described as neo-realist, but not all of which would predict balancing to be a prevalent state behavior. To be sure, Schroeder correctly points out that Waltz's theory is not the only important version of neo-realism (p. 112). Having

8. These include the Dutch negotiating with France rather than balancing against it in order to obtain part of the Spanish Netherlands (p. 133); the Austrians being more interested in southeast expansion against the Ottoman Empire than in balancing against France (pp. 136–137); William III making a deal with Louis XIV to divide the Spanish inheritance—"a deal which advanced British commercial and imperial interests" while at the same time enhancing French power (p. 138); England entering the War of the Spanish Succession for "imperial, colonial, and commercial gains" rather than to balance against France (pp. 139–140); and, after Tsar Peter the Great's victory over the Swedish army, smaller powers bandwagoning with Russia "mainly to get their share of the Swedish empire" (p. 141).

9. For more on the neo-realist notion that territorial conquest pays, see Peter Liberman, "The Spoils of Conquest," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 125–153; Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 72–107. For more on why the acquisition of territory played such an important role in previous centuries, see James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, "A Tale of Two Worlds: Core and Periphery in the Post-Cold War Era," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 473–474.

said this, however, he purports to criticize the neo-realist paradigm as a whole, and thus overlooks the fact that much of his argument confirms the predictions of alternative neo-realist applications. For example, Schroeder argues that "neo-realism is incorrect in its claim for the repetitiveness of strategy and the prevalence of balancing in international politics" (p. 120). Yet, in an important version of neo-realism, namely power transition theory, balancing is not considered a prevalent strategy, nor are balances predicted to occur repeatedly. For instance, according to Robert Gilpin, world politics is more aptly characterized as a series of hegemonic systems.[10] For Gilpin, backlashes to unipolar or hegemonic moments are uncommon, largely because secondary states perceive any challenge as bound to fail. Hegemons tend to prosper until the benefits of challenging them outweigh the costs. Moreover, because states tend to perceive that the route to assured security is in maximizing their power capabilities relative to others, Gilpin predicts that hegemonic periods will be far more typical than balance-of-power theorists assert. Thus, Schroeder's argument that most states did not balance against France from 1600–1713, realizing that "they could not fight on equal terms with a single great power" (p. 134), is consistent with power transition theory. Additionally, Gilpin would have little problem accepting the fact of French hegemony from 1799–1813 (pp. 120–121), the "emergence and endurance" of Russian hegemony (pp. 140–141), or the replacement of French hegemony with British "paramountcy" (pp. 141–142). Such hegemonic periods in which one state sought an imbalance of power or "advantage, [and] domination for [itself]" (p. 142) and was unchallenged by secondary states for long periods of time would not appear anomalous. After all, bids for hegemony and the long-term success of these endeavors is what power transition theory in general, and Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics* in particular, is all about.

Even among those neo-realists who believe that hegemony is a rare phenomenon, many do not believe that systemic constraints single out balancing as a unique optimizing strategy—states may vary enormously in their responses to external pressures. Thus, contrary to Schroeder's assertions, balancing is not the only strategy that is logically compatible with neo-realist assumptions of anarchy and self-help (p. 109). For example, Randall Schweller points out that states may adopt policies of peaceful accommodation, internal balancing, alliance formation, or preventive war, each of which is "consistent with and widely discussed in the structural-realist literature."[11] And Stephen Walt argues that, while all states should prefer to balance, small states

10. Power transition theory conforms to the central tenets of the neo-realist paradigm. The theory assumes that states interact in anarchy, are self-regarding, and practice self-help. Additionally, the theory assumes that survival is the central problem for states and that state behavior is a rational reaction to external constraints and opportunities. Despite Gilpin's interest in the domestic sources of hegemonic decline, it is ultimately the nature of the external environment that determines the cost-benefit calculus facing individual states and thus accounts for their behavior as well as for systemic change. See Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981). See also A.F.K. Organski, "Power Transition," *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, pp. 415–418; Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988), chap. 8.

