The Theoretical Foundations of
Paul W. Schroeder's International System

WHEREAS HISTORIANS COMPLAIN that political scientists are more interested in the elegance of their theoretical models than in the empirical fit between those models and historical reality, political scientists argue that historians' interpretive narratives are based on implicit theoretical assumptions and causal models that influence their interpretations and that ought to be made explicit. Whatever the truth of these claims in general, the charge of a lack of theoretical self-consciousness certainly does not apply to Paul W. Schroeder. In several books and countless articles that span three decades and that demonstrate remarkable thematic consistency, Schroeder has been explicit about his view of the nature of historical explanation and about the analytic assumptions underlying his narrative interpretations.

This essay locates Schroeder's work in international relations theory, analyses his conception of an international system, and identifies the theoretical traditions from which he borrows.4

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I begin with a brief discussion of Schroeder's view of international history, which I relate to the levels-of-analysis concept in international relations theory and to the ongoing theoretical debates about international systems between realist and liberal international theories. I show that Schroeder builds on elements from each of these theoretical traditions, though his views most closely approximate a recent development in liberal theory that has been labelled 'neoliberal institutionalism'.

Schroeder's interpretation of the transformation of European politics from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and his

1 I thank Minda Bogovansky, Lori Groinich, Edward Rhodes, John Vasquez, Tom Walker, and Alexander Wendt for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.  
2 See also the critiques of Schroeder's view of the Vienna system in 'Did the Vienna Settlement Rest upon a Balance of Power?', American Historical Review, xciii (1998); responses by Kevin Krashe, Robert Jervis, and Wolf Guenter.
explain foreign-policy actions in terms of the motivations of statesmen. True motivations are difficult to determine, in part because statesmen have an interest in rationalizing and distorting them. In addition, he argues, constraints are generally far more important than motivations: "The best practitioners of statecraft have always recognized that opportunities, capabilities, contingencies, and necessities take precedence over motives and intentions."2

In spite of Schroeder's strong endorsement of a systems approach in his general theoretical remarks, his historical interpretations deviate from a strict systems perspective in several ways, as I shall demonstrate later. Unlike some systems theorists such as Kenneth Waltz, Schroeder is interested in explaining the foreign-policy behaviours of individual states as well as systemic patterns and outcomes. He also gives considerable explanatory power to certain individual-level variables, for it is the changing images and belief systems of political leaders that constitute the engine of change for Schroeder's system. In contrast to much historiography and to the more recent work of political scientists, however, Schroeder gives relatively little emphasis to domestic (or bureaucratic) political variables or to the political economy of war.4

First suggested later by J. David Singer. Here I decompose the state category into distinct institutional (or bureaucratic/organizational) and societal levels. Waltz, Man, the State, and War (New York, 1959); Singer, "The Levels of Analysis Problem in International Relations," in The International System: Theoretical Essays, ed. Ralf Kuehn and Sydney Verba (Princeton, 1961), pp. 77-92. See also Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Ponsonnet, 1976); ch. 1. Waltz's three levels are reflected in A. J. P. Taylor's analogy between the causes of wars and automobile accidents (the individual driver, the nature and condition of the vehicle, and road and weather conditions); Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (Oxford, 1957), p. 102. Interestingly, one of Schroeder's earlier critiques of quantitative studies of international relations was that they focused exclusively on actor's behaviour and neglected their motivations: Paul W. Schroeder, "Quantiative Studies in the Balance of Power: An Historian's Reaction," Journal of Conflict Resolution, xxii (1977), 1-22.


3 In contrast to Waltz and other political scientists whose preferences for a systems perspective are driven in part by their quest for parsimonious theory (explaining as much as possible with as few assumptions as possible), Schroeder is less concerned with parsimony. Admittedly, underlying Schroeder's nuanced historical interpretations is a relatively simple theoretical structure.

Schröder's theoretical emphasis on systemic explanations of systemic patterns is consistent with a long tradition of scholarship in international relations theory. Realist balance-of-power theories have long dominated the field, and the leading contemporary theoretical debate in the field between realism and liberalism is essentially a debate between alternative systems theories. To help place Schröder's international history in the context of international relations theory, I shall summarize the realist and liberal theoretical perspectives, note some of the major variations in each (particularly realism), and show how Schröder's work incorporates elements from each of them.

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Realism has been the dominant tradition (at least in the West) in the study of international politics since the time of Thucydides. It includes Machiavellians, Hobbesians, balance-of-power theorists, hegemonic-transition theorists, Waley neo-realist, cold-war strategists, and many quantitative analysts. Realism incorporates a number of specific theories that often generate conflicting predictions but that share a hard core of common assumptions. These assumptions concern the nature of the actors in world politics, their motivations and strategies, and the system within which they operate.

Realists see the international system as anarchic, defined by the absence of a higher legal authority or enforcement mechanism and characterized by conflicting interests and severe threats to security. The key actors are territorial states who define their interests in terms of survival, security, and power and who act rationally to maximize their interests. Given their views of an inherently conflictual world and their uncertainty regarding the present and future intentions of the adversary, political leaders focus on short-term security needs and on their relative position in the system, adopt worst-case thinking, discount long-term security considerations, engage in a struggle for power, and treat the threat and use of force as the ultima ratio.

The realist world-view includes assumptions about the bargaining behavior of states engaged in international crises. States engage in a competition in risk-taking and utilize coercive threats to demonstrate resolve, exploit the other's fear of war, induce the adversary's compliance with one's demands, and maintain their reputation and credibility for the future. Bargaining power is a function of relative power and resolve.1 Statesmen are prudent and yield in the face of stronger power and resolve, but they also assume that the adversary will do the same, and crises sometimes resemble games of chicken.

