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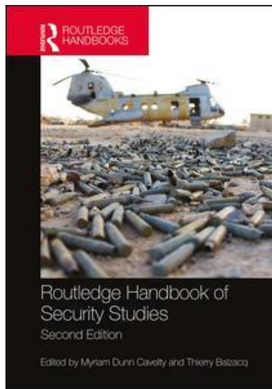

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Realism and Security Studies

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PART I

Theoretical approaches to security

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1

REALISM AND SECURITY STUDIES

*William C. Wohlforth**

It is impossible to understand contemporary Security Studies without a grounding in realism. After all, many of the most influential theories that have ever been advanced about violence and security among human groups fall within this intellectual tradition. And in many countries realism is a standard part of practitioner's lexicon, informing headline debates on foreign policy. To many analysts, moreover, realism's focus on power shifts and power politics seems as relevant as ever, as a rising China and a reassertive Russia upend complacency about the stability of the Western-dominated international system. Given the many scholarly criticisms of realism, ongoing debates about its place in Security Studies, and the proliferation in recent years of such realist 'brands' as defensive, offensive, and neoclassical realism, gaining this grounding might seem a formidable undertaking. In fact, the controversy and complexity have eased the task.

As this chapter shows, realist thinking is now far more robust and rigorous than ever, making it much more accessible and useful to security scholars. The chapter provides the four key elements that students of international security need to make use of realism: a simple definition of realism that distinguishes it from other approaches; an introduction to the various sub-schools of realist thought, such as neoclassical realism, which help bring order to the daunting diversity of realist scholarship; an outline of some of the most prominent realist theories, which do the actual work of explaining puzzling real-world phenomena, and a sketch of the contemporary realist contribution to Security Studies.

Defining realism

Realism is a school of thought based on three core assumptions about how the world works:[1]

1. *Groupism*. Politics takes place within and between groups. Group solidarity is essential to domestic politics and conflict and cooperation between polities is the essence of international politics. To survive at anything above a subsistence level, people need the cohesion provided by group solidarity, yet that very same in-group cohesion generates the potential for conflict with other groups. Today, the most important human groups are nation-states, and the most important source of in-group cohesion is nationalism. But it is important to stress that realism makes no assumption about the nature of the polity. It is as applicable to relations between ISIS and the Kurds as it is between the United States and China.

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2. *Egoism*. When individuals and groups act politically, they are driven principally by narrow self-interest. Although certain conditions can facilitate altruistic behaviour, egoism is rooted in human nature. When push comes to shove and ultimate trade-offs between collective and self-interest must be confronted, egoism tends to trump altruism. As the classic realist adage has it, 'Inhumanity is just humanity under pressure.'
3. *Power-centrism*. Once past the hunter-gatherer stage, human affairs are always marked by great inequalities of power in both senses of that term: social influence or *control* (some groups and individuals always have an outsized influence on politics) and *resources* (some groups and individuals are always disproportionately endowed with the material wherewithal to get what they want). Key to politics in any area is the interaction between social and material power, an interaction that unfolds in the shadow of the potential use of material power to coerce.

Realism's most important single argument builds on these assumptions to illuminate a relationship between political order and security: if human affairs are indeed characterized by groupism, egoism, and power-centrism, then politics is likely to be conflictual unless there is some central authority to enforce order. When no authority exists that can enforce agreements – in a state of 'anarchy' – then any actor can resort to force to get what it wants. Even if an actor can be fairly sure that no other will take up arms today, there is no guarantee against the possibility that one might do so tomorrow. Therefore, all tend to arm themselves against this contingency. Disputes that would be easy to settle if actors could rely on some higher authority to enforce an agreement can escalate to war in the absence of such authority. The signature realist argument is therefore that anarchy renders security problematic and potentially conflictual, and is a key underlying cause of war.

This argument is not restricted to international politics. It identifies a fundamental and universal human problem that may apply to individuals as well as city-states, tribes, empires, or nation-states. The point simply is that insecurity is endemic to anarchy. To be secure, people need to overcome anarchy. One way to do this is to strengthen the bonds within a group to provide governance. This is what states do – or what they are supposed to do. If they fail, then life within a state can become just as threatened by insecurity as life among states. The dilemma is that solving the anarchy problem within one group only magnifies it between groups. Much realist thought is thus focused on how the security problem manifests itself in inter-group relations, but its insights are applicable to politics at all levels of analysis.