11. Randall L. Schweller, "Domestic Structure and Preventive War: Are Democracies More Pacific?" *World Politics*, Vol. 44 (January 1992), p. 267.

will often be forced to eschew such a strategy and bandwagon instead.[12] Moreover, balancing is not only manifested by alliance formation, as Schroeder implies. Balancing can take many forms, and neo-realists have been quick to show that certain balancing tactics may be better suited to particular external conditions. Thus, Waltz distinguishes between alliance formation under multipolar conditions and arms-racing under bipolar conditions. Joseph Grieco differentiates competitive balancing from more cooperative forms, such as "binding." Stephan Haggard notes that "the prediction of 'balancing' is consistent with a wide range of behaviors, from mutual postures of minimal deterrence to arms races and intense competition in the periphery." Finally, Eric Labs points out that even the smallest of states have options, such as "balancing and fighting" or "balancing and free riding."[13]

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "SELF-HELP"?

While Schroeder correctly points out that neo-realists have not clearly defined the concept of self-help, they do suggest that it is a condition of anarchy rather than a specific foreign policy. Self-help is generally considered to be a behavioral rule or principle derived from an implicit secondary assumption linked to anarchy, namely that states have self-regarding identities. Self-help means that states must look out for their own security and well-being; they cannot rely on others to ensure their vital interests nor are they likely to equate their own security and well-being with that of others.[14] Self-help is also not generally thought to be a prediction of state behavior, but rather an assumption from which such predictions are derived. To the extent that this is the case, it is immune from direct empirical falsification, and Schroeder's claim that "states do not rely on self-help" becomes irrelevant.

In addition to misunderstanding the epistemological status of the self-help concept, Schroeder misconceives its substance. To be sure, neo-realists frequently link self-help to balances of power because they often consider balancing to be the most successful strategy for most states most of the time. But, insofar as states are self-interested, competitive, and see their own security interests as distinct from the security concerns of others, there is no logical reason to exclude other strategies from the self-help

12. According to Walt, small states are often likely to see bandwagoning as the only means of protection, particularly when other allies are not forthcoming and a threatening great power is geographically proximate. Indeed, Walt would agree with Schroeder that small states will often bandwagon against a feared hegemonic threat (p. 141).

13. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 168; Stephan Haggard, "Structuralism and Its Critics: Recent Progress in International Relations Theory," in Emanuel Adler and Beverly Crawford, eds., *Progress in Postwar International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 408–409; Joseph M. Grieco, "Understanding the Problem of International Cooperation: The Limits of Neo-liberal Institutionalism and the Future of Realist Theory," in David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neo-realism and Neo-liberalism: The Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 328–335; Labs, "Do Weak States Bandwagon?"

14. By contrast, Alexander Wendt argues that the absence of centralized political authority does not necessarily generate self-regarding identities. Rather, self-help is *sometimes* produced and reproduced through state interaction. See Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make Of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 391–425.

repertoire—hiding, transcending, and bandwagoning, as well as balancing, may be "diverse and different strategies" but they are nonetheless compatible with the proposition of a self-help identity.[15]

By contrast, Schroeder equates self-help with balancing. In his own words, "self-help means, at least generally and primarily, the potential or actual *use of a state's own power along with that of other units* for the purposes of compellence, deterrence, and other modes of controlling the actions of one's opponents" (p. 116, emphasis added; see also p. 117). For Schroeder the opposite of self-help is *any* policy *other than* balancing, such as hiding, transcending, or bandwagoning. Yet, we would argue that since self-help is a behavioral rule based on self-regarding identities rather than a foreign policy, the opposite of self-help is other-help.[16] Other-help follows from an assumption of other-regardingness—a sense of community or collective identity which fosters the belief that one's own security and well-being are tied to the security and well-being of others. In his article, Schroeder does not cite evidence suggesting that this kind of empathetic identity motivated state behavior during the period under investigation. In his interpretation of the historical record, states were consistently self-regarding—on the whole, they did not identify positively with each other's security. While they certainly pursued policies other than balancing, the strategies they chose were always meant to protect their own security and well-being. States did not identify with each other to the extent that they were concerned as much with the security and well-being of other states as they were with their own. On the contrary, Schroeder tells us that "most unit actors tried if they possibly could to protect *their* vital interests" (p. 116, emphasis added). In sum, Schroeder falls short of challenging the neo-realist proposition that aggregate state behavior can be explained by assuming that states interact in anarchy, have self-regarding identities, and consequently are constrained to follow the self-help principle.