In realist theory, wars occur not only because some states prefer war to peace as a means of maximizing their power and security, but also because of the unintended consequences of actions by those who prefer peace to war and who are more interested in minimizing their losses than in maximizing their gains.2 Efforts by states to provide for their own security through armaments, alliances, and coercive threats often create the security of others (the security dilemma), trigger counter-actions, and lead to entrapment in conflict spirals which become difficult to reverse.3

Although all realist theorists share these basic assumptions, there are some important differences in emphasis. For those who engage in debates over 'grand theory' in international relations, the key division is between traditional or 'classical realism' -- which goes back to Thucydides, E. H. Carr, and Hans J. Morgenthau, and 'neorealism' -- which was formalized by Waltz in an attempt to construct a rigorous, deductive, and parsimonious theory of international politics.4

A key difference between these two realist traditions concerns their underlying assumptions regarding the fundamental source of international conflict. Classical realists emphasize both the absence of a

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1 The balance of resolve is a function of the asymmetry of interests at stake. Some realists adopt a 'pure power' model in which the outcomes of crises bargaining are determined solely by the dyadic balance of power, but a wide range of empirical research demonstrates that relative power does not provide a good explanation of crisis outcomes and that, if anything, relative resolve explains more than relative power. See Russell J. Leng, Intensive Crisis Behavior, 1816-1986: Realism versus Realpolitik (New York, 1990); Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, Domestic in American Foreign Policy (New York, 1974).

2 Recent research in social psychology emphasizes that people tend to overvalue losses relative to comparable gains and to take greater risks to avoid losses than to secure gains. See Jack S. Levy, 'An Introduction to Prospect Theory', Political Psychology, 20 (1999), 771-86. This is reflected in the emphasis of some realists on 'defensive state positivism'. See Joseph M. Giecco, Cooperation among Nations (Boulder, CO, 1995), pp. 26-9.


higher authority and the inherently aggressive and conflictual propensities of human nature as the primary causes of international conflict. Waltz and his followers eliminate human nature as an explanatory concept, give primacy to the anarchic structure of the international system, and attempt to construct a structural-systemic theory of international politics (which is why some refer to Waltz’s theory as ‘structural realism’). In the process, Waltz retains the classical realists’ assumption of the primacy of states; reinforces their assumption of rationality; shifts from Morgenthau’s idea that states try to maximize power as an end in itself to the notion that power is a means to the maximization of security; abandons the traditionalists’ concerns to develop a theory of statecraft or foreign policy; and argues more strongly for a purely systemic theory of international politics.

For Waltz, the key explanatory variable is the distribution of power, which is reflected by the number of great powers in the system. A core hypothesis is that the dynamics of state interactions differ in bipolar systems and multipolar systems, just as the economic behavior of firms differs in monopoly, oligopoly, and competitive markets in spite of the fact that the motivations of individual firms remains the same. For Waltz, bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity, which differentiates Waltz’s balance-of-power theory from that of classical realists like Morgenthau, Edward V. Gulick, and others, who emphasized the stabilizing features of multipolarity, which is conveniently ignored by deductively oriented neorealists, is mixed. Among the major wars occurring during bipolar periods are the Peloponnesian War, the Punic Wars, and the Habsburg-Valois wars of the early sixteenth century. It is somewhat puzzling that in his general critique of neorealism theory, Schroeder does not comment on the neorealist proposition that bipolarity is more stable than multipolarity.

I cannot deal here with the many criticisms of Waltzian neorealism. It is important to note, however, that, for the sake of parsimony, Waltz defines the structure of the international system very narrowly in terms of the distribution of capabilities and excludes relational phenomena and interaction processes (alliance and trade patterns, for example) from his conception of structure. This leaves Waltz with the distribution of power in the system as his remaining structural variable, which cannot fully explain the enormous variation in the patterns of behavior in the international system. For this reason, most realists depart from Waltzian neorealism and define structure much more broadly to include alliance configurations, territorial continuity, patterns of trade, and other systems-level variables.

It is clear that Schroeder’s view of the international system is far broader than that suggested either by Waltzian or classical realism. Schroeder defines a system as ‘the understandings, assumptions, learned skills and responses, rules, norms, procedures, etc. which agents acquire and use in pursuing their individual divergent aims within the framework of a shared practice’. He goes on to say that ‘systemic analysis’ means a consistent attempt to determine not only how the game of international politics turned out and how the decisions, policies, and actions of individual states led to that outcome, but also how these individual policies and actions were shaped and


3 Waltz also treats the development of nuclear weapons as a war-level rather than a system-level phenomenon.

limited by these shared rules and understandings, and how these collective understandings were in turn challenged and altered, sometimes violently, by violations or different versions of the rules1 (p. xii).

Thus Schroeder goes far beyond Waltz in terms of what he includes in the system. There is no room in Waltz for the rules, norms, procedures, or shared assumptions which play such a central role in Schroeder’s international system. As we shall see, Schroeder’s conception of the system is much closer to a neoliberal institutionalist view of international society. Some of his interpretations of international behaviour, however, are consistent with more particular realist hypotheses, and to see this we must return to two theories that can each be subsumed within the realist framework but that generate rather different explanations of international politics and foreign policy. These are balance-of-power theory and hegemonic theory. This distinction cuts across the distinction between classical and neorealism but in my view is equally important. Let us consider each in turn.

