

# Neorealism in International Relations

## From Explaining to Influencing World Politics\*

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### Introduction

IT IS hard to overestimate the dominance of the realist tradition not only in academia, but also in the actual work of policy-makers, of state officials and diplomats involved in the daily management of issues on the international agenda.

As far as academic studies are concerned, a book with a relevant name, *The Power of Power Politics*, published 30 years ago, would provide concrete data about the positioning of researchers in the field: 92% of the hypotheses and 94% of the variables used were realist (Vasquez, 1983). Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that, for some authors, the (neo)realist theory is the only scientific theory of the IR field since it assumes a status similar to that of other disciplines. Another relevant situation is that the textbooks or general books on theories of international relations were also written by authors whose academic identity is self-proclaimed as (neo)realist, such as the case of Dario Battistella's work *Théories des relations internationales* (2012). Perhaps the statistics have changed from 1983 to nowadays, all the more so as constructivism in IR would be propelled only in the late '80s, with the contributions of Nicholas Onuf, *World of Our Making* (1989) and Alexander Wendt, "The Agent-structure Problem in International Relations Theory" (1987).

Nevertheless, the realist school still holds a dominant position, especially in the American academia, which is also the most important for IR.<sup>1</sup> Things are even clearer when we consider the way of thinking of those who are the actors studied by political scientists. As Keohane shows, the problem is not whether there is an understanding of the reality of international politics, respectively action guided by this understanding, without prior *theory*, but the question is rather: what are the theoretical assumptions after which, consciously or unconsciously, voluntarily or involuntarily, every political actor guides both its understanding of the world and political action?

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For over 2000 years, thinkers have sought to understand, more or less systematically, the most basic questions of world politics: the sources of discord and of war and the conditions of cooperation and of peace. As Keynes said in another context, practitioners are prisoners of “academic scribblers,” whose views of reality profoundly affect the contemporary actions of practical people. The choice for practitioners is not between being influenced by theory or examining each case “on its merits”: it is rather between being aware of the theoretical basis for one’s interpretation and action, and being unaware of it (O. Keohane, 1986, pp.3-4).

Therefore, the problem becomes even more serious as it turns out that, unlike theories from fields such as Physics or Chemistry, theories of international relations directly or indirectly influence the behavior of the political actors they are supposed to study. Alexander Wendt has even devised a theory able to explain the possibility of transition from one understanding of anarchy to another understanding of what anarchy means. In other words, the very fact that anarchy is a social construct allows for different types of anarchy—Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian—and consequently for different political behavior. It is not by chance that the same Wendt arrived in a later study to the conclusion that “a world state is inevitable” (Wendt, 2003). However, for the time being the prospects of a Kantian image of anarchy are rather reduced and a cosmopolitan arrangement of international politics seems unlikely to happen.

For the present study, what is important in presenting the realist school is the emphasis on the (external) sovereignty of states and the complete lack of regulation of their action in pursuit of national interest in an anarchic system.

## Realism as Science and Guide for Foreign Policy

ONE OF the first thinkers claimed by the realist school is Thucydides, whose explanations and thoughts on the Peloponnesian War can be summarized to three fundamental assumptions regarding what in his era represented the counterparts of modern states, namely, the city-states:

- City-states are the basic political structures on the ‘international’ scene;
- in their action, city-states seek power either as an end in itself, or as a means to achieve other goals;
- city-states act in a manner that is, with some approximation, rational and comprehensible to the others in rational terms.

As it will be shown below, although the international political landscape has changed dramatically, some of these insights remain constant for realist school advocates nowadays. In the twentieth century, the one that would ascertain the failure of liberal theory attempts was E.H. Carr, who would publish, in 1939, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919-1939. An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, relevant in this regard being especially the analysis that he performed on the failure of the League of Nations, in the chapter “The Utopian Background” (Hallett Carr, 1946, pp. 22-41). As he came

to occupy a chair named in honor of the US President Woodrow Wilson, Carr would disappoint those who were expecting from him a defense of the liberal Wilsonian idealism and international institutions based on a new ethical-legal order in international relations. As Carr would specify, one of the merits of what he calls the “sociology of knowledge” is to have helped the realist school to prove what lies beyond the ethical pretensions of utopian thinking:

The realist has thus been enabled to demonstrate that the intellectual theories and ethical standards of utopianism, far from being the expression of absolute and a priori principles, are historically conditioned, being both products of circumstances and interests and weapons framed for the furtherance of interests. “Ethical notions,” as Mr. Bertrand Russell has remarked, “are very seldom a cause, but almost always an effect, a means of claiming universal legislative authority for our own preferences, not, as we fondly imagine, the actual ground of those preferences (Hallett Carr, 1946, p 68).