WALTZ'S THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

Even if Schroeder's critique is limited to Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, his characterization of that theory is wrong. First, although Schroeder claims to be evaluating the utility of neo-realism for historians (pp. 111–112), he fails to address the epistemological differences separating historians from Waltz. While he does not explicitly tell us the standards by which historians should judge theories, Schroeder does suggest that "a theory, to be valid, needs not merely to predict a general outcome, but to explain its development and etiology" (p. 140). However, in the positivist epistemology that Waltz employs, theories *do not* have to describe real causal mechanisms. For Waltz, theories contain theoretical notions, which can be either concepts or assumptions:

15. Thus, contrary to Schroeder's flow chart of neo-realism (p. 109), self-help is logically *prior* to the concern for security. For neo-realists, anarchy generates a security/survival problematique. It is not the primacy of security that generates the need for self-help, as Schroeder asserts, but rather self-regarding identities and a lack of overarching authority which requires self-help behavior. Thus neo-liberal institutionalists, who do not assume the primacy of security, nevertheless assume that states rely on self-help. The difference is that they believe the system-generated problem is making and keeping contracts.

16. See Jonathan Mercer, "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Spring 1995), pp. 229–252, esp. 233–236.

A theoretical notion does not explain or predict anything. . . . They are neither true nor false. Theoretical notions find their justification in the success of the theories that employ them. . . . A theory, though related to the world about which explanations are wanted, always remains distinct from that world. "Reality" will be congruent neither with a theory nor with a model that may represent it.[17]

Hence, while Schroeder's assertion that neo-realism "gets the motives, the process, the patterns and the broad outcomes of international history wrong" (p. 147) appears to be a powerful indictment, an examination of this list reveals that Schroeder is asking Waltz's theory to perform tasks for which it was not created. For example, motives are assumptions in Waltz's theoretical model, not dependent variables for which the model makes predictions. As such, they cannot be subjected to direct "reality checks." International historians can no more complain that Waltz's theory is invalid because the motives that Waltz ascribes to states are wrong, than could economic historians dismiss micro-economic theories because some firms do not maximize profits, and no markets are really perfect.

In short, Schroeder criticizes Waltz's theory for being true to the epistemology in which it was grounded, without explaining why this epistemology is inadequate for historical knowledge and explanation.[18] Instead, Schroeder condemns Waltz's theory for failing to explain the particular motivations of individual statesmen and units, a job for which the theory was clearly not designed.[19]

Secondly, Schroeder misunderstands the status and meaning of functional differentiation in Waltz's theory. If a lack of functional differentiation is a corollary to the assumption of anarchy, then according to Waltz's epistemology it is not fair game for criticism. Since it is predictions rather than assumptions that are subject to falsification, Schroeder's point that states are *really* functionally differentiated is irrelevant. On the other hand, if we treat unit character as a prediction, then Schroeder misreads Waltz's notion of "like units." According to Waltz, units in an anarchical environment cannot risk a division of labor. Although states must fulfill the same tasks lest they become too

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17. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 5–7. See also Milton Friedman, "The Methodology of Positive Economics," in Milton Friedman, ed., *Essays in Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), especially Part I, sections 1, 2, 3 and 6. Reprinted in Frank Hahn and Martin Hollis, *Philosophy and Economic Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). In other words, for Waltz, being a "scientific" realist does not mean being a scientific realist. For a general discussion of the distinction between positivism and scientific realism, see William Outhwaite, "Laws and Explanations in Sociology," in R.J. Anderson, J.A. Hughes, W.W. Sharrock, eds., *Classic Disputes in Sociology* (New York: Allen & Unwin, 1987), pp. 157–183. See also Russell Keat and John Urry, *Social Theory as Science*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 1–45.

