

Anarchy and Authority: International Structure, the Balance of Power, and Hierarchy

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Do international systems tend to remain anarchic due to balance-of-power mechanisms or do they tend toward power imbalances and political hierarchy? A number of approaches—including structural-realism (Waltz 1979), hegemonic-order theories (Gilpin 1981; Lemke 2002), and notable English School frameworks (Wight 1977)—provide competing predictions. Comparative-historical evidence fails to resolve this debate, finding both trajectories in the historical record (Wohlforth et al. 2007, 20). This controversy has taken on new urgency in recent years. Analysts interested in the relative lack of balancing against the United States after the Cold War question the balance-of-power mechanism (Wohlforth, 1999; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008). Scholarship on the dynamics of non-European systems suggests that anarchical orders do not necessarily produce recurrent balances of power. The emergence of hegemonic and imperial orders may be as, or more, common than balancing (Kang, 2003/2004; Kang, 2003; Hui, 2004; Kaufman et al., 2007).

Some (such as Wohlforth, 2011) suggest that realist security studies made a critical mistake in embracing structural realism. Mearsheimer (2001) offers a rival “offensive realist” theory that sees *regional* systems as tending toward hegemonic domination. Others argue for “preserving a weak balance of power theory” that decouples “the mechanisms specified by Waltz from his predictions about system-level outcomes” (Nexon 2009a, 353).

We propose a variant of this last approach. We contend that structural realism allows—or should allow—for variation in patterns of authority without negating international anarchy. We disaggregate patterns of authority in international politics into two analytical dimensions:

*particularism-cosmopolitanism*¹ and *degree of substitutability*. The first refers to the extent that prevailing norms, identities, and institutions allow one polity to make *authoritative claims* on the behavior of another polity. The second captures how much they facilitate the *incorporation* of one polity into another.

We preserve mechanisms associated with structural realism while extending existing theoretical insights, especially in the English School and Constructivism. In brief, we build upon the intuition that nationalism and sovereign-territoriality undergird structural-realist expectations (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996; Nexon 2009b; Spruyt 1994). Nationalist ideology—which holds that states and nations should be coterminous—suggests more particularistic relations of authority, insofar as cross-boundary authoritative claims run contrary to principles of national sovereignty. But even within systems broadly characterized by national sovereignty, various *cosmopolitan* norms, principles, and identities may facilitate the ability of polities to make legitimate claims on the conduct of other political communities, or even legitimate *de facto* or *de jure* political domination.

Along these lines, *substitutability* manifests most directly in the institutional arrangements—broadly understood to include political organization and the basis of legitimate rule—of political communities: to the extent that these arrangements can be hooked up to, subsumed within, or incorporated by other polities. The degree and prevalence of such political institutions generates international structures with higher and lower values of substitutability.² When substitutable forms of rule prevail, the costs of expansion and consolidation are comparatively low. This increases the chances of transformations from anarchy to system-wide political hierarchy. In short, when the

¹ We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for the term. This is equivalent to particularistic-universalistic distinction that may be more familiar to students of Comparative Politics and American politics (e.g. Wimmer 2002; Kriner and Reeves 2015).

² We defend the status of this pattern variable as structural in greater detail later on.

international-authority system is more cosmopolitan and substitutable, polities are more likely to lose their political autonomy and more inclined to bandwagon with the powerful.

Our argument focuses on imperial and hegemonic processes of transformation from anarchy to political hierarchy (see Griffiths 2017), but has broader theoretical implications. These include:

- Taking up Acharya's (2014) appeal for international-relations theory to incorporate non-European contexts, while addressing concerns that focusing on variation in cultural content renders comparison impossible (Butcher and Griffiths 2017).
- Helping understand the broader logic of strategies associated with soft balancing (Pape 2005; Paul 2005). That is, *some* of what we call "soft balancing" amounts to efforts to alter international order in ways that make its authority structures less cosmopolitan and less substitutable. While not, as critics contend, balancing in the traditional sense (Kauffman, Little, and Wohlforth 2007, 3), these still entail a realpolitik logic stemming from structural incentives.
- Sharpening aspects of hierarchy-centric scholarship (Barder 2017; Bially Mattern and Zarakol 2016). Many dimensions of international hierarchy found in this literature take the form of patterns of vertical stratification *within anarchy* (McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon 2018). Our framework identifies broad ways such patterns of authority might interact with anarchy.

We begin by revisiting the debate about anarchy and the balance of power, focusing on structural-realist theory and its analytical assumptions. We argue that structural realism has problems with *some* kinds of systemic balancing failures and transitions to political hierarchy. Second, we develop our alternative. We explore autonomous logics of the international-authority system and

how they interact with expectations about the effects of anarchy. Because this paper is primarily a theory-building exercise, we limit our empirics to illustrations of key claims.