But Carr’s influence in the era was obviously diminished by the string of errors in his political vision, errors that included, among other things, the admiration expressed towards the Soviet Union and the misunderstanding of the threat of political action and elements of doctrine of Nazi Germany, such as the concept of *Lebensraum*. Therefore, Carr’s recovery as a theoretician only began in the period after the end of World War II, being appreciated especially within certain more recent neorealist trends, such as offensive realism. Incidentally, the same route will be followed by Carl Schmitt, another realist theoretician who, this time due to his explicit adhesion to Nazi ideology for a certain period, would be rediscovered later on and even invoked and quoted by most different political schools (Chandler, 2004, pp 49-65).

Far from being a ‘scientist’ in the sense of the neutrality of the scientific approach to the object studied, Morgenthau aimed at influencing contemporary foreign policy and, consequently, much of its work has analyzed the US action in terms of his conception of national interest. Nevertheless, in order to respond to criticism by other theories, realism needs to be grounded in a ‘science’ of international politics, not only to provide a guide for the exercise of power in foreign policy. Morgenthau was the one who provided realism with this ‘science,’ being recognized not only as the ‘founding father’ of the discipline by Stanley Hoffman, but also as essential for understanding the neorealism presented by Waltz in *Theory of International Politics*.<sup>2</sup>

Here is a brief presentation of the principles of realism, as Morgenthau himself has stated them in *Politics among Nations*:<sup>3</sup>

1. Politics is governed by objective laws. The objective nature of these laws derives from their foundation in human nature.

2. The difference between politics and other spheres of action is the difference between different ways of understanding the concept of ‘interest’: an interest in economy means wealth, while for politics, *interest means power*. Not every foreign policy will follow this principle, but if this happens it is for reasons of personal weakness or collective irrationality. Hence the normative character of Morgenthau’s realism, for whom a rational

foreign policy is good as it ‘minimizes risks and benefits and, hence, complies both with the moral precept of prudence and the political requirement of success.’<sup>7</sup>

3. Although it has an objective nature, the concept of interest defined as power can change its meaning, just as the connection between the concept of ‘interest’ and the national state is a product of history.

4. The circumstances and context of political action are essential, so that universal moral principles must take these into account when applied to political action. Survival is what should stand above any moral considerations.

5. The system of values or morals of any nation must not be identified with universal moral principles.

6. The fundamental difference between realism and other schools: judging by legal-moral standards is inadequate to the political field, which has to be considered within its autonomous sphere of action, according to the principle *interest is power*: “The economist asks: ‘How does this policy affect the wealth of society, or a segment of it?’ The lawyer asks: ‘Is this policy in accord with the rules of law?’ The moralist asks: ‘Is this policy in accord with moral principles?’ And the political realist asks: ‘How does this policy affect the power of the nation?’” (Morgenthau, 1993, pp 4-17).

What is less obvious in the presentation of the six principles of realism is the scale of reflection about the essence of human nature, a reflection that embraces Morgenthau’s whole theory, and in some ways, proves the influence of one of his intellectual friends, Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr. Known not only in academia, Niebuhr exercised in his turn a heterogeneous influence in the world of real politics, having been read and quoted by Martin Luther King, praised by former President George W. Bush, Jr. and nominated by Barack Obama as his favorite political thinker.<sup>4</sup>

Just like Morgenthau, or, like Hobbes, Niebuhr has no illusions regarding human nature and points out that the idealists and utopians (whom he calls ‘children of the light’) may be responsible for catastrophes suffered by their peoples because, in their political action, they will be easy victims of the cynicism of those inclined to think in terms of the will to power (‘children of the dark’). Consequently, there is no international order, not even the system created by the so-called balance of power, which should never deceive the statesman responsible for that—Niebuhr is in 1944 a visionary regarding the future conduct of the then ally of the United States, the USSR. Nothing will dictate the behavior of another power besides the interest to maximize its power:

No participant in a balance is ever quite satisfied with its own position. Every center of power will seek to improve its position: and every such effort will be regarded by the others as an attempt to disturb the equilibrium. There is sufficient mistrust between the great nations, even while they are still locked in the intimate embrace of a great common effort, to make it quite certain that a mere equilibrium between them will not suffice to preserve the peace (Niebuhr, 2011, p.175).