18. Our comments here are limited to Waltz's fairly strict epistemological position. We accept that not all neo-realists, let alone all international relations theorists, are such hard-core positivists, and that some (notably those who use neo-realism to explain specific foreign policy outcomes) are more conscious of the need to make their models mirror reality.

19. We should distinguish Waltz's epistemological position (i.e., theories are to be judged by their consistency and predictive accuracy, not by the realism of their assumptions) from Waltz's *substantive* assertion about the status of motives. Unlike earlier "classical" realists, Waltz's enduring insight is that explanations of state behavior and international outcomes that refer solely to statesmen's motivations and actions are mistakenly reductionist. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 18–37, 60–65; see also Keith L. Shimko, "Realism, Neo-realism, and American Liberalism," *Review of Politics*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 281–301.

dependent on others, Waltz emphasizes that they may select different strategies to do so.

Contrary to Schroeder's assertion, Waltz's suggestion that states are not functionally differentiated in anarchy does not preclude an investigation into the different roles that states have played in various historical periods. Indeed, both Waltz and Christopher Layne open the door for this kind of detail. To be sure, Waltz argues that states are the same because they are all "autonomous political units" and must decide for themselves how to cope with external problems. In so doing, states may wind up duplicating many activities, but Waltz points out that they also "develop their own strategies [and] chart their own courses." Similarly, Layne argues that great powers are not identical: "They may adopt different strategies and approaches; however, ultimately they must be able to perform satisfactorily the same security-related tasks necessary for survival."[20] Thus Schroeder is certainly right that states, "aware of their vulnerability and threats," are un-like units to the extent that they have "sought survival" by adopting different strategies or "specializations" (p. 125). But while this finding adds some important detail to Waltz's neo-realist account, it does not contradict his prediction that all states have a primary function—to survive.[21]

Finally, Schroeder misreads Waltz's views on balancing. Schroeder claims that Waltz predicts that "all states" resort to "self-help in the form of balancing" (pp. 116–117). As a result, Schroeder maintains that if a state fails to balance then this evidence would make a strong case against neo-realism in general, and Waltz's theory in particular (pp. 119–120). We have already shown why this is untrue for the neo-realist paradigm in general. But it is false for Waltz's theory as well. Waltz clearly does not believe that balances of power operate everywhere and at all times. Indeed, Schroeder fails to recognize that Waltz's theory also predicts balancing *failures.*

There are at least two reasons why Waltz might not expect to see balancing. First, the system itself can interfere. Indeed, much of Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* is devoted to identifying the structural conditions that generate erratic and haphazard balancing responses. For example, multipolar distributions of power can lead to chain-ganging and buck-passing.[22] Thus Schroeder's finding that states failed to balance prior to World War I (pp. 122–123) and World War II (pp. 123–124) does not disconfirm Waltz's argument; in both cases the structural features of multipolarity hindered effective balancing in ways that Waltz's theory would lead us to expect.[23] In short, a failure

20. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 96, 122–123; Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion," p. 16.
21. Schroeder's discussion of various states' roles and specialized functions is also largely consistent with Waltz's argument that states are different in their capacity to fulfill security tasks. The fact that, as great powers, Britain and Russia were able to take on roles such as "holder of the balance" and "defender" is consistent with Waltz's theory. Similarly, Schroeder's finding that states with fewer power resources relative to others have had fewer choices and have been limited to play such roles as "neutral" or "buffer" (p. 126) is also compatible with Waltz's argument that a state's behavior is a function of its relative power position. On why the doctrines and policies of states that are similarly placed in the international system tend to converge, see Kenneth N. Waltz, "America as a Model for the World? A Foreign Policy Perspective," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 24 (December 1991), pp. 668–670; and Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, chap. 9.
22. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 161–193.
23. For more on how the structural features of multipolarity influenced states' alignment patterns prior to the First and Second World Wars, see Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances, Threats, and U.S. Grand

to balance is not a failure of balance of power theory if systemic conditions are likely to generate this sort of outcome in the first place.