We conclude by building out the implications of the theory. It implies that contemporary world politics, marked as they are by *relatively* low levels of cosmopolitanism and substitutability, are, overall, less prone to system-wide balancing failures than past systems. It also highlights the significance of debates over whether China can reproduce the cultural dispositions of pre-modern Sino-centric systems, or whether the spread of sovereignty norms and national-state institutions precludes older patterns of regional hegemony (see Acharya 2003/2004 and Kang 2010). Indeed, the amenability of future international relations to balancing outcomes will depend partly on, first, power-political contestation over norms and values and, second, processes of state (trans)formation.

Balances of Power, Structural Realism, and Hierarchy

For Waltz (1979, 66), the texture of international politics is generally stable, altering “so long as none of the competing units is able to convert the anarchic international realm into a hierarchic realm.” Competition and socialization help maintain anarchy as an ordering principle by eliciting recurrent balancing equilibria; thus, structural-realist theory says little about under what conditions units (or a coalition of units) ‘roll up the system’ and transform anarchy into hierarchy. For this reason, structural realists dispute the prevalence of bandwagoning: if bandwagoning predominated in a system, “we would see not balances forming but a world hegemony forged” (Waltz 1979, 126).

Wight (1977, 43), in contrast, claims that most “states-systems have ended in a universal empire, which has swallowed all the states of the system.... Is there any states-system which has not led fairly directly to the establishment of a world empire?” The “states-system can only maintain its existence on the principle of the balance of power, that the balance of power is inherently unstable,

and that sooner or later its tensions and conflicts will be resolved into a monopoly of power.” This tracks with hegemonic-order theories—including power-transition theory (DiCicco and Levy 1999; Lemke 2002) and hegemonic-stability theory (Gilpin 1981)—which see balances of power as fragile.

Examples of transformation in the ordering principles of international systems are commonplace. They include the emergence of ‘universal’ empires in the Warring States period of ancient China (Hui, 2004), the conquest of the Mediterranean system by Rome (Eckstein 2006), and the emergence of the Mongol Empire in the Central Asian system (Morgan, 1990).³ If we are more relaxed about what we call ‘international systems’ (see Wight 1977, Bull 1977, Philips 2014), then nearly all cases of state formation present puzzles for structural realism; systems that should be characterized by balance-of-power dynamics transition into hierarchical political orders.

Such evidence suggests that structural realism’s core proposition has been falsified: anarchy fails to produce recurrent balances of power (Wohlforth et al. 2007). From here, international-relations scholars might draw different conclusions.

First, we should adopt different accounts of the dynamics of international systems. Perhaps scholars should embrace hegemonic-order theories. Many “offensive realists” consider *regional* hegemonic orders a ‘natural’ condition of world politics—while advancing a variety of secondary explanations for why balancing may emerge at the systemic level (Mearsheimer 2001). Systemic constructivism presents another alternative. Transitions from anarchy to political hierarchy may demonstrate that anarchy is “what states make of it,” and intersubjective norms, beliefs, and identities—rather than the objectively given nature of international relations—drive outcomes (Finnemore 1996, Wendt 1999).

Second, we should abandon systemic theorizing altogether. Perhaps aggregate outcomes follow from unit-level attributes, such as the distributions of preferences, interests, or strategies

³ For more examples, see (Kaufman 1997; Kaufman et al. 2007).

(Moravcsik, 1997). If these can produce systemic balancing failures, then unit-level attributes may not only prove unnecessary for explaining systemic outcomes, but international systems may involve *no* autonomous structural tendencies. That is, we should adopt reductionist explanations for international order.

Third, we might expand structural-realist theory in ways that incorporate key insights from other systems-level theories. This approach has produced successful theoretical frameworks (see Buzan, Jones, and Little 1999).⁴ These tend to avoid, however, adding something like an international-authority system. Butcher and Griffiths (2017) explicitly reject defining international systems in terms of their cultural properties, on the grounds that this renders them idiographic and hampers trans-historical comparison.

Realists themselves tend to modify structural realism at the margins. They add variables, such as the offense-defense balance, or debate whether anarchy inclines states to maximize security or power. Neoclassical realists maintain the logic of the theory; they study how domestic-level factors interact with relative power to explain foreign policy (Lobell et al. 2009; Rathbun 2008). Indeed, this provides the most common realist way of tackling the role of authority and culture in world politics: as elements of domestic politics.