The balance-of-power concept has been used in many ways, as Schroeder recognizes.1 I focus here on balance of power both as a theory of international politics and as a strategy or policy pursued by states. Each of the many versions of balance-of-power theory is not so much a well-developed theory as a loose collection of hypotheses and strategic prescriptions which are not always mutually consistent. What these ‘theories’ share in common are the basic reasons outlined above and the core hypothesis that in order to ensure their own survival, independence, and security, states attempt to preserve the decentralized sovereign state system and prevent any single state from achieving a position of dominance over it.

The absence of hegemony requires that states maintain a ‘balance’ or ‘equilibrium’ of power. This instrumental goal takes priority over peace, which is desirable but not the most highly valued objective for most states (or at least most great powers) at most times. Schroeder agrees that the main purpose of the balance of power is not to preserve peace but to prevent empire or hegemony, to preserve the independence of the various units within a multinational system.1 The

2 Some versions of balance-of-power theory add further assumptions such as the existence of at least four or five great powers or an equality of power. I prefer to treat these as hypotheses to be tested rather than assumptions of the theory: Levy, ‘Causes of War’, p. 230.
3 Schroeder, Austria, Great Britain, and the Crimean War, p. 422. Also Golick, Balance of Power; Mergenthaler, Politics among Nations. For the emphasis on the maintenance of peace, see Iain L. Clapham, Jr., Power and International Relations (New York, 1960), p. 55.

independence to be preserved is that of the large states; the independence of weaker states is often sacrificed for the sake of the interests of the great powers and peace among them, as Schroeder makes clear in his discussions of the partitions of Poland and the principle of compensation in the eighteenth-century balance-of-power system (pp. 5-19). Balance-of-power theory originated as a theory of great-power behaviour, and consequently some of the theory’s key propositions are not necessarily applicable to smaller states operating in regional systems in the shadow of the great powers.

States have two general strategies for maintaining an equilibrium of power. The first is the mobilization of internal resources to build up the state’s own military capabilities. The second is external balancing through the formation of alliances and military coalitions as a means of capability aggregation and deterrence against potential aggressors. A key hypothesis is that states, and particularly the great powers, will form coalitions against any bid for hegemony, which is defined as military hegemony over the system as a whole. Thus, great powers tend to balance against the strongest and most threatening states rather than ‘bandwagon’ with them.2 Other techniques that serve external balancing (as well as other) functions and that are discussed by Schroeder include the creation of buffer states, territorial partitions, compensations, indemnities, other forms of intervention in the affairs of small states, and preventive war (pp. 6-11).

Balance-of-power theorists argue that the balancing mechanism usually works, so that military hegemonies almost never form. But is this because the ‘balance of power’ successfully deters aspiring hegemons from arising and threatening the system, or because the hegemonic threats that do arise are defeated by blocking coalitions and general wars to restore equilibrium? Do balance-of-power strategies (and related realpolitik prescriptions) lead to peace, as their proponents claim, or do they lead to war?

Balance-of-power theory is not perfectly clear on this point, in part because it is more concerned with explaining national strategies, the formation of blocking coalitions, and the avoidance of hegemony than the origins of wars. Schroeder recognizes this dilemma. He argues that ‘balance-of-power arguments ... explain any outcome equally well.

1 In fact, Schroeder argues that these small buffer states and intermediaries play an important role in maintaining a balance or equilibrium in the system.
War or peace can be accounted for either by a balance or by an imbalance of power (p. 6). In the end, however, Schroeder concludes that balance-of-power policies lead to war; this view is shared by some international theorists, but empirical research on this question has produced mixed results.1

Although balance-of-power theory is rather ambiguous, it is possible to make certain inferences as to which conditions are conducive to war and which are more conducive to peace. Balance-of-power theorists disagree somewhat as to whether major war is least likely under conditions of bipolarity or multipolarity, but they agree that movements towards unipolarity are destabilizing because they trigger blocking coalitions and (usually) a hegemonic war to restore equilibrium. Thus, balance-of-power theorists agree that some form of equilibrium of military capabilities increases the stability of the system. This stability is further enhanced by a flexible and non-polarized array of power systems and by the existence of a balance.

Some classical realists, but not Waltzian neorealists, add a normative component to the set of conditions that facilitate the effective functioning of a balance-of-power system. They refer to the concept of a European family of states, a consensus regarding the legitimacy of the system, and a belief that the taming of unrestrained ambition by the balance-of-power mechanism contributes to a just international order.2 Thus, Morgenthau concedes that the fuel that keeps the motor of the balance of power moving is the 'intellectual and moral foundation of the balance of power', and Gillick speaks of the 'homogeneity' of states in the 'European commonwealth' and distinguishes balance-of-power theory from power politics.3

Schroeder acknowledges these moral and prescriptive aspects of balance-of-power theory (and their ideological function) (p. 9). In contrasting his own interpretation of the Vienna system with a balance-of-power perspective, however, Schroeder minimizes the role of norms, rules, and other non-realpolitik elements in balance-of-power theory and highlights them in his own analysis of the system. This tends to conceal some of the similarities and exaggerate the differences between Schroeder's systems theory and that offered by many balance-of-power theorists.