Second, Waltz might expect to see balancing failures because of unit-level influences on state behavior.[24] Waltz repeatedly emphasizes that a state may resist external pressures because of conditions internal to the state or the skill of its leaders. His point is that internal constraints *do* matter, but that states that repeatedly fail to heed international pressures will "fail to prosper, will lay themselves open to dangers, will suffer."[25] It is in this sense that Waltz insists that his theory cannot be used to explain the foreign policies of specific states at particular times:

> A theory of foreign policy . . . leads to expectations about the responses that dissimilar polities will make to external pressures. A theory of international politics . . . can tell us what international conditions national polities have to cope with . . . [without] in itself say[ing] how the coping is likely to be done.[26]

Thus, while Schroeder does provide one instance in which national security policy was clearly guided by domestic-level influences, namely England's entry into the Nine Years War (pp. 135–136), this does not pose a significant challenge to Waltz's theory—in any *single* case Waltz concedes that unit-level constraints may well exert a more powerful influence. Additionally, Schroeder's finding that states adopted different strategies to meet similar external threats (pp. 117–119) merely reiterates Waltz's distinction between theories of international politics and theories of foreign policy.[27] In short, Schroeder is right that Waltz's theory is not very good at explaining the "policies of individual statesmen and units" (p. 140). But here he merely restates the obvious.

Strategy," *Security Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1992), pp. 448–482; John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 22–24. Similarly, the fact that Germany did not balance against Britain after 1860 (p. 146) can also be attributed, at least in part, to the structural features of a multipolar global power structure. Indeed, Schroeder's claim that the Germans were more fearful of Russia than of Britain is consistent with both Waltz's and Walt's predictions that uncertainty with regard to who threatens whom generates inefficient balancing in multipolar systems. For a general theoretical discussion of multipolar pathologies such as chain-ganging and buck-passing see Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Spring 1990), pp. 137–168.

24. Finding that unit-level factors occasionally drive state behavior would not be inconsistent with neo-realism unless it could be shown that, in the aggregate, such internal influences were more significant than external constraints.

25. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 71, 92, 118–119, 122, 124–125, 174–175; Waltz, "Reflections on *Theory of International Politics*," pp. 331, 343.

26. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 72; see also ibid., pp. 121–123; Waltz, "Reflections on *Theory of International Politics*," pp. 339–340.

27. Of course, many international relations theorists argue that Waltz's theory *should* be considered a theory of foreign policy, and a number of scholars have employed it in this fashion. See, for example, Richard Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein, "Beyond Realism: The Study of Grand Strategy," in Richard Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein, eds., *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 27, n. 16. For an opposing view, see Fareed Zakaria, "Realism and Domestic Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Summer 1992), pp. 177–198. For a general discussion of this debate, see Colin Elman, "Neo-realist Theories of Foreign Policy? Meaning, Objectives, Implications," paper presented at the Annual Conference of the International Studies Association, Chicago, February 1995.

In sum, Schroeder is incorrect to presume that balancing failures can be automatically coded as challenges to Waltz's theory, because the theory does not predict that states will always balance correctly or that balances will form in all cases. In other words, Schroeder overstates the extent to which Waltz expects states to balance. Nevertheless, Waltz *does* claim that insofar as systemic rather than unit-level constraints determine state behavior, and structural features do not prevent efficient responses, balancing is the optimal strategy. While Waltz does not specify how prevalent balancing is likely to be, he clearly believes that, *in the aggregate*, states are constrained by the system and will tend to balance. Consequently, Schroeder's evidence that states rarely balance does indeed pose a problem for Waltz's theory. We address this particular challenge in our final section.

WALTZ'S THEORY: DISCARD, AMEND, OR CIRCUMSCRIBE?

We have explained why Schroeder's article leaves the general neo-realist paradigm unscathed. We have also shown why his comments regarding self-help and functional differentiation were perhaps epistemologically unsound, and in any event, substantively misconceived. Thus, we are left with Schroeder's one remaining criticism, namely the argument that balancing behavior and balances of power are not as prevalent as Waltz would have us believe. This critique is strengthened by the fact that Schroeder does not rely on a single historical event, but rather casts his empirical net widely, and thereby submits Waltz's theory to a fairer test.[28] Yet, while a single case cannot be used to test a theory, neither does the route to theory advancement lie in amassing large numbers of disconfirming facts. Only better theories can displace theories, but we have yet to construct a competing research program that can account for both new facts and anomalies as well as past patterns of state behavior.[29] Thus, Waltz's theory should not be discarded until something better comes along to replace it.

