Chapter 1

Structural Neorealism and the British Case

The ascendancy of structural neorealist theory in international relations that coincided with the 1979 publication of Kenneth Waltz’s Theory of International Politics gave rise to expectations across the discipline. It was believed that by discovering recurrent trends that seemed to be at a divorce from specific national attributes such as language, history, and culture, Waltz had found a way to generate elegant, parsimonious, and predictive theory on the basis of a scant number of variables. If true, it was felt that this development would allow the discipline of international relations to shift toward economics with its more robust predictive abilities and putative scientific neutrality and away from its mangled legacy as a mongrelized version of political science, philosophy, and diplomatic history.

Among the recurrences that Waltz had discovered, two bear particular mention. The first is that systemic-structural factors intervene between the intentions of actors in international politics and the outcomes of their interactions. Waltz argued that states very often want peace yet get war, not because of some factor inherent in human nature or even in the regime type of the interacting states, but rather because of the international system with its underlying anarchy. Anarchy, for the purposes of international relations theory, refers to the absence of a sovereign authority above the level of the state. That systemic anarchy, in which all states must be the guarantors of their own security, drives states toward security competition, which can result in war.

The second recurrent pattern that Waltz observed was that the competition spawned by the structure of the international system conditioned states to emulate the successful practices of others in their
pursuit of security. In so doing, there was a certain convergence of capabilities that resulted in the formation of a balance of power. Waltz argues that the formation of balances of power need not be the result of a deliberate policy of “balancing” as some earlier scholars suggested. Balancing is, rather, an unintentional response to the pressures that drive states to converge in their capabilities.

The balance of power is perhaps the central concept in international relations theory. For the most part, scholars writing on the balance of power frame balancing as a form of alignment that “occurs when a state brings its policies into close cooperation with another state in order to achieve mutual security goals.” This definition refers to “external” balancing, in which the efforts at attaining security are characterized by the pursuit of alliances. Another variant of balancing, called “internal” balancing, also exists. Internal balancing occurs when a threatened state seeks to enhance its security by bolstering its own power by such means as increasing military strength and the like.

Waltz’s theory does not attempt to explain when specific balances will form and when they will not. Waltz argues that while he expects balances to form all the time, other factors that “lie outside of the theory’s purview” can explain why they occasionally do not. Other scholars, discussed later, have found the lack of predictive specificity in Waltz to be disheartening. While having knowledge of recurring systemic tendencies is interesting, it is far more exciting to be able to generate prediction on how any given state in any given situation will react. That information is relevant and useful both to scholars and the policy makers they inform. Randall Schweller, Jack Snyder, Thomas Christensen, and Stephen Walt have all developed theoretical approaches that provide a greater specificity in terms of predicting outcomes while remaining within the structural Waltzian framework.

**Goals and Arguments**

The goal of this book is to discuss leaders as a determinative variable in both explaining and predicting outcomes in international politics. That goal is advanced through three main arguments and three distinct targets. The first argument is against Waltz’s claim that it is systemic-structural factors that intervene to explain why intentions and outcomes so rarely match up in international politics. Waltz is right that there is a variable that intervenes; however, it is not systemic structure but leadership.

The second argument is against neorealism’s underspecified conception of the balance of power. Waltz himself and the many scholars