Nevertheless, the treatment of balance of power as essentially a structural theory of realpolitik behaviour is a reasonable one. The inclusion of normative and other non-structural elements into balance-of-power theory makes it even less falsifiable than it already is, less distinguishable from alternative theories, and consequently less useful as a theory of international politics. If there is anything distinctive about balance-of-power theory, it is its emphasis on the importance of system structures and the realpolitik state behaviours that they induce.4

Hegemonic theory shares the realist assumptions that states act rationally on the basis of their own interests defined as power and security, and that the distribution of power is the primary determinant of behavior and outcomes in a decentralized sovereign state system. But 'hegemonic realists' differ from 'balance-of-power realists' in that they downplay the significance of anarchy and emphasize hierarchies of power and informal sources of order and 'governance' in the system. There is usually one state that dominates over the others by virtue of its military and economic strength, and this 'hegemon' uses its power to create and maintain a set of political and economic structures and certain norms of behavior that serve its own interests and enhance its power. Many subordinate great powers benefit from this system of order and align with the hegemon. A hegemonic state cannot maintain its position of dominance forever, however, because of differential rates of growth among states and the costs of imperial over-extension. They are ultimately overthrown and replaced by a rising state, usually as the result of a 'hegemonic war', and the new hegemon then uses its power to create a new political order.

Different versions of hegemonic theory have been proposed by A. F. K. Organski and Jack Kugler, Robert Gilpin, and George Modelski and William R. Thompson.5 They share the central

1 Vasques, War Peddle, Leng, Interstate Crisis Behavior.
2 Some add the limited aims of states as a further condition contributing to a stable balance of power. But this adds a degree of elasticity to the theory by suggesting that if states have limited aims and accept the legitimacy of the system, they will not attempt to overthrow it. It also raises the question of whether it is limited aims of states that contribute to a stable balance of power, or a stable balance of power that induces limited aims in the form of a deadlock of self-defeating efforts of anticipated blocking coalitions. Most balance-of-power theorists accept the second proposition and believe that the unintended outcome of self-defeating works, through the balance of power, to avoid hegemony, preserve the independence of states, and thus contribute to a morally just international order.

4 This view of balance-of-power theory as a structural theory and the exclusion of normative and ideological elements in the analysis of realpolitik is not universally shared, and the nature of structure is a contested issue in international relations theory, and in social theory. See Alexander Wendt, 'The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory', International Organization, xxi (1967), 311-70. Anthony Giddens, Central Problems of Social Theory (Berkeley, 1979). In my view, the question of whether or not to define ideological variables as part of system structure is less important than the question of whether such variables, however defined, significantly enhance the explanatory power of our theories and historical interpretations.

hypothesis that the probability of a major war is least likely under conditions of hegemonic dominance and most likely at the point of the 'power transition' from one hegemonic power to the next. They each identify a set of hegemonic or global wars which constitute major turning-points in the international system, though they disagree somewhat on which particular wars should be included and the particular causal dynamics from which they arise.¹

Thus, balance-of-power theory and hegemonic transition theory share basic realist assumptions but yield diametrically opposed hypotheses regarding the dynamics of power politics and the conditions most likely to lead to major war. Balance-of-power theory posits that hegemony is rare; that increasing concentrations of military and economic power tends to increase the likelihood of a major war; that the dispersion of military power among several great powers is conducive to stability and peace; that great powers tend to balance against the leading state rather than bandwagon with it; and that alliances play a central role in the balancing process to maintain order. Hegemonic transition theory suggests that hegemony is relatively common; that concentrations of power minimize the likelihood of a major war and that dispersions of military capabilities are destabilizing; that great powers bandwagon with hegemons as often as they balance against them; and that alliances play a secondary role in deterring aggression.

The debate over balancing and bandwagoning is particularly important because of the central and unambiguous role of great-power balancing behaviour in balance-of-power theory, and Schroeder makes an important contribution to this debate.² He notes, first of all, that if one follows Stephen Walt and emphasizes balancing against the greatest threat rather than against the greatest power, it often becomes very difficult to distinguish between balancing and bandwagoning because of the difficulty of measuring threat perception. Second, although balance-of-power theory can accommodate bandwagoning


² Schroeder identifies bandwagoning (joining the stronger side for protection and payoffs) as one of three alternatives to the 'self-help' strategy emphasized by realists. The other two are 'hiding' through neutrality or isolationism and 'transcending' through some kind of institutionalist arrangement Schroeder, Neo-realist Theory, pp. 116-18. Schroeder discusses the strategy of appeasement in 'Munich and the British Tradition', Historical Journal, xii (1969), 233-4.

³ Schroeder, 'Neo-realist Theory', p. 113; Walt, Origins of Alliance. See also the symposium on balancing and bandwagoning in Security Studies, i (1992); Randall L. Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for Profit', International Security, xii (1993), 72-107.

politics is not so much an explanation of world politics, as it is a form of behavior that must itself be explained. In Vasquez’s view, realpolitik is not structurally determined but is instead learned behavior that derives from a particular image of the world held by political leaders, an image characterized by insecurity, distrust, and a struggle for power.

For Vasquez, image is a key intervening variable between structure and behavior. Through their images and practices, political leaders help shape (or socially construct) the system within which they interact. Whereas neorealist theory posits that there is a direct and invariant link between objective structures and intervening images or beliefs, so that those images are epiphenomenal, Vasquez argues that decentralized international systems can give rise to different images and consequently to different foreign-policy practices and behaviors.

Although Vasquez rejects the premises of realist theories, he does accept the validity of many realist hypotheses for empirical domains where political elites share realpolitik images of the world: ‘Power politics theory provides an accurate description of the extent to which collectivities continue to adopt its perspective and/or practices.’ That is, realist images lead to realist practices through a self-fulfilling process: if everybody believes that states adopt realpolitik policies, everybody will. Moreover, these images—and consequently the practices that emerge from them—are in fact quite common in the modern era because of learning, evolution, and diffusion of images. But for Vasquez, power-politics practices generally lead to war rather than to peace, and constitute an important step on the ‘realist road to war’ that must be explained. Thus, a theory of war must include an exploration of how and under what conditions certain kinds of images arise, what kinds of behavior or foreign-policy practices they generate, and the conditions under which those practices contribute to the outbreak and escalation of war.