Critics generally prefer to leave structural realism intact as a foil. Constructivists, in general, follow Wendt (1999) in dismissing, or downplaying, an autonomous logic to anarchy. We think this amounts to a missed opportunity. We should not be forced to choose between theorizing system-level patterns of authority and paying attention to structural-realist claims about the logic of anarchy.

⁴ Butcher and Griffiths (2015, 720) see anarchy as transhistorical, and argue that adding dimensions of structural differentiation (the degree to which states delegate governance functions to substate units), functional differentiation (the degree that states hand over governance functions to “other foreign-policy controlling entities”), and interaction capacity (the density of interactions among states).

Consider the rise of hierarchy-centric scholarship, which seeks to recast world politics from a domain of anarchy to one of complex hierarchies (see Barder 2017; Bially Mattern and Zarakol 2016). When structural realists talk about the balance-of-power mechanism preventing, or disrupting, international hierarchy, they have in mind, at minimum, a superordinate power—or cartel of great powers—that can establish hegemonic dominance over international systems or, at maximum, the formation of something like a world state.

But hierarchy-centric scholarship centers on patterns of super- and subordination that are much broader than formal or informal governance, such as vertical stratification by “status, economic roles, and military capabilities” (McConaughy, Musgrave, and Nexon 2018, 1). Some suggest that while anarchy retains some “utility,” it obscures such hierarchies (Bially Mattern and Zarakol 2016, 649). Others argue that the world is divided into zones of hierarchical authority and anarchy, or that governance hierarchies exist within a more broadly anarchical context (Lake 2009).

Thus, much of the subject-matter of hierarchy-centric scholarship “pose[s] no special problems for thinking of world politics as anarchical” (McConaughy, Musgrave, and Nexon 2018, 1; see also Adler-Nissen 2014; Towns 2009). Moreover, hierarchy-centric scholars correctly note, as we detail below, that the states-under-anarchy framework depends heavily on principles of sovereignty (Bially Mattern and Zarakol 2016). But contemporary sovereignty norms are far from the only basis by which actors maintain relative autonomy over, say, matters of economic exchange and decisions to initiate conflicts (Butcher and Griffiths 2017, 330-332).

Altogether, this calls for theorizing the *interaction* of anarchy with systemic patterns of authority: how the latter influence dynamics that might follow from the lack of a common government, and how anarchy might shape patterns of authority. It also implies that we should not treat sovereignty as *sui generis*—without which structural realism ceases to provide any explanatory leverage. We should analyze sovereignty within the context of broader variation in configurations of

international authority. Doing so provides a fruitful way of cutting into general matters of international continuity and change, as well as the specific focus of this paper: the formation of governance hierarchies, such as both the more limited governance that international-relations theorists commonly associate with hegemony and the more extensive political control they associate with empires.⁵

Structural Realism and Structural Theorizing

Most international-relations scholars know the basic contours of structural realism. The international system is anarchical: no actor enjoys authority to command obedience from other actors (Waltz 1979, 88). Anarchical orders are governed by principles of self-help. As Waltz (1979, 111) argues, “units in the condition of anarchy – be they people, corporations, states or whatever – must rely on the means they can make for themselves.” Since self-help requires states to prioritize their security—over, say, domestic welfare—states are primed to pay attention to changes in relative capabilities. Survival depends on preventing any state, or coalition of states, from developing the ability to subordinate all others.

Thus, actors may seek to balance by expanding their own capabilities (internal balancing) or forming countervailing coalitions (external balancing). Processes of competition and socialization tend to bring them into conformity with these expectations; polities that fail to pay attention to relative power “fall by the wayside”. The net result: international politics are driven by the balance-of-power mechanism and characterized by recurrent balancing equilibria (Waltz, 1979). Anarchy and self-help also have a second critical consequence: international systems tend towards functional

⁵ We agree with McConaughey et al. (2018) and Barder (2016) in their criticisms of the common understanding of hegemony. But the term will do well enough for present purposes.

undifferentiation. Thus, the distribution of power is the *only* structural variable that distinguishes between different international orders (Waltz, 1979; Copeland, 2000; Goddard and Nexon 2005).

Waltz's theory describes the international system *qua* system. It does not offer a self-contained account of micro-level behavior—what Waltz terms “foreign policy.” Structural realism is also a particular kind of systems theory with specific analytical assumptions (LaRoche and Pratt 2017).

Systems are analytically autonomous

For Waltz (1979, 40), “the aim of systems theory is to show how two levels,” structure and units, “operate and interact, and that requires marking them off from one another.” Structural realism seeks to elucidate the internal logics of the international system and to account for aggregate tendencies across time and space. It does not purport to provide a sufficient explanation for changes “within systems,” such as alterations in the “form and purpose” of nations, shifting alliances, or other factors that “explain variation in international-political outcomes” (Waltz, 1979, 67).

