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## Realists as Idealists

JOHN MEARSHEIMER

Charles Glaser established himself as one of the leading defensive realists in the mid-1990s when he published an important article entitled “Realists as Optimists.”<sup>1</sup> *Rational Theory of International Politics* is a sophisticated extension of that article.<sup>2</sup> There is much to admire in Glaser’s new book, as he employs his first-rate analytical mind to make arguments that are comprehensive as well as logically sound. Nevertheless, his theory has shortcomings that limit its usefulness as a guide for understanding international politics.

There are two ways to assess any theory of international relations. One way is to analyze its internal logic: its core concepts, assumptions, and logical consistency. Alternatively, one can take the theory as it is and test it against the historical record: how well does it explain the past and present behavior of states, and how useful might it be for explaining future actions?

I have disagreements with some of the main elements in Glaser’s theory. For example, I do not think that the offense-defense balance, which is at the heart of his theory, is a useful concept. Nor do I agree with Glaser’s contention that it is possible for states to signal their intentions to each other in meaningful ways. But I would like to put aside my criticisms of the theory’s underpinnings and instead evaluate it on its own terms. In what follows, I take the theory as given and ask how useful it is as a guide for understanding how states can maximize their security in the real world.

### THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION PROBLEM

Taken on its own terms, Glaser’s theory has two problems that limit its usefulness. First, because his theory is normative—not explanatory—there

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<sup>1</sup> Charles L. Glaser, “Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994–95): 50–90.

<sup>2</sup> Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), subsequent references cited in text.

has to be a fundamental transformation in how policy makers think about international politics for his theory to operate. But Glaser does not tell us how this radical shift might occur, and given that so much past behavior by the great powers contradicts his theory, there is good reason to think that little will change in the future.

Glaser makes it clear from the outset that his theory “analyzes the strategies that a state *should* choose—which is essentially the same as assuming that the state is a rational actor” (2). He later writes, “This book develops a rational theory—a theory of what states should do to achieve their goals, given the constraints they face; in this sense, it is a prescriptive, normative theory” (23). Significantly, he does not claim that his theory—which has a rational actor assumption at its core—has much explanatory power, because it does not. Instead, it provides a guide for how rational states should act toward each other under different sets of circumstances.

What is going on here? When Glaser and other defensive realists look at the historical record and consider how the great powers have behaved over time they quickly recognize that those states have often behaved in ways that run counter to what their theories predict. In other words, their realist theories do a poor job of accounting for the past and present actions of the major powers in the international system. To put the point somewhat differently, great powers often behave in ways that the defensive realists consider reckless rather than rational. In practice, states frequently do not operate as strategic calculators, which obviously contradicts what one would expect from a realist theory built around a rational actor assumption.<sup>3</sup>

The root of the problem is that defensive realists believe that the structural constraints of the international system should discourage great powers from adopting aggressive strategies and especially from starting wars with each other. For them, the structure of the system should push states to behave defensively and to maintain rather than upset the balance of power. Of course, this logic explains why realists can be optimists. In practice, however, this is not what the world looks like; great powers often behave aggressively and are prone to engage each other in intense security competitions that sometimes lead to devastating wars. For the defensive realists this is reckless behavior that contradicts their deeply held belief that the structure of the international system is largely benign.

All of this foolish and dangerous behavior explains why Kenneth Waltz, the preeminent defensive realist, insists that his theory of international politics does not employ a rational actor assumption. It also explains why he

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<sup>3</sup> I interpret the historical record differently from the defensive realists. Where they see states acting recklessly, I often see them acting as strategic calculators. Of course, states acting rationally sometimes miscalculate and end up worse off, not better off. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001). The analysis in this article assumes that Glaser’s description of the past is correct.

maintains that his theory does not explain state behavior, but instead explains international outcomes. He argues that a separate theory of foreign policy is needed to explain state behavior, although he does not provide one.<sup>4</sup>

Consider the work of two other prominent defensive realists, Jack Snyder and Stephen Van Evera. They also see much evidence of reckless behavior on the part of the great powers, but unlike Waltz, Snyder and Van Evera try to explain it.<sup>5</sup> Each of them has invented what is in essence a compound theory comprised of: (1) a realist component that can account for those cases where a great power recognizes the dangers of pursuing aggressive policies and consequently shows the appropriate restraint in its behavior, and (2) a unit-level component that accounts for the reckless behavior so often displayed by the great powers in the past. Their theories, in other words, aim to account for both strategic and nonstrategic behavior. Snyder and Van Evera fit neatly in the Waltzian tradition because the realist component of their theories is essentially a theory of international politics while the unit-level component of their theories is in effect a theory of foreign policy.