Vasquez’s argument that realist hypotheses are often valid in periods in which leaders share realist images of the world, but that realpolitik practices lead to war rather than to peace, is reflected in Schroeder’s interpretation of the balance of power. He conceives that balance-of-power principles have often governed the conduct of states, particularly in the eighteenth century. Schroeder summarizes the key rules

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1 Vasquez, War Puzzle, p. 86.
2 Some of these practices may also lead to war, but through different causal paths. On the theoretical importance of belief systems, see Alexander L. George, ‘The “Operational Code”: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision Making’, International Studies Quarterly, xviii (1964), 190-232.
3 Vasquez, War Puzzle, p. 87 and ch. 5.
governing the operation of the eighteenth-century balance-of-power system and argues that eighteenth-century statesmen often explicitly referred to balance-of-power language and doctrine and behaved accordingly. They ‘by and large accepted this system, more or less believed in it, operated by its rules, and were thus trapped by it’ (pp. 6-10).²

They were trapped by it because the pursuit of balance-of-power policies leads to war rather than to peace. Schroeder argues that the 1763 to 1787 period (as well as other periods) demonstrates that balancing behaviour produces not equilibrium, limited conflict, and the independence of essential actors, but rather ‘imbalance, hegemony, and systemic conflict’ (p. 48). States’ conceptions of a suitable balance of power were mutually contradictory,² and the structure of power was such that the free play of competitive forces would lead to hegemony for one or two actors and destruction or dependence for others. In addition, the assumptions and methods required by the balance of power to maintain equilibrium actually blocked the peaceful resolution of disputes, promoted conflict, and increased the likelihood that particular conflicts would periodically escalate into general systemic wars. As Schroeder explains in his analysis of the ‘general systemic crisis’ that led to the First World War, ‘the very devices built into a system to keep it stable and operative under stress, subjected to insurmountable pressures, generate forces of their own which cause the system to destroy itself’ (pp. 6-10).³

If there was ever a time when the balance of power should have worked, Schroeder argues, it was in the eighteenth century after the Seven Year War, which generated a military stalemate and political results that should have been conducive to a durable peace. Schroeder rejects the traditional view that the period after 1763 was a system of limited warfare and controlled competition which was destroyed only by ideological and military forces unleashed by the French Revolution. Rather, it was only a ‘truce marred by constant crises and smaller wars threatening to spread and become general’, and by the mid-1780s Europe was in the midst of a general security crisis. ‘Europe in the 1780s was not heading inexorably toward revolution, but toward war, whether or not there was revolution. Revolution was contingent; war systemic and structural’ (pp. 51-52).¹

Schroeder’s balance of power and associated realpolitik practices that provide the seeds of the system’s self-destruction are not the inevitable consequence of objective laws of nature or impersonal international structures, as they are for Morgenthau or Waltz. They are more like Vasquez’s foreign-policy practices, which constitute learnt behaviour and which reflect political leaders’ images of the world. Images can change without structural change, and changes of images can lead to changes in practices and consequently to changes in the system.² For Schroeder this is precisely what happened in 1813-15: ‘A competitive balance-of-power struggle gave way to an international system of political equilibrium based on benign shared hegemony and the mutual recognition of rights underpinned by law’. This system transformation was driven by changes in the assumptions, beliefs, and goals of political leaders and institutionalized in the rules, norms, and conventions of the European Concert, which endured until it was destroyed by the Crimean War.³

The Vienna settlement did not lead to a restoration of a balance-of-power system and related realpolitik practices, but to a new and ‘decisively different’ system. In fact, the transformation of political thinking in 1813-15 contributed to the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the construction of the Vienna settlement itself. Moreover, it was this new international system and not a revived balance-of-power system that gave the conservative-minded ‘Holy Alliance’ against the transnational class struggle and internal revolution, or general war weariness which explains the relative peace and stability of international politics of the period between 1815 and 1854 (chs. 11-12).⁴ More than all

¹ Also Schroeder, ‘Did the Vienna Settlement Rest on a Balance of Power’, American Historical Review, xcvii (1992), 643-706.
⁴ For balance-of-power interpretations of the stability of the Concert period, see Gills, Balance.
other times in European history when statesmen of Europe attempted to construct a peaceful international system after a general systemic war — 1648, 1713-14, 1792, 1793, 1815 — the Vienna system succeeded (p. 579).1

Structurally, the new system did not rest on an equal distribution of power among five great powers, but on a shared hegemony.2 The two flanking powers, Britain and Russia, were each invulnerable, able to provide for its security without the help of allies, and strong enough to be able to withstand even an unlikely alliance of the three great powers of central Europe.3 Britain was hegemonic in the colonial world and on the high seas, and Russia was hegemonic in eastern Europe and throughout much of northern Asia, and the two retained dominance in the Mediterranean, North Africa, the Levant, the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire, and the Baltic. The other great powers — France, Austria, and Prussia — were considerably weaker, dependent on allies for security, and able to secure alliances only with considerable costs, if at all. This was 'not balance of power but hegemony'.