In the interim, we can follow two heuristic strategies to maximize the theory's payoff. First, we can make adjustments to Waltz's model, such as relaxing some of its assumptions or adding variables, in order to improve its empirical validity. For example, if we broaden the definition of threat to include both external and internal pressures, then evidence that states bandwagoned with a stronger power rather than joined the weaker side would not necessarily disconfirm the prediction that balancing is more common—these statesmen may still be balancing against the greatest threat to their survival, namely rival domestic groups.[30] Alternatively, by "relaxing" the assumption that "states

28. On how ransacking history to find a single confirming or disconfirming case cannot constitute a meaningful test of a general theory, see Charles W. Kegley, Jr., "How Did the Cold War Die? Principles for an Autopsy," *Mershon International Studies Review*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (April 1994), pp. 31–33.

29. Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

30. On this point, see Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit," p. 78. See also Steven R. David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

value what they possess more than what they covet," we can account for both bandwagoning and balancing behavior.[31]

A second heuristic strategy would be to distinguish the conditions under which Waltz's theory has value from those situations and circumstances where it is likely to be less relevant. Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba put it well: "The process of trying to falsify theories in the social sciences is really one of searching for their bounds of applicability."[32] The aim of such research would not be a wholesale refutation of Waltz's theory, but rather a clearer understanding of the particular conditions, issue-areas, and settings within which unit- and international-level explanations are likely to prove superior and a more precise sense of the relative importance of systemic and non-systemic constraints.[33] Thus, where Waltz's theory is not applicable, we should employ another. Since international history lends empirical support to very different interpretations of how states behave and interact, it is only by encouraging this kind of theoretical pluralism and diversity that we are likely to make sense of where we have been and where we might be headed.

—*Colin Elman*
—*Miriam Fendius Elman*
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The Author Replies:

Clearly no serious answer to this critique or careful discussion of the complicated issues involved in it can be fitted into the space allotted me (4–5 double-spaced pages). This will therefore not be a reply to the Elmans, but a few remarks designed merely to dispel any possible impression that a failure to reply signified an inability to do so, and to give a hint of what a genuine reply might be.

The Elmans claim two main things: that I narrowly restrict and misrepresent neo-realism as a whole and Waltz's version in particular, and that when my mistakes and distortions are corrected, my account supports rather than undermines neo-realist theory. Given an opportunity to reply, I would not seriously contest the first part as not worth the requisite effort, but strongly reject the second. I would argue instead that the

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31. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit."
32. Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 101, and their discussion on pp. 100–103; see also Keohane, "Neo-realism and World Politics, " pp. 5–6; Alexander L. George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy* (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1993), pp. 13, 120–125.
33. Andrew Moravcsik, "Liberalism and International Relations Theory," Harvard University, Center for International Affairs, Working Paper No. 92-6, April 1993, p. 41; Haggard, "Structuralism and Its Critics," p. 405. For recent studies along these lines, see Miriam Fendius Elman, "The Foreign Policies of Small States: Challenging Neorealism in Its Own Backyard," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (April 1995), pp. 171–217; Benjamin Miller, "Explaining Great Power Cooperation in Conflict Management," *World Politics*, Vol. 45 (October 1992), pp. 1–46; Andrew Bennet, Joseph Lepgold, and Danny Unger, "Burden-sharing in the Persian Gulf War," *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 39–75.

Elman defense, far from saving neo-realist theory from my critique, makes the case that it is useless and harmful for understanding international history even stronger. What follows is not that argument, impossible in this space, but various assertions in lieu of it.