Unlike Snyder and Van Evera, Glaser does not offer a compound theory with a realist and a unit-level component, because he is not attempting to explain how the great powers have behaved in past and recent times. Like Waltz, he simply offers a systemic theory or what Waltz calls a theory of international politics. There is, however, an important difference between them: as noted, Waltz maintains that his theory can explain international outcomes, even if it cannot account for state behavior. Thus, Waltz is claiming that his theory has a great deal of explanatory power, although its domain is limited. Glaser, on the other hand, does not make this distinction between state behavior and international outcomes and instead concedes that his theory has little explanatory power. Thus, he is left with little choice but to tell us how states should behave, not how they actually have acted toward each other over time. His normative theory, in other words, simply provides a rational baseline for assessing how states should think about the strategic choices facing them.

This discussion of the normative nature of Glaser's theory raises the all-important question: will he be able to convince future policy makers to think about the world in the manner he prescribes? The problem he faces is that history is littered with examples of states that have not acted according to the dictates of his version of defensive realism. Indeed, the fact that countries have frequently acted in reckless ways probably means that nonstrategic

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 60–73, 118, 121–23, 128; and John J. Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," *International Relations* 23, no. 2 (June 2009): 241–56.

<sup>5</sup> Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press); and Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

behavior is deeply wired into the international system. Thus, for Glaser's theory to be useful, there will have to be a great transformation in state behavior. In effect, he has to sell his ideas to foreign policy elites across the world and those ideas have to have continuing influence over time. Otherwise, his theory will have little impact outside of academia, which is not what the author of any normative theory wants.

Glaser, however, has no explanation for how to transform the behavior of states and get them to act as strategic calculators. The reason he has no story about how his theory might catch on in policy-making circles is that he has no theory of state behavior. If he had such a theory, as Snyder and Van Evera do, he could explain when states are likely to act according to the dictates of defensive realism and when they are likely to act recklessly. Snyder, for example, argues that cartelized political systems in which powerful interest groups logroll with each other are especially prone to pursuing foolish foreign policies, while democracies and unitary oligarchies are likely to act more intelligently and not pursue aggressive and dangerous policies. Thus, if democratization was inexorably spreading across the globe, as Francis Fukuyama famously claimed when the Cold War ended, one could expect more and more states to think and act like upright defensive realists, which would lead to a more peaceful world.<sup>6</sup> But that is Snyder's account, which grows out of the unit-level component of his theory. Glaser, however, has no such story, and thus no explanation for how to cause the great transformation that his theory demands.

### THE FIRST-MOVER PROBLEM

There is another problem with Glaser's theory that concerns the first countries that might adopt his theory. He believes that reckless behavior has been commonplace in international politics, which is not to say that he thinks that every action by every great power has been strategically unwise. But there are many examples of misguided state behavior in his story, including the glaring cases of Imperial Germany, Imperial Japan, and Nazi Germany, which all started wars that ended in their destruction. This means that the first states that decide to behave according to the dictates of Glaser's theory will be doing so in a world that is populated with other countries that are given to behaving recklessly. This is a fundamentally different situation from a world in which almost all of the other states are committed to acting like defensive realists.

Glaser maintains that rational states will usually emphasize cooperation over competition. When they do compete, they should do so in a restrained

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<sup>6</sup> Frances Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *National Interest* (Summer 1989).

fashion. There is little room for war and no room for the pursuit of hegemony in his theory. There is not much question that if all or nearly all of the states in the system embraced his theory, the world would be much more peaceful. But the problem is: how do you get to that point? It is unlikely that all of the great powers will simultaneously undergo an epiphany and start acting like defensive realists. It is much more likely that one or maybe two states will find Glaser's logic compelling and think seriously about adopting it. But these first-movers will be living in a world where some number of powers will continue to act recklessly. What does this mean for the first-movers? How does it affect their behavior?

It is worth noting that Glaser maintains that his theory "prescribes the strategy, or at least narrows the range of strategies, that a state should pursue when facing a rational adversary" (270). The problem, however, is that first-movers cannot assume they will be facing rational adversaries. On the contrary, as first-movers they face a world where reckless states are still a very real possibility.

There is good reason to think that the first-movers would often have to behave offensively, not defensively, to ensure their security, thus perpetuating interstate competition and conflict. Specifically, in a world in which there is significant potential for the great powers to act recklessly, those countries that are rational have strong incentives not just to preserve the balance of power, but also to take concrete measures to increase their share of world power for purposes of self-protection. Indeed, states in such a dangerous situation often have good reasons to pursue risky—which is not to say foolish—strategies to gain additional increments of power. In fact, aggression may sometimes be the smart strategy for states simply worried about their survival in such a world.