Realism's diversity: theoretical schools

Realism today is marked by the coexistence of numerous sub-schools, notably defensive, offensive, and neoclassical realism. These sub-schools are the outgrowth of sharp debates among scholars as well as unceasing efforts to check realist ideas against international political reality.

Classical realism

It all began with classical realism – a term scholars use to describe the whole realist tradition in all its diversity as it unfolded up to the 1970s. For the subsequent development of International Relations (IR) theory, however, one classical realist text stands far above all others: Hans J. Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* (Morgenthau 1948). This book inaugurated the practice of seeking to translate the realist tradition of scholarship and statecraft into what Morgenthau, in the famous first chapter of his text, called 'a realist theory of international politics.'[2]

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Morgenthau's major text did bring realist arguments to bear on a very large number of phenomena: war, peace, cooperation, international law, diplomacy, ethics, international organization, world public opinion, and more, but it simply failed to hold together as a unified theory, at least in the eyes of his critics. Even fellow realists found Morgenthau's theory beset by 'open contradictions, ambiguity, and vagueness' (Tucker 1952: 214). Key concepts such as the 'national interest' or 'the balance of power' were either undefined or defined in multiple and mutually contradictory ways. Not surprisingly, arguments deployed in different issue areas did not always cohere.

By the 1960s, many scholars of IR had come to see the natural sciences as models for social sciences. For them, a 'theory' had to be a coherent set of linked propositions, preferably falsifiable and empirically verified, that explains some phenomenon. In this context, Morgenthau's more modest and more humanistic understanding of what a theory of international politics can and should be seemed increasingly anachronistic (Williams 2007). And these scholarly criticisms mounted just as the world's security preoccupations were moving from the great-power contest between the US and the Soviet Union towards issues such as inequality between the wealthy North and the developing South, resource scarcity, and human rights. Morgenthau's version of realism seemed out of sync with the times. Out of this first post-war 'crisis' of realism came a revival of realist thinking that came to be called 'neorealism.'

Neorealism

As scholarly criticism of realism mounted in the 1960s and 1970s and the interest in the scientific approach to the study of politics grew (especially in the US), Kenneth Waltz sought to revivify realist thinking by translating some core realist ideas into a deductive, top-down theoretical framework first known as 'structural realism' but now most commonly called neorealism. Waltz (1959) held that classical realists' powerful insights into the workings of international politics were weakened by their failure to distinguish clearly between arguments about human nature, the internal attributes of states, and the overall system of states. His *Theory of International Politics* (1979) brought together and clarified many earlier realist ideas about how the features of the overall system of states affect security affairs. He presented the book as the transformation of classical realist 'thought' into a theory on the scientific model, in keeping with the contemporary expectations of the wider discipline of political science.

By restating, in the clearest form yet, realism's key argument about how the mere existence of groups in anarchy can lead to powerful competitive pressure and war – regardless of what the internal politics of those groups might be like – Waltz presented a theory that purported to answer a few important but highly general questions about international politics: why the modern states-system has persisted in the face of attempts by certain states at dominance; why war among great powers recurred over centuries; and why states often find cooperation hard. In addition, the book forwarded one more specific theory: that great-power war would tend to be more frequent in multipolarity (an international system shaped by the power of three or more major states) than bipolarity (an international system shaped by the power of two major states, or superpowers). Events in the real world seemed to underline the salience of Waltz's seemingly abstract ideas: right after the publication of the book, the Cold War heated up, reinforcing the sense that bipolarity was indeed a powerful structural force shaping international security.

Yet even in the 1980s, it was clear that neorealism left a great many questions about international security unanswered: why alliances form, why arms races begin and end, why states create international institutions, why the Cold War began, and why the superpower rivalry waxed and waned, and many more. The overwhelming majority of scholars seeking to address those questions found Waltz's general theory insufficient. Most responded by using Waltz's work as a foil

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for developing self-consciously non-realist explanations of specific puzzles or, more ambitiously, for developing alternative theoretical schools, most notably institutionalism (Keohane 1984) and constructivism (Wendt 1999). But some responded by developing their own realist theories based on Waltz's. For example, in seeking to explain alliance behaviour, Stephen M. Walt (1987) integrated insights from Waltz into a new, related but clearly distinct 'balance of threat' theory (discussed below), while Glen Snyder (1997) combined Waltz's theories with other complementary theories. In explaining cooperation, Joseph Grieco (1988) supplemented Waltz's theory with propositions from game theory.