This shared hegemony was supplemented by several other interrelated elements. One was a series of 'sub- hegemonies'. Austria dominated central Europe and Italy, Prussia northern Europe, and together they managed the German Confederation. The joint management of the Bund was important because it dampened controlled rivalries and territorial disputes among states and other

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factions within Germany, temporarily settled the Austro-Prussian rivalry, and created an independent centre to fill the power vacuum in central Europe that had been an important source of European wars for over three centuries. Closely related was a system of smaller states that were situated and organized to serve as buffers and spheres of influence to separate the great powers and reduce both the opportunities and incentives for war.1

The debate over whether Schroeder's system is really one of shared hegemony, a bipolar balance of power, or a reformed multipolar balance of power has largely focused on the characterization of the structure of the system defined in terms of the distribution of power. In this sense, I see all three, including Schroeder's shared hegemony, as consistent with a broadly defined balance-of-power framework. This was not hegemony over the entire system (whether continental or world-wide), as hegemonic realists define the term,2 and regional hegemonies or sub-hegemonies are perfectly consistent with the spheres-of-influence concept in balance-of-power theory. In addition, hegemonic aspirations by individual great powers are not in principle inconsistent with equilibrium at the systemic level because they are tempered and contained by the distribution of power and other structural constraints. Finally, Schroeder's model of his own system as a 'catamaran — a light, frail, but mobile and buoyant vessel, its vulnerable centre held above the waves by outriggers on both sides, needing constant attention and seamanship to keep it afloat' — is also structurally consistent with a balance-of-power perspective (p. 591).3

Thus, the structure of the system in terms of the distribution of capabilities does not distinguish Schroeder's system from a balance-of-power system. Nor does it explain four decades of great-power peace, whereas other hegemonic systems have been much more violent. As

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3 Hegemonic stability theory defines hegemony in economic terms and permits the conceptualization of economic hegemony over part of the system; as illustrated by interwar-century British hegemony or post-1945 American hegemony: Robert O. Keohane, After Hegemony (Princeton, NJ, 1984), ch. 4.
4 In many respects, Schroeder's system of shared hegemony fits Midlarsky's model of hierarchal equilibration, in which there is an equilibrium of power between two leading states but hegemonic dominance of each by its own sphere. But Midlarsky envisions stability to include a polarized alliance system around two leading rival, whereas in Schroeder's description of Europe after 1815 there are no polarized (or even permanent) alliances and no significant rivalry between the two leading states. M. L. Midlarsky, Hierarchical Equilibria and the Long-Run Instability of Multipolar Systems, Handbook of War Studies, ed. M. L. Midlarsky, pp. 35-81.
Schröder argues, in structural terms Europe of 1815 was much like that of 1763, but the former was far more stable: 'Eighteenth-century balance of power rules and practices produced predatory, destabilizing hegemony. The Vienna era's equilibrist rules and practices promoted benign, stabilizing kinds of hegemony' (pp. 3-5). How do we explain the difference?

The answer lies in four interrelated non-structural elements: the new system of great-power management; the informal norms and rules of the Concert system; the new conceptions of state interests and security which helped to shape and maintain the rules and norms of the Concert; and the transformation in political thinking through experiential learning that generated this new conceptual orientation towards international politics. None but the first can fit easily into a balance-of-power or broader realist framework. Together, these components are more compatible with the conception of a concert regime and a neoliberal institutionalist perspective, to which we now turn.

Whereas the realist tradition sees international politics as a conflictual Hobbesian world in which concerns for power and security dominate and co-operation is difficult, the 'liberal' tradition sees a more benign Grotian international society or Lockean state of nature where anarchy does not imply disorder and where states have common as well as conflictual interests. They aim to maximize economic welfare as well as provide for security, and they often create international institutions which help to regulate conflict and promote co-operation. As Hedley Bull writes, an 'international society exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions'.

Schröder's inclusion of 'shared rules and understandings' in his conception of the system fits nicely into this perspective.

The liberal tradition in international politics has evolved from the Kantian conception of a cosmopolitan world society and eternal peace between democracies, to the commercial liberalism of the nineteenth century based on the pacific effects of free trade, to the 'neofunctionalism' of the 1950s and the emphasis on regional integration, to 'complex interdependence' of the late 1970s, and finally to 'regime

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2. Robert O. Keohane, International Institutions and State Power (Boulder, CO, 1989), pp. 2-4. In contrast, neofunctionalist realism acknowledge the role of international institutions but insist that these institutions mirror the interests of the hegemonic power and change when these interests change as a function of the distribution of power: Stephen D. Krueger, Regimes and the Limits of Realism, in International Regimes, ed. Krueger (Boulder, CO, 1984), pp. 33-68.
4. The question of how political leaders learn and the extent to which learning influences policy is attracting more and more attention in international politics. Jack S. Levy, 'Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conception Minefield', International Organization, xvi (1992), 279-312.
ideals, however, and, like realists, insist on the rationality postulate and minimize the impact of psychological variables. This emphasis on the impact rather than the sources of ideas differentiates neoliberal institutionalism from an emerging group of scholars known as 'constructivists' or 'reflectivists', who emphasize both the social construction of ideas and institutions and the need to focus on the processes through which these ideas and institutions arise. Although Schroeder demonstrates some constructivist tendencies (as we shall see), his greater attention to the impact of ideas than to their origins leads me to put him closer to a neoliberal institutionalist perspective. This is a fine line, however, and one that might very well vanish with the further development of liberal institutionalist theory.

Liberalists also differ from realists in their view of military power. They are more sensitive to the different contexts which govern the effectiveness of military force, critical of the traditional assumption of the fungibility of force across different issue-areas; and insist that the development of nuclear weapons, increasing economic interdependence, and other changes in world politics has generally reduced (but not eliminated) the utility of military power in international politics. Still, most empirical applications of neoliberal institutionalism have been to non-security issues. The handful of attempts to develop the concept of a security regime or to analyse collective-security systems as an alternative to a balance-of-power system have been applied to one or two limited periods of international politics (most notably the period of the European concert). The relative lack of theoretical and empirical research on the role of institutions and norms in peace, war, and security issues is a problem that needs to be rectified, particularly given the claim that neoliberalism is not an alternative to realism, but that it instead subsumes realism.