A first-mover operating in a system where there might be powerful but misguided adversaries runs the risk that one or more of those dangerous adversaries might attack it, possibly with the aim of destroying it. Even if no rival great power seems to fit that profile at the moment, a state can never be certain that will always be the case, especially since Glaser maintains that reckless states show up with some frequency in the existing international system. A savvy first-mover will therefore be constantly thinking about how best to prepare itself for the possible appearance of a dangerous opponent.

As a good defensive realist, Glaser would probably advise a threatened state to build a balancing coalition in the event that an aggressive adversary appears on the scene. However, a first-mover faces two major obstacles to crafting an effective balancing policy. It is more difficult to make deterrence work when dealing with powerful and reckless states rather than strategic calculators. By definition, misguided states will sometimes pursue policies that violate strategic logic. That means they might initiate a war in circumstances where a rational state would sit tight and not start a fight. This is because domestic political considerations are likely to push them to pursue

strategies that are unnecessarily risky. They are also likely to have more than the usual amount of trouble that all countries face when they assess the balance of power as well as the systemic constraints and incentives facing them. After all, they are not rational states.

Furthermore, a threatened first-mover cannot be certain that its potential balancing partners will be there when they are needed, if only because balancing coalitions usually face significant collective action problems. In addition, there is always the possibility that those allies might behave foolishly themselves, in which case the balancing coalition would not come together in time to deter a potential aggressor. One might concede that balancing is not always efficient and that war sometimes results, but argue that a balancing coalition would eventually come together and the threat would be contained or eliminated in the end. That is possible, maybe even likely, but hardly guaranteed. Moreover, the first-mover would still have to fight a war to check the aggressor, and that undertaking would involve huge costs, which a prudent state would surely want to avoid.

Given the difficulties of making containment work effectively in a world where there might be some number of reckless great powers, the best way for a first-mover to protect itself is to be especially powerful. Striving to be the preponderant power in the system—which is not to say attempting to become a hegemon—would appear to be a sensible policy. In addition, that first-mover should be willing to pursue risky strategies to gain more power or retain the power advantage it has over other states; it should have opportunities to acquire more power, because putting together a balancing coalition that might deter the first-mover will be especially difficult in a world where most of the great powers are prone to act in foolish ways. In particular, preventive war should be a serious option for a rational state facing a rising power that might one day foolishly aspire to be a hegemon.

The logic here is straightforward. The more powerful a first-mover is relative to the other states in the system, the less likely it is that a reckless state would attack it. There is no guarantee that a state prone to foolish behavior would not start a losing war, but it is less likely if that potential aggressor is badly outgunned. Plus, if deterrence fails and there is a war, the first-mover would be well positioned to win it quickly and decisively. Finally, a rational state that is the preponderant power in the system is likely to be able to contain a misguided aggressor by itself and not need to rely on a balancing coalition to do the job. This takes the problem of inefficient balancing off the table, as the first-mover no longer has to worry about unreliable allies.

First-movers face another troubling dilemma. If they act offensively to protect themselves from their reckless adversaries, there is a good chance that those reckless states will feel more threatened and respond even more aggressively. A rational state bent on defending itself may do its best not to provoke the reckless states in the system, but it will find that goal hard

to achieve. The main reason is the familiar security dilemma, which says that measures a state takes to increase its own security usually decrease the security of other states. In spite of this tendency, or perhaps because of it, potential first-movers will sometimes go on the offensive to try to gain power at the expense of their reckless foes and thus increase their prospects for survival.

### THE LIMITS OF IDEALISM

The bottom line is clear. It may be rational to act defensively in a world where most or all of the great powers have accepted Glaser's logic, but in a world of first-movers surrounded by reckless states, it sometimes makes sense to act offensively. Such behavior, needless to say, is not going to lead to the benign world that is at the heart of defensive realism. This tragic reality will make it hard for Glaser to convince world leaders to follow his theory's prescriptions. His only hope would be to convince almost all of them to adopt his theory at essentially the same time. Otherwise, he is stuck with the first-mover problem. But Glaser has no explanation for how he can convince any policy makers to act like defensive realists, much less get the majority of them to do so simultaneously. Until he comes up with a clever marketing strategy that can address that fundamental problem, his theory is likely to be of interest only to his fellow academics. There is nothing wrong with that, of course, although one suspects that Glaser was hoping for something more.