Thus, even though Waltz, like Morgenthau, presented his work as a single stand-alone realist 'theory of international politics', the natural development of scholarly inquiry led to the development of neorealism as a complex sub-school within realism, encompassing many Waltz-inspired theories. What linked the research of these scholars best captured as 'neorealist' was a common bet that Waltz's reformulation of realism was the best place to start inquiry.

Offensive and defensive realism

The advent of neorealism sparked a major debate that still reverberates among scholars. The debate was well under way before the Berlin Wall fell, but the Cold War's end further intensified critical scrutiny of Waltz's ideas. The criticisms added up to a crisis of realism that was easily as consequential as the antirealist storm that had pummelled Morgenthau in the 1960s and 1970s. While the focus at the time was on the theory's deficiencies – neorealism has never recovered the scholarly influence it attained in the 1980s – in hindsight, it is clear that neorealism had caused scholars to think much harder and more clearly about the underlying forces that drive IR. Realists working with Waltz's theory discovered that, depending on how they thought about the core assumptions, and what they saw as the most reasonable expectations about real-world conditions, neorealism could lead to very different predictions. Written in a highly abstract manner, Waltz's neorealism ignored important variations in IR, including geography and technology. Depending on how one conceptualized those factors, the very same neorealist ideas could generate widely disparate implications about the dynamics of inter-state politics. Out of this realization were born two new theoretical sub-schools, each of which built on the basic insights of neorealism: defensive realism and offensive realism.

Building on core ideas presented in *Theory of International Politics* and, arguably even more importantly, on the pioneering work of Robert Jervis (1986) on cooperation under anarchy, defensive realists reasoned that under very common conditions, the war-causing potential of anarchy is attenuated (Taliaferro 2000/2001). The harder conquest is, the more secure all states can be. Anything that makes conquest hard can reduce the security problem. For example, it is hard to contemplate the conquest of states that have the capacity to strike back with nuclear weapons. Thus, even accepting Waltz's arguments about how difficult it is to be secure in an anarchic world, under some conditions, states can still be expected to find ways of defending themselves without threatening others, or can otherwise signal their peaceful intentions, resulting in an international system with more built-in potential for peace than many realists previously thought (Glaser 2010). The result was to push analysts to look inside states for the domestic and ideational causes of war and peace.

Offensive realists, by contrast, were more persuaded by the conflict-generating, structural potential of anarchy itself. They reasoned that, with no authority to enforce agreements, states could never be certain that any peace-causing condition today would remain operative in the future. Even if conquest may seem hard today owing to geography or technology there is no guarantee against another state developing some fiendish device for overcoming these barriers.

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Given this uncertainty, states can rarely be confident of their security and must always view other states' increases in power with suspicion. As a result, states are often tempted to expand or otherwise strengthen themselves – and/or to weaken others – in order to survive over the long haul. The result is to reinforce the classic realist argument about the competitive nature of life under anarchy, regardless of the internal properties of states.

Defensive and offensive realism emerged in the 1990s as outgrowths of Waltz's neorealism. In keeping with the tradition established by Waltz and Morgenthau, many of the scholars who developed these theories saw them as articulating *the* realist theory (see, for example Mearsheimer 2001). But it is impossible to put the genie of realism's diversity back into the bottle. It is clear that defensive and offensive realism coexist as distinct sub-schools. And those two sub-schools hardly exhaust realism's diversity, for many other realist theories fall outside either of them.

A telling example of this diversity is the work of Waltz's contemporary Robert Gilpin, whose magisterial *War and Change in World Politics* (1981) is seen by many as a more important and lasting theoretical contribution than Waltz's (Wohlforth 2011; Ikenberry 2014). Written and conceived completely independently from Waltz's *Theory* but certainly no less realist, Gilpin's work provided an elegant theoretical framework to explain the links between shifting power balances, order, and war over centuries. Furthermore, many of the theoretical ideas in Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*, especially those relating to the analysis of foreign policy, retained potential relevance, but had fallen by the wayside in Waltz's reformulation of realism. It was the sense that too many important realist ideas had been lost in the transition to neorealism and the closely related sub-schools of offensive and defensive realism that gave rise to the sub-school that eventually came to be called 'neoclassical realism'.