This takes us back to the question of why the international system was more stable after 1815 than it was before, and to Schroeder's emphasis on great-power management, the informal norms and rules of the Concert system, new concepts of state interests and security, and the transformation in political thinking. Schroeder emphasizes that the international system cannot run well by itself; it requires skilful management by one or more great powers, the proper conditions for leadership, the use of restraining alliances, and some subordination of short-term self-interest to a common purpose. The conditions for effective management include both the structural elements described above and a centrally located and satisfied great power: 'the state best suited to provide this management is not one whose power and position render it fairly independent of the system, able to live without it, but the power dependent on it, compelled by its central position and vulnerability to be a prime investor in its stability and survival' (p. 425).

It is important to note that, for Schroeder, it is not necessarily the most powerful state in the system or the 'balancer' that plays the key management role. The key manager during the Concert period was not one of the hegemonic flanking powers but instead Metternichian Austria, the most exposed state in the system and the one with the greatest vested interests in peace. Later, it was Bismarckian Germany. Contrast this with hegemonic theory, where the hegemon manages the system and provides the collective goods without which the system cannot endure. For nearly all hegemonic theorists, including hegemonic stability theorists who focus on the international political economy, it was Britain who played this role in the nineteenth century. Britain was also the balancer in balance-of-power theory, which reserves that role to an insular state in 'splendid isolation' which can pursue its interests outside the system as long as it can maintain an equilibrium of power in the system.4

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1. Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, 'Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework', in Ideas and Foreign Policy, ed. Goldstein and Keohane (Oxford, NY, 1993), p. 7. There are many liberals who reject the rationalism assumption and who incorporate a decision-making perspective into their theories, but these scholars generally do not fit under the 'neoliberal institutionalist' label and are less inclined to engage in systemic-level debate. Neoliberal will have to reconcile their insistence on both rationality and learning, because most theories of learning emphasize the impact of non-rational psychological variables on the learning process.


In addition to a centrally located and satisfied great power, effective management also requires, for Schroeder, a system of procedural norms and the ability of states to see beyond their own short-term self-interests. Thus, he argues that 'the stable, peaceful political equilibrium Europe enjoyed from 1815 to 1848 rose not from a balance of power but from a mutual consensus on norms and rules, respect for law, and an overall balance among the various actors in terms of rights, security, status, claims, duties, and satisfactions rather than power.' These ideas fit quite nicely into a neoliberal institutionalist perspective.

Schroeder argues that although the statesmen of the time spoke the language of political equilibrium, they did not mean a narrowly defined balance of power. Although checking and balancing power was one element in the process, the essence of the system was a balance of satisfactions, a balance of rights and obligations and a balance of performance and payoffs, rather than a balance of power. Schroeder argues, for example, that the redistribution of territories, peoples, and thrones at Vienna was driven as much by concerns for the balance of rights and long-term security as by the balance of power.

Schroeder argues that the behaviour of the great powers deviated in significant ways from standard realpolitik practices. States did not always attempt to maximize their power positions: they were often willing to forgo gains that were within their grasp, they did not always try to exploit others' temporary weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and they made concessions that were not dictated by the realities of power.

These tendencies are illustrated by the moderate treatment of Austria in the Vienna settlement, the even more lenient peace terms offered to Napoleon after his army was virtually destroyed at Leipzig in October 1813, Russia's promotion of an Austro-Prussian partnership in Germany in 1815 rather than its traditional exploitation of divisions between the two leading German powers, and even as late as 1848 the great powers' hesitancy to exploit Austria's problems (p. 558).

Political leaders were also less likely to resort to force or prepare for war when others were intransigent, in part because they expected others to reciprocate their conciliatory behaviour and because these expectations dampened the self-fulfilling prophecies that often fuel a conflict spiral. As a result, crises (in 1830, 1840, and 1848, for example) that probably would have led to war at any other time were instead settled peacefully.

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York, 1962.
1 Schroeder, 'Vienna Settlement', pp. 94-8 and 'Balance of Power or Political Equilibrium?', p. 143.
2 Also, Schroeder, 'Transformation of Political Thinking', p. 65.
led to long-term insecurity, coercive threats provoked counter-threats and conflict spirals rather than compliance, and war was an ineffective, self-defeating, and counter-productive instrument of statecraft. In Schroeder’s terms, this was a shift from ‘linear’ to ‘systemic’ thinking, from a focus on unilateral solutions for security problems to systemic solutions. Political leaders learned that their own security depended on the security of others and the stability of the system as a whole.¹ The key to the emergence of a stable and enduring peace at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, for example, was the development of a clear conception of what peace might look like and the recognition that a durable peace must be given priority over a military victory (pp. 581, 773).