As will be shown in what follows, the realist doctrine advocated by Morgenthau in *Politics among Nations*, as well as Niebuhr’s legacy (Niebuhr, 2002) had an enormous echo both through the influence on American foreign policy and on the development of the realist theory of international relations by Kenneth Waltz.

## Neorealists and Systemic Theory: Anarchic Structure and Sovereign State

**I**F THE quest for power represents the connector between the realist and neorealist reflection, then its origin is different. For Morgenthau, the origin of power is found in human nature, for Waltz it is the very structure of international politics which forces the states to follow a sole path. For Waltz, the main problem of international relations researchers, regardless of their orientation, traditionalists or modernists, as he calls them, lies in their inability to analyze the system as such. For all of them, what happens within states or the very nature of states is the main trigger of consequences in the field of foreign policy.

Viewed from this perspective, the main distinction in IR becomes now not the one between realists and other schools, but the one between reductionist and systemic theories. Reductionist theories are those theories that are interested in the behavior of parts of the system, those which try to explain what happens internationally through elements or combinations of elements located at state (national) or sub-state (subnational) level. The example offered by Waltz to illustrate such a position is the same as Morgenthau's in the period in which he was directly involved in American foreign policy.

In the context of the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union in the '70s, during the so-called *détente*, the question which aroused concern in Washington was related to the possibility that the relatively less tense relationship between the two superpowers would be adversely affected by the pressures US exerted on Moscow to bring about a transformation of the Soviet political regime into a more liberal one. Morgenthau's position in this case was one which reversed the problem by arguing US's obligation to be concerned with the internal politics of the Soviet Union for reasons related to their own national interest:

(...) A stable peace, founded upon a stable balance of power, is predicated upon a common moral framework that expresses the commitment of all the nations concerned to certain basic moral principles, of which the preservation of the balance of power is one (Waltz, 1979, p. 62).

This type of argument is synonymous to saying that international stability is jeopardized by the nature of some states, the so-called revolutionary states, which are by their nature inclined towards war. Such theories, which Waltz calls 'inside-out explanations,' are nevertheless unable to explain the situation of some revolutionary states which had no such behavior on the international relations scene, and the attempts to make predictions based on such analyses failed. On the contrary, even if all states would be stable and had only concerns regarding their own safety, nothing could guarantee the keeping of peace, because the "the means of security for one state are, in their very existence, the means by which other states are threatened." As you can see, for such an assertion Waltz has a generality that goes beyond the internal politics of states or the nature of political regimes. Hence the conclusion: "One cannot infer the condition of international politics from internal composition of state, nor can one arrive at an understanding of international politics by summing the foreign policies and external behavior of states" (Waltz, 1979, p. 64).



Once established the importance of structure to the detriment of components, Waltz proposes an analysis of the possible variations of structures on three dimensions: according to principles of order, to the functionality of the component units and to the power capabilities available to these units. However, things simplify consistently since we find that only the third principle implies variation. As far as the principle that has always 'governed' the world of international politics is concerned, there is only one: anarchy. In a system whose governing principle is anarchy, the components cannot be differentiated in terms of their functionality, as they have a sole function: survival. Of course, a state is by nature bound to meet a number of other functions in relation to its own people and to interact and cooperate, most often in a number of areas that have no connection with survival, with other states. But all these functions are irrelevant from the perspective of international relations theory, as long as, in order of importance, all other functions are secondary and dependent on the accomplishment of the fundamental task of any state, namely, to ensure survival.

The same can be said about reducing state actors in international politics to the states themselves. This time the possibility of simplifying the model is due to differences among units when they are analyzed according to the third dimension. Certainly the world of international relations, empirically speaking, encompasses other actors and types of interaction than just the states and the interactions among them. But, following the model of economic theory, the system can be better understood and explained when the units that matter are pursued, the ones which, to use academic vocabulary, have a significant 'market share.' From this perspective, it is not only that states alone matter and are worth considering, but not even *all* states qualify when weighed against the real power they hold. Basically, the systems are structured and can be classified according to the number of states or alliances of the states that really *matter*, Waltz dedicating an entire chapter in the *Theory of International Politics* to analyzing the consequences arising from the structure of the system as bipolar or multipolar.