Neoclassical realism

Neoclassical realism embraces rather than denies realism's diversity as well as the complexity of the international system, but clings tenaciously to the goal of rigorous theorizing and careful empirical evaluation. It accepts from neorealism and its descendants the utility of thinking theoretically about the international system as distinct from the internal properties of states. Having carefully specified their assessment of the international conditions particular states face, however, neoclassical realists go on to factor in specific features of a given situation to generate more complete explanations of foreign policy. They seek to recapture the grounding in the gritty details of foreign policy that marked classical realism while also benefiting from the rigorous theorizing that typified neorealism. Their work is characterized by a strong commitment to rigorous historical case studies both to test and develop theoretical propositions.

Neoclassical realist research began as efforts to explain anomalies or puzzles that neorealism could not account for, such as foreign policies seemingly too aggressive or not aggressive enough (Rose 1998). This was partly a reaction to the once common practice of immediately reaching for non-realist theories to account for any phenomenon that seemed inexplicable according to neorealist theory. While retaining the new penchant for careful theorizing of the external system setting, neoclassical realists reached back into classical realism's toolkit for arguments and theories that often provided better explanations for puzzling phenomena. They looked inside states to see how governmental actors registered and processed systemic pressures, tracking how various aspects of domestic politics could alter the effect of a given external incentive on the resulting foreign policy choice (Lobell et al. 2009).

Neoclassical realism is currently in the process of coming into its own as a fully developed realist sub-school. Its advocates have developed a much more fulsome theoretical picture of the international system that builds on and adds more complexity to defensive realism's scheme,

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a well-developed set of 'intervening variables' (e.g., perception, decision-making, and policy implementation) that mediate the international system's effect, and a more expansive understanding of the approach's 'dependent variables' to encompass not just specific foreign policy decisions but patterns of outcomes across the international system (Lobell et al. 2016).

Realist theories

Sub-schools within realism help the student figure out the intellectual connections among scholars, how various arguments are related, and how scholarship progresses. Equally important are specific theories about the fundamental constraints and incentives that shape behaviour and outcomes in international politics. When the issue at hand is a real explanatory problem – such as the effort to explain puzzling security dynamics in a particular issue area or regional setting –analysts should take recourse to the specific theories that appear to be relevant, such as theories of the balance-of-power and balance-of-threat, security dilemma, offence-defence balance, hegemonic stability, and power transition. Certainly, there are numerous other realist or realist-related theories, but even this list makes the main point: realist theories, which do the real work of explanation, are far more diverse than any one theoretical sub-school within realism.

Arguably the best-known theoretical proposition about IR is *balance of power theory*. Given the basic problem that, under conditions of anarchy, any state can resort to force to get what it wants, it follows that states are likely to guard against the possibility that one state might amass the wherewithal to compel all the others to do its will and even possibly eliminate them. The theory posits that states will check dangerous concentrations of power by building up their own capabilities ('internal balancing') or aggregating their capabilities with other states in alliances ('external balancing'). Because states are always looking to the future to anticipate possible problems, balancing may occur even before any one state or alliance has gained an obvious power edge.

Balance of threat theory predicts that states will balance against threats, not just power. Threat, in turn, is driven by a combination of three key variables: aggregate capabilities (overall military and economic potential), geography, and perceptions of aggressive intentions. If one state becomes especially powerful, and if its location and behaviour feed threat perceptions on the part of other states, then balancing strategies will come to dominate their foreign policies. Thus, the US began both external and internal balancing after the end of the Second World War, even though the Soviet Union remained decidedly inferior in most categories of power. Ultimately, the Western alliance overwhelmed the Soviet-led alliance on nearly every dimension. Balance-of-threat theory holds that it was the location of Soviet power in the heart of Europe, as well as the threat inherent in its secretive government and perceived aggressiveness that produced this outcome (Walt 1987).