It is clear that the critical process that drove the transformation of European politics from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century was the transformation of political thinking as a result of experiences in learning. Statesmen learned from the cumulative failures of eighteenth-century practices and from the failure to end the war against Napoleon in particular.² Some learned earlier than others (the Habsburg emperor, Leopold II, by 1792, for example), but learning could not have an impact on the system until the lessons of the past were shared by all, for otherwise the temptation of short-term gain would dominate over the long-term benefits of restraint and easy realpolitik thinkers to exploit the others. The learning process was a gradual and uneven one as political leaders learned from their mistakes, but it had spread and become system-wide for great-power leaders by 1813-15. The result was a fairly sudden transformation of international politics. For Schroeder, it is a story of ‘the long gestation and sudden birth of a new international system’ (pp. ix [quote], 287, 581).³

Schroeder does not focus in detail on the process through which political leaders changed their beliefs about international politics. It is clear, however, that what drove the transformation of European politics was learning through experience by individual leaders rather than the replacement of one set of leaders with another group with different beliefs.⁴ This was more than a simple case of straightforward

⁴ Recent work in political science emphasizes the interplay between learning and policy change. Politics affects the political power and influence of those who have learned, and learning or the failure to learn may affect one’s political influence and position in the government.
atation to changing material conditions, but a change in causal
belief about the dynamics of international politics that emerged from
creative reflection and insight. Ideas about the world had an
autonomous role and independent causal impact on state actions and
international outcomes. The autonomous role of ideas plays an
important role in liberal international theory and is another respect in
which Schroeder's view of international politics fits a neoliberal
institutionalist perspective, though both pay more attention to the
impact of learning than to the processes through which learning
occurs.

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In analysing Schroeder's theory of international systems and his
interpretation of the transformation of European politics between the
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I have shown how he builds
upon several different theoretical traditions in the political science
literature. His concept of shared hegemony is consistent with notions of
a bipolar balance of power and with hegemonic theory's emphasis on
hierarchical order, though for Schroeder it is dominance within an
alliance or region rather than the system as a whole. Schroeder's
argument that the system cannot be neatly broken down into
specifically by itself but requires
some kind of involved and skilful great-power management is quite
compatible with the emphasis on order, governance, and management
in hegemonic theory, though, unlike hegemonic theory, the key
management role does not necessarily fall to the strongest military
power in the system. In most other respects, however, Schroeder
departs significantly from a realist framework, and particularly from the
narrow conception of system structure in Waltzian neorealism.

Schroeder's insistence that realpolitik practices are a function of
leaders' shared images of the world rather than structurally determined
behaviours cannot be reconciled with realism's emphasis on objective
laws of history, but they do reflect Vasquez's notion of learned

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Greater attention to the interaction effects between learning and policies would have made for a
more complete explanation of the transformation of European thinking and policies, but
admittedly these effects are less important in the monarchical systems that Schroeder analyses than in

1 Sometimes, however, Schroeder downplays the creative element of learning and implies that
political leaders simply adapt to changing circumstances. They 'did not actively look for new
and better ways of thinking about international politics and practising it; nor did they willingly
accept them. They were forced into systemic thinking by repeated failures, the exhaustion of
alternative' and by 'Napoleonic imperialists': 'Transformation of Political Thinking', p. 68.
In
some respects this view of the learning process approximates what theorists describe as 'milliard-and-
enor' learning; see Levy, 'Learning', p. 284.

2 On the autonomy of Ideas, see Goldstein and Kohante, 'Idea and Foreign Policy'.

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foreign-policy practices. His emphasis on norms and rules within a
society of states, the importance of shared expectations and reciprocity, the role of institutions in facilitating co-operation among states,
and the autonomous impact of ideas is quite compatible with a neo-
liberal institutionalist framework. Finally, his emphasis on conceptual
transformations as the underlying causal mechanism driving system
change is closely related to theories of foreign-policy learning.

Whether Schroeder's particular interpretations of the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries and the transformations from one system to
the next are empirically valid is something I leave to historians with
more expertise on those periods. I can say, however, that Schroeder
has made several important contributions to international relations
theory. His emphasis on the role of alliances as tools of management
and control adds a new theoretical dimension to the rather narrow
literature on international alliances, and his historical critique of the
balancing hypothesis of balance-of-power theory adds an important
empirical dimension to a major theoretical debate.

Schroeder's argument that realpolitik strategies reflect the conceptual
images of political leaders rather than the necessary consequence of
objective and structurally determined laws of nature is an important
t challenge to realist theory and to Waltz's structural realism in
particular. It is a good illustration of Vasquez's argument that power
polities is a learned foreign-policy practice and of the neoliberal view
that ideas have an autonomous impact on behaviour.

Schroeder's discussion of the role of rules and norms in the func-
tioning of the European security system is a major contribution to the
empirical research programme of neoliberal institutionalism, which has
thus far focused primarily on economic and ecological issues to the
neglect of security issues. Schroeder demonstrates fairly convincingly
that a critical difference in the periods before and after 1815 was the
development of a system of informal rules and norms during the
Vienna settlement; that this security regime had a significant causal im-
 pact on state policies and international outcomes; and that the regime
endured longer than many prior accounts had suggested. Schroeder's
detailed analyses of this period, along with that of other historians,
provides a rich body of data that can be used by political scientists in
more explicit tests of key propositions from neoliberal institutionalist
theory about the conditions for peace and the causes of war.

Similarly, Schroeder's discussion of the transformation of political

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1 It also has important implications for more abstract 'agent-structure' debates in international
thinking and changing conceptions of self-interest provide data relevant to theories of learning in foreign policy, whether tied to neoliberal theory or an alternative theoretical framework. Because of Schroeder's orientation, this data is particularly useful for hypotheses on the impact of learning on behaviour. The period between 1789 and 1815 also provides an intriguing case for the further exploration of hypotheses about the conditions and processes leading to conceptual change and also of hypotheses relating to the interaction of learning and politics in policy change.

All of this reflects a theme that has been implicit throughout this essay: the fact that Schroeder's historical analyses are theoretically grounded and that his theoretical contributions are historically informed provides a superb illustration of how an emphasis on the interplay of theory and history can enhance our explanations of international politics.

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