Systemic theories must avoid reductionism

Critics sometimes conflate “reductionism” with explaining outcomes through the use of domestic-level variables. But structural realism seeks to avoid analytical and explanatory reductionism: the error of making one system *epiphenomenal* to another (Parsons, 1951; Goddard and Nexon, 2005). For Waltz, scholars err by reducing the structure of the international system to the aggregation of unit-level processes and properties, or by reducing unit-level processes and properties to the structure of the international system. In either case, they violate the core goal of keeping systems autonomous from one another so as to account for their interaction.

Both approaches use only a single system to explain outcomes. Waltz decries unit-level reductionism: explaining international-political outcomes based solely on the dispositions of units. But Waltz *also* rejects systemic reductionism; the structure of the international system rarely fully explains the choices and actions of states. Structural realism no more accepts structural determinism than it accepts methodological individualism. To explain what Waltz calls “foreign policy” we need to understand *both* how international structures “shape and shove” units *and* unit-level properties and processes (Waltz, 1979, 38-93; Waltz, 1986, 342-344; Buzan et al., 1993, 135-136; Braumoeller 2013).

Structures should be cast in distributional and positional terms

Waltz’s (1979, 80) commitment to the autonomy of systems leads him to a restrictive conceptualization of political structures. “To define a structure,” he argues, “requires ignoring how units relate with one another (how they interact) and concentrating on how they stand in relation to one another (how they are arranged and positioned).” Conceptualizing structures in distributional and positional terms entails abstracting elements of a system for trans-historical comparison. If systems are reduced to catalogs of interactions and unit-level attributes, they lose their autonomy, and hence their explanatory efficacy.

Waltz’s claim that international systems tend towards functional undifferentiation becomes important here. When anthropologists and sociologists study domestic systems, they abstract a great many relations of arrangement and position: they can generalize about cliques, clans, divisions of labor, and the like. But since units in the international system are differentiated largely by capabilities, Waltz (1979, 80-2) sees the distribution of power as the only form of structural variation that has sufficient autonomy to meet his criteria. Thus, the “general-systems approach” used to study domestic and organizational politics proves inappropriate in the context of international relations (Waltz 1979, 59).

In sum, structural realism paints a picture of two distinctive and interacting systems: the international and domestic. Structural pressures and unit-level processes combine to produce specific foreign policies and international-political outcomes. And the systems interact with one another. The international system pressures states through self-help, sensitivity to relative power, and competition and socialization (see Rathbun 2008). Internal and external balancing aggregate, sometimes unintentionally, to produce recurrent balances of power *within* the international system (see Figure 1).

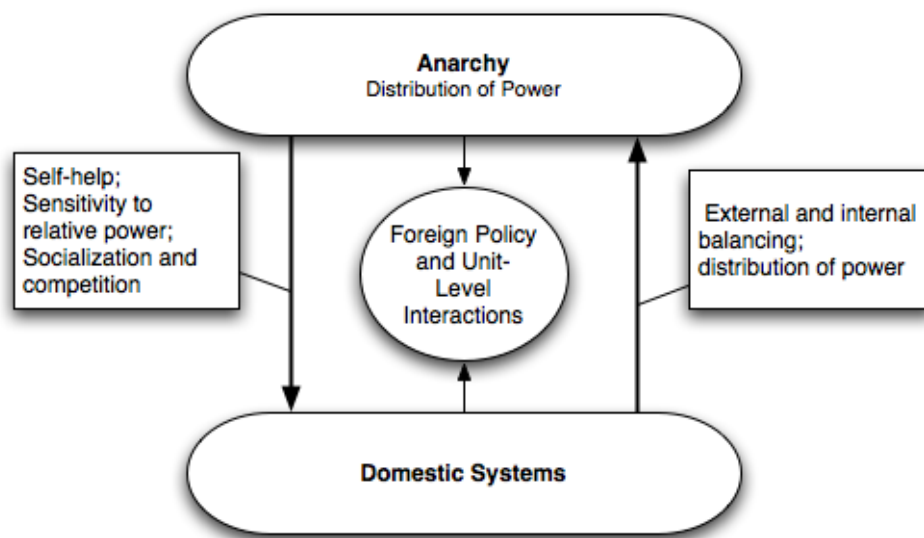


Figure 1: Structural Realism

Waltz says little about the role of domestic politics in, say, threat perception. But one way in which domestic politics shapes concrete foreign policy is through a state's perception of whether another state threatens its security (Walt, 1987; Lobell et al. 2009). Furthermore, domestic politics implicate the specific manner in which balancing pressures play out in any foreign policy; they account for some of balancing's "frictions" (Wohlforth, 1999; Schweller, 2004). Processes such as log-rolling and buck-passing involve domestic political considerations, and may contribute to imperial over-stretch or inadequate balancing (Christensen and Snyder, 1990; Snyder, 1991). Since

the resulting policies affect capabilities of states, they can result in structural change by affecting the distribution of power in the system.