Security dilemma theory: the 'security dilemma' is a term coined by John Herz (1951) for the argument that in arming for self-defence, a state might *decrease* its security via the unintended effect of making others insecure, prompting them to arm in response. Robert Jervis (1986) showed how this consequence of anarchy could lead security-seeking states into costly spirals of mistrust and rivalry. He argued that the severity of the security dilemma depends on two variables: the balance between offence and the ability to distinguish offence from defence.

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Thus, although anarchy is theoretically a constant, 'there can be significant variation in the attractiveness of cooperative or competitive means, the prospects for achieving a high level of security, and the probability of war' (Glaser 1997: 172). The article prompted a major debate among realists that eventually ended up in the two sub-schools of offensive and defensive realism. Barry Posen (1993) demonstrated how security dilemma theory can be deployed to explain ethnic conflict within states, opening a rich avenue for research relevant to state collapse and civil war.

Offence-defence theory is an offshoot of Jervis's development of security dilemma theory. As developed by Charles Glaser (1994–5), Stephen Van Evera (1999), and others (Lynn-Jones 1995; Glaser and Kaufman 1998; Brown et al. 2004), this is a set of theoretical propositions about how technology, geography, and other factors affect the ease of conquest as opposed to defence, as well as the ease of distinguishing between offensive and defensive postures. Its main prediction is that militarized conflict and war are more likely when offensive military operations have the relative advantage over defensive operations, while peace and cooperation are more likely when defence dominates. Similarly, the easier it is to distinguish offensive from defensive military preparations, the greater the probability of peace and cooperation. If states seek security rather than glory or conquest, they might avoid the security dilemma by creating mainly defensive military postures, thus signalling their benign intent to others and reducing the core problem of uncertainty about intentions that drives the gloomy predictions of defensive realism. The theory also extends to perceptions: when leaders believe offence is relatively easy, war and conflict are more likely, and vice-versa. This has spawned a massive literature that seeks to explain the origins of perceptions and misperceptions of the offence/defence balance (Snyder 1984; Van Evera 1999). Posen (1993) adapted offence-defence theory to help explain the intensity of competition of groups within states when faced with the security problems that may arise when state authority breaks down.

Hegemonic stability theory builds on the observation that powerful states tend to seek dominance over all or parts of any international system, thus fostering some degree of hierarchy within the overall systemic anarchy. It seeks to explain how cooperation can emerge among major powers, and how international orders, comprising rules, norms, and institutions, emerge and are sustained. The theory's core prediction is that any international order is stable only to the degree that the relations of authority within it are sustained by the underlying distribution of power (Gilpin 1982). According to this theory, the current 'globalization' order is sustained by US power and is likely to come undone as challengers like China gain strength.

Power transition theory is a subset of hegemonic stability that seeks to explain how orders break down into war. Building on the premises of hegemonic stability theory, it deduces that dominant states will prefer to retain leadership, that lesser states' preference for contesting that leadership will tend to strengthen as they become stronger relative to the dominant state, and that this clash is likely to come to the fore as the capabilities of the two sides approach parity (Tammen et al. 2000). Applied to the current context, the theory posits that the stronger China gets, the more likely it is to become dissatisfied with the US-led global order. It predicts that a war or at least a Cold War-style rivalry between the US and China is likely unless China's growth slows down or Washington finds a way to accommodate Beijing's preferences.

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Contemporary realist scholarship and Security Studies

It has been argued in this chapter that realism is not now and never has been a monolithic and universal 'theory of international politics'. It has always been diverse; even its grandest theories are contingent in scope if not name. The chief development of the last 15 years has been a greater recognition of this fact, as well as an associated decline in realism's centrality to the discipline. With the advent of neoclassical realism, meanwhile, realist research has become more problem-focused, and its interactions with research from other traditions more complex and arguably more productive.