The Elman argument further undermines the case for neo-realist theory as a satisfactory approach for international history in several ways. First, it appropriates every possible tenable position in IR theory and history for the neo-realist camp. The category of non-neo-realist theory and interpretation is empty. Second, they succeed, in fact, in rendering neo-realist theory immune to empirical historical falsification, but at the cost of rendering it otiose and irrelevant for historical explanation. Third and most important, the fundamental neo-realist assumptions they cite, on which everything in neo-realist theory rests and from which everything flows, are in reality not synthetic judgments, as they seem to suppose, but analytic, definitional statements, in which the predicate adds nothing that was not already in the subject. Anarchy is simply part of the definition of an international system. The assumption of the state as prime actor and rational unitary actor in the system, constrained by its exigencies and threats, is simply part of the definition of what it is to be a "state" in a "state system." The same holds for states as self-regarding entities practicing self-help; this is simply part of the definition of a state. When, however, these analytic statements, which define in an abstract way the basic terms used in international theory, are understood as synthetic statements ascribing real, particular properties to their subjects, and when these assumptions, so fleshed out, are applied to concrete historical circumstances and used to support hypotheses and deductions about actual historical patterns, all kinds of fallacies and category errors arise. The assumptions, legitimate as analytic statements, prove when wrongly understood and used to produce vacuous distinctions, false dichotomies, and logical contradictions.

Thus every logical contrary the Elmans attempt to construct so as to provide an alternative to the neo-realist concept of state conduct, an alternative which, if it could be proved historically, would falsify neo-realism, ends in logical contradiction and practical historical nonsense. Every such category proves empty. There are not, and could not be, states which *choose* not to be constrained by the state system, or *choose* to pursue loss rather than gain or extinction rather than survival; no states which are or can be other-regarding and practice other-help. A state which did so, *per impossibile*, would thereby prove itself to be not a state. So it goes with every dichotomy they present.

Therefore, I would show, their whole case that history fits the neo-realist paradigm falls to the ground because they fail to see that it is their neo-realist assumptions, as they understand and use them, which simply put all state action in the state system into a neo-realist mold and neo-realist boxes *by definition*. The whole thing is essentially an elaborate word game, explaining and predicting nothing about the actual historical character of the international system. At the same time the scheme ignores, dismisses, or argues away vast masses of historical data and patterns which its assumptions cannot deal with (e.g., that the state system has always historically contained as important actors many units which were not states—either less than states or more and other than states, and that these have been indispensable to its functioning).

This, as I say, gives only an inkling of the reply I would give. I have drafted a tentative version of the argument; the Elmans or anyone else interested may have a copy on request. I have not decided whether to try to publish it in some form elsewhere.

I also wish hereby to declare victory and go home—i.e., to state that I will not discuss neo-realist theory further, at least not in this journal. I assure the Elmans that I do not resent their challenge. I provoked it; it was civil; and I learned from it, though not what they wanted. But I do regret the great amount of time and trouble (unprecedented in my experience) which proved to be involved in publishing an article which has little connection with and no profit for my main work, and now wish to terminate it. I have heard from a number of historians about the article. None criticized the historical interpretations, though this is quite possible, but some said in effect, "Why do you bother? You know this kind of theory does historians no good." I have long believed, and acted on the belief, that this attitude was wrong in regard to IR theory in general, including many of the theories generated by or spun off from neo-realism. But in this instance I think they are right. This discussion has convinced me more than ever that neo-realist theory in general has little to offer the historian. It addresses only questions, the answers to which we knew already, and its explanatory framework is the night in which all cows are black. I attacked Waltzian neo-realism because I believed that it was a coherent, influential theory which had something definite to say about history, which could be falsified and should be. But neo-realism in general as the Elmans present it is not a coherent theory; one could apply to it the verdict of the physicist Wolfgang v. Pauli: "Not even wrong." Hence I will devote myself from now on to the history of international politics, and leave neo-realists to deal with the results, or ignore them, as they see fit.

—*Paul W. Schroeder*
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CORRECTION:

In V.P. Gagnon, Jr., "Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict: The Case of Serbia," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), p. 134, the text of note 15 should read as follows: "For example, 29 percent of the Serbs living in Croatia who married during the 1980s took Croat spouses." Our apologies to the author and our readers for the error.