Structural Realism and Transformations from Anarchy to Political Hierarchy

One challenge to structural realism comes from cases where actors are *not* punished for ignoring systemic constraints: when competition and socialization fail to prevent systemic transformation. The most significant cases of deviation from structural-realist expectations involve actors that dominate a system, transforming it from an anarchical order to one of hierarchy. Structural realism says little about the causes of such changes; the balance-of-power mechanism *supposedly* reproduces anarchy. If the characteristics of states—or their specific relations—produce conditions that transform anarchy into hegemonic or imperial systems, then we should doubt structural realism’s analytic utility.

Structural realism allows for *some* balancing failures,⁶ such as when no conceivable coalition of actors is capable of forming a countervailing coalition against a domination-seeker, or when most actors in the system are sufficiently unaware of the threat posed by the domination-seeker to balance against it. The latter can happen, for example, due to the sudden appearance of actors from outside, or from the margins of, a system (Nexon 2009a, 351-52). In both conditions the balance-of-power

⁶ It allows, for example, for cases of peaceful transformations, such as the establishment of supranational federations. Waltz (1979: 118-119): “obviously, the system won’t work if all states lose interest in preserving themselves. It will, however, continue to work if some states do, while others do not, choose to lose their political identities, say, through amalgamation.... The possibility that force may be used by some states to weaken or destroy others does, however, make it difficult for them to break out of the competitive system.” See also Griffiths (2017) on organic anarchies. Another scenario, potentially consistent with structural realism, is the possibility—envisaged by realists like Niebuhr and Morgenthau and explicitly rejected by Waltz—that polities will forgo political autonomy in the singular hope of avoiding nuclear armageddon (see Craig 2003). Monteiro (2014, 95) articulates a weaker version of this argument, suggesting, per Waltz (1986, 327), that nuclear weapons merely attenuate the effects of anarchy for those that possess them, since nuclear-armed countries need not worry too much about their survival even when faced with serious imbalances in capabilities.

mechanism “shapes and shoves” units, but cannot produce a balancing equilibrium (see Cederman 1994).

But other examples of systemic transformations defy structural realism. As noted earlier, the tendency of multi-state systems in ancient and early-modern China to repeatedly transition to hierarchy point to additional structural variables that account for the recurring emergence of hierarchy in the same region (Hui 2004; Kang, 2003). Aspects of the frequent formation of nomadic empires in Central Asia itself also raise questions about structural realism’s claims. It might also be too simplistic to represent Rome’s conquest of the Mediterranean as nothing more than the result of organizational advantages (see Eckstein 2006). Hegemonic systems that remain stable for long periods, such as those in East Asia, also pose problems (Kang 2010; Lee 2013, 2016; Zhang 2015). Can we synthesize structural realism with other systems theories, particularly those that make different predictions about balances of power, to provide leverage over such anomalies?

Patterns of Authority as International Structure

Waltz (1979, 88) claims that “authority quickly reduces to a particular expression of capability” in international politics because self-help systems lack a power capable of enforcing rules and norms. “Elements of authority emerge internationally” only because the distribution of capabilities gives a political community the power to enforce its preferred normative order.⁷ We agree that anarchy may *tend* to undermine transnational or cosmopolitan authority, just as it may *tend* to produce a lack of functional differentiation, but that does not logically preclude the existence of an autonomous authority system in international politics (see Bukovansky, 2002).

⁷ Also see Carr (1946).

Thus, “if we see recurrent, systemic patterns of variation relating to... cultural phenomena over time, then, by Waltz’s own criteria, we are looking at variations in structure” (Goddard and Nexon 2005, 40). The key: incorporating aggregate patterns of authority in a manner consistent with the theory’s analytics. Our international-authority system must have its own internal dynamics, interact on co-equal terms with structural-realist accounts of structure and unit-level processes, and its elements must be cast in formal and abstract categories (Goddard and Nexon, 2005, 34-35; Snyder, 2002, 34-6).

English School theorists and constructivists correctly argue that cultural factors can be understood in systemic terms (Wight 1977; Bukovansky, 2002; Wendt, 1999