However, Waltz does not deny the natural tendency of states to move in the accumulation of power beyond providing the basic function of self-preservation, to what might be called universal domination.<sup>5</sup> From this point of view, the situation became really interesting after the collapse of the Soviet Union when the United States remained virtually the sole global actor in a system whose bipolar structure was transformed into a unipolar one. But before outlining the evolution of neorealist theories after the end of the Cold War, we shall briefly present the manner in which Waltz explains structural realism in terms of the European integration process which began in the late '40s. Presenting the understanding of the process through the prism of neorealism is particularly useful because, in a chronological order, we can talk about a succession of two major changes to the world of contemporary international politics: the transition from a multipolar system to a bipolar one, at the end of the Second World War, respectively the shift from a bipolar system to a unipolar one at the end of the Cold War.

According to the old power equation that dominated the world after the Peace of Westphalia, European countries held the role of important global powers, an equation that could operate only as a zero sum game in which any gain for a player is a loss for another and, vice versa, any loss is a gain for another participant in the game. The bal-

ance of power was the only one that explained under these conditions why some countries had temporarily overcome the rivalry specific to such a system and had come to cooperate: to offset the even greater power of another state. The growth of the power of the Soviet Union and the United States changed everything and forced the European states to cooperate among themselves for the common benefit of all:

They (European states) became consumers of security (...). For the first time in modern history, the determinants of war and peace lay outside the arena of the European states, and the means of their preservation were provided by others. These new circumstances made possible the famous ‘upgrading of the common interest,’ a phrase which conveys the thought that all should work together to improve everyone’s lot rather than being obsessively concerned with the precise division of benefits (Waltz, 1979, p. 70).

Let us recall, for the sake of comparison, the famous phrase about the lasting peace among European states in the founding document of the integration process, the Declaration of 9 May 1950: “La solidarité de production qui sera ainsi nouée manifesterà que toute guerre entre la France et l’Allemagne devient non seulement impensable, **mais matériellement impossible.**” (our emphasis) (Schuman, 1950). The solidarity of production would be the result of absolute innovation in institutional terms, for the so-called ‘pooling’ of coal and steel production was to be regulated and supervised by a High Authority. The document was thus paving the way for a lasting peace on the continent, anticipating at the same time the idea of the emergence of supranational institutions and paving the way towards a European federation.<sup>6</sup>

From Waltz’s neorealist perspective, nothing of the tragedy and trauma inflicted by the Two World Wars has contributed to the creation of the postwar European architecture, but only calculations and the harsh reality of the decline of European power in comparison with the USSR and the USA: “Living in the superpower’s shadow, Britain, France, Germany and Italy quickly saw that war among them would be fruitless and soon began to believe it impossible” (Waltz, 1979, p. 70). Thus, first was the strategic decision, taken after a rational calculation, regarding the futility of a war among European states, and only then the decision on the economic benefits that an accelerated integration could bring to companies, respectively to member states. Nevertheless, the conflict itself has not disappeared, but has only changed its nature, and nowadays it manifests itself in the form of tough negotiations within the European Economic Community. Even the fundamental difference, namely, that disputes are no longer resolved by military interventions but through negotiation, is explainable not by a change in attitude or in the way of thinking of European leaders, but by understanding the change undergone with the transition to a bipolar power system, of which none of the former European powers is still part (Waltz, 1979, p. 71).

If these were the historical conditions in which the process of European integration began, which are then the constraints and opportunities which, according to neorealists, the European states had at the end of the Cold War with the transition from a bipolar system to a unipolar one? To answer this question it should be remembered above

all that there is a quasi-unanimous—passing over internal boundaries between neorealist sub-schools<sup>7</sup>—view that the bipolar system is the safest of the three in terms of balance and self-support, while the unipolar system is less stable. Therefore, the fate of the European integration process in the early '90s must be projected against this background and understood together with the challenge posed by the United States for the international community, as the sole global actor.

Precisely because the process of European integration cannot be considered separately from the relationship of European states with the United States, the future of the European Community was questionable in the early '90s, together with the future of the main transatlantic organization, the Organization of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO). The most important neorealist theorists predicted the collapse of the North Atlantic Alliance, and Kenneth Waltz was no exception (Waltz, 1993; Mearsheimer, 1990, pp. 5–56; Mearsheimer, 1993, pp. 50–66).

A decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Kenneth Waltz would analyze the survival and even expansion of NATO, in an article which is important for understanding the realist heritage in the post-Cold War era (Waltz, 2000). In a direct criticism of the various institutionalist trends, Waltz refuses the explanations on the persistence of institutions or their “stubbornness” to operate like independent structures or bodies (Legro and Andrew, 1999). On the contrary, if an institution or international organization continues to exist even after the purpose for which it was created no longer exists, this is because the founding states have invested it with another purpose, one that would serve their current interests. According to Waltz, it is thus not hard to identify the reason why NATO not only survived but also expanded after the main purpose for which the Alliance was established—the danger represented by a potential aggression of the USSR—ceased to exist. The reason is that the United States wanted that to happen, Waltz citing in this regard a senior US official, John Kornblum: “The Alliance provides a vehicle for the application of American power and vision to the security order in Europe” (Kornblum, 1994, p. 14). Throughout the '90s, there was in this respect a continuity in US foreign policy, regardless of the political affiliation of the leaders at the White House, both President Bush and then President Clinton considering NATO as an appropriate instrument to achieve the American objectives of political and military domination of European states.

It is relevant in this context that some European countries in the early '90s found that it would have been possible to rethink the Western European Union (WEU), an institution rather inoperative ever since the beginning of its existence in 1954. In their view, WEU could have taken over the task of ensuring European security outside of NATO or after the disappearance of NATO. The intervention of the American administration was a determined one, and the result was an abandonment of the ideas of independent development and re-discussing the project of European security within NATO, which occasioned, after the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, the following message of congratulations from the US President George Bush: “we are pleased that our Allies in the Western European Union (...) decided to strengthen that institution as both NATO’s European pillar and the defense component of the European Union” (Waltz, 2000, p. 21).



Based on the same data but with a different interpretation, William C. Wohlforth, a representative of neoclassical realism, argues with Waltz both in terms of the current unipolar system's stability and the US ability to provide leadership within this system on the medium and long term. Thus, in an article entitled "The Stability of a Unipolar World" (Wohlforth, 1999) Wohlforth advances three statements meant to support his position. The first refers not only to the obvious unipolar nature of the contemporary system, but also to the extent of the rift between the USA and the rest of the great powers, a rift that gives stability to the current system:

The United States enjoys a much larger margin of superiority over the next most powerful state or, indeed, all other great powers combined than any leading state in the last two centuries. Moreover, the United States is the first leading state in modern international history with decisive preponderance in all the underlying components of power: economic, military, technological, and geopolitical (Wohlforth, 2011, p. 8).

The second idea supported by Wohlforth comes therefore as a consequence of this rift: the lack of any prospect that any opposing power could rival the United States in terms of global leadership means eliminating a source of constant conflict present in other earlier systems. Following the same logic, Wohlforth advances the last of the three strong ideas of his position, namely, that all these elements, combined with the geographical position of the US, transform the current unipolar system not only into a stable, but also a durable one. The advantage of being separated by two oceans is one that the other powers, potential candidates to a power pole status, such as Japan, China, Germany or Russia, do not enjoy, thus "efforts on their part to increase their power or ally with other dissatisfied states are likely to spark local counterbalances well before they can create a global equipoise to U.S. power" (Wohlforth, 2011, p. 8). However, regardless of the positioning in a debate on the stability of the unipolar system, it remains clear that, at least for the period relevant to this study, the US position as the sole superpower on a global scale has been crucial in determining how to resolve the most important moments in the recent history of international relations.

## Conclusions

**I**N CLOSING this study, we return to the normative character of realist theories, in this case the theory developed by Waltz. For Waltz, the descriptive nature of his theory refers to the structural level, where the pressures exerted on states can be understood and described. However, Waltz insists on the idea that nothing can be inferred from here about the actual behavior of the system units, the states, which may respond differently—in a rational or less rational manner—to these pressures and possibilities. According to him, it is only a theory of foreign policy that is able to try this, not a systemic theory of international relations (Waltz, 1979, p. 71).

It can be said that such a theory of foreign policy would not be necessary and the systemic theory of international relations would be sufficient, provided that national states are rational agents (and, additionally, equipped with a perfect knowledge of all the conditions deployed by the system). Although there are authors who take such a position, Waltz will decline it steadily: “Since making foreign policy is such a complicated business, one cannot expect of political leaders the nicely calculated decisions that the word ‘rationality’ suggests” (Mearsheimer, 2009, p. 23).