All of this is good news for Security Studies. The accumulation of new and important research by scholars working within the realist tradition has figured centrally in recent scholarship on international security. This includes work that seeks to account for general phenomena, such as the origins of war (Copeland 2000); regional war and peace (Miller 2007); suboptimal under-provision of security by states (Schweller 2006); great-power military interventions (Taliaferro 2004); threat assessment (Lobell 2003); the origins of revisionist state preferences (Davidson 2006); the constraints on peace settlements after major wars (Ripsman 2002); and the dynamics of unipolarity (Wohlforth 1999, 2009; Pape 2005), to mention only a few. It also includes research explaining more discrete events or behaviours, such as US foreign policy in the Cold War (McAllister 2002; Dueck 2005); the end of the Cold War (Schweller and Wohlforth 2000); US, South Korean, and Japanese strategies vis-à-vis the North Korean nuclear crisis (Cha 2000); the evolution of US monetary policy after the demise of the Bretton Woods monetary system (Sterling-Folker 2002); the origins of the Bush administration's approach to foreign policy and the invasion of Iraq (Layne 2005; Dueck 2005); and many others.

These works are eclectic. Most avoid chest-thumping advocacy on behalf of realism. Many expend considerable effort finding fault with other realist works. Nevertheless, if they had to be classified as being in one theoretical school, all would end up in the realist column: they share a sensitivity to realist core insights, a central role for the three key assumptions that define realism, and an appreciation of how neorealism and its successor sub-schools can aid in analysis. At the same time, most are open to the insights of classical realism and lack dogmatic attachment to one theory or the other. While they hardly represent the last word on the respective subjects, in aggregate they stand as testimony to the ongoing contributions of realism to Security Studies.

Conclusion

Realist theories remain an important, if insufficient, part of the Security Studies toolkit. Once we set aside the fruitless debate over which overarching theory trumps all others, the diversity of realist scholarship comes to light. The advent of new sub-schools of realist thought, such as offensive, defensive, and neoclassical realism, helps organize this diversity and makes sense of the many theories that have grown out of the realist tradition. As a result, it is easier for today's security scholars to make sense – and use – of realist theories than it was 10 or 20 years ago. Also, thanks in part to these developments within realism, it is much easier for realists and scholars working in other intellectual traditions to interact productively, as evidenced by a burgeoning literature that bridges realism and constructivism (e.g., Bukovansky 2002; Sterling-Folker 2002; Goddard and Nexon 2005).

Needless to say, today's complex mix of classical, great-power security issues such as the rise of China, Russia, and India, equally classic but newly salient phenomena such as states' failure, civil war, and terrorism, and novel problems like nuclear proliferation presents new challenges to scholars working within and outside the realist tradition. Scholars are energetically deploying

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the theories discussed herein to address these issues. For example, Charles Glaser (2015) deployed security dilemma theory to propose a way to avoid a US–China confrontation and John Mearsheimer (2014) utilized realist theory to explain the breakdown in relations between Russia and the West.

But work remains to be done. Realist scholarship still has not come fully to terms with research findings on the effects of domestic institutions on international conflict – arguably the most significant development in Security Studies over the last two decades. For their part, democratic peace researchers have yet to take on board the implications of more fine-grained realist theories, which predict much more variation in states' conflict behaviour than neorealism. Both need to grapple with older theories from the classical realist tradition concerning the effect of international systemic conditions on domestic institutions. Realists are still struggling with the implications of nuclear proliferation. They remain unsure of the security implications of the spread of weak and non-survivable nuclear arsenals.

Arguably, the issue that is most ripe for more work is the interaction between international security and the global economy. Decades ago, pioneering scholars such as Robert Gilpin (1975; 1986) and Stephen Krasner (1986; 1991) explored the links between state power, international institutions, and the international political economy. Many of the core ideas they propounded fell by the wayside as scholars studying security and political economy went separate ways. But recent works have begun to re-engage this interaction. Stephen Brooks (2005) shows how the globalization of production by multinational corporations has 'changed the calculus of conflict'. Jonathan Kirshner (2007; see also Kirshner 2006) demonstrates the links between financial interests and states' propensity towards war. As these works demonstrate, in a world of dramatic economic change amid rapidly shifting inter-state power balances, realist scholarship has a lot more to offer Security Studies.

Notes

* This chapter shares some material with Wohlforth (2008) and Wohlforth (2012).

1 Here I follow Gilpin (1996: 7–8). See Donnelly (2000: 7–8) for a good list of representative defining assumptions of realism.

2 Carr's *Twenty Years' Crisis* (1946) does seek to advance IR as a science, but does not explicitly articulate an overarching theory.

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