From this perspective, the value of Waltz’s theory rather lies in its normative nature than its predictive ability. In other words, states that ignore the logic of the balance of power or refuse to act strategically—rationally—will be “punished” not by the dominant power(s) in a system regardless of its structure—unipolar, bipolar or multipolar—but by its very own functioning mechanism. In other words, states are free to use the prerogatives that come together with the status of sovereign actor on the scene of international relations.

But sovereignty is a hollow concept as long as it is disconnected from the real balance of forces between the great powers. The actors which do not take into account this relationship, the game of power balance and the constraining force of the international system structure, are very likely to be eliminated by the engineering of this structure. □

## Notes

1. It is important to point out the difference between the almost uncontested domination of (neo)realism in IR in the American academia compared to the more varied situation especially in the European countries. For example, Carr was lamenting the idealist environment in the British universities in the interwar period, and Mearsheimer recently noticed regarding Carr’s finding that: “I will argue that idealism is now more firmly entrenched among British international relations scholars than it was in the late 1930s. Carr, I think, would be appalled by the almost complete absence of realists and the near total dominance of idealists in the contemporary British academy.” In John Mearsheimer, “E.H. Carr vs. Idealism: The Battle Rages On,” *International Relations* Vol 19 (2), 2005, p. 140.
2. Robert O. Keohane, *Neorealism and Its Critics*, p. 10. For a recent exegesis of Morgenthau’s work see Michael C. Williams, *Realism Reconsidered. The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Moreover, recent studies have recovered the importance, for later realist theory, of the legal education Morgenthau received during his youth or his philosophical lectures, Nietzsche and Weber in particular. Cf. Oliver Jütersonke, *Morgenthau, Law and Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), respectively Mihaela Neacsu, *Hans J. Morgenthau’s Theory of International Relations: Disenchantment and Re-Enchantment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
3. As Jonathan Cristol would notice, the fact that the first edition of Morgenthau’s book, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, is published in 1948 without this famous chapter “Six Principles of Political Realism” raises the question whether the subsequent interpretation base on this chapter does not contradict the original meaning of the first edition. In Jonathan Cristol, “Morgenthau vs. Morgenthau? ‘The Six Principles of Political Realism’ in Context,” *American Foreign Policy Interests: The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy* Volume 31, Issue 4, 2009.

4. Gary Dorrien, "Introduction" to Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr, p. XXV.
5. It is beyond the intentions of this paper to analyze in depth the evolution of realism after Waltz, but it is worth mentioning here the bifurcation defensive/offensive realism, that starts exactly from the different interpretation of state behavior and functions: self-preservation (minimalist) or global hegemony (maximalist). If for Mearsheimer (2001) a global hegemon is, in practical terms, an unachievable idea, for authors such as Nuno Monteiro (2011/2012), contemporary world can be described in terms of a unipolar system, but without a global hegemon.
6. "La mise en commun des productions de charbon et d'acier assurera immédiatement l'établissement de bases communes de développement économique, première étape de la Fédération européenne, et changera le destin des régions longtemps vouées à la fabrication des armes de guerre dont elles ont été les plus constantes victimes." In Robert Schuman, *Déclaration du 9 mai 1950*.
7. The specification is necessary because, as far as classical realism is concerned, both Carr and Morgenthau considered the multipolar system to be more stable than the bipolar one. Their argument was related to higher chances of avoiding a direct confrontation in a multipolar world, due to the existence of some 'valves,' or through the involvement of great powers in minor conflicts with other actors, or by strengthening the relative power through creating alliances.

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### Abstract

#### Neorealism in International Relations: From Explaining to Influencing World Politics

The article analyses the most important claims of the neorealist school in International Relations and the tension between the normative stance of neorealist theory and its predictive ability. Indeed, the simple fact that there are states that, in the name of absolute sovereignty, ignore the logic of the balance of power or refuse to act strategically undermines the predictability of any analysis. But, as the article concludes, sovereignty is an empty concept as long as it is disconnected from the real balance of forces between the great powers. The actors which do not take into account this relationship, the game of power balance and the constraining force of the international system structure, are very likely to be eliminated by the engineering of this structure.

### Keywords

Neorealism, foreign policy, international relations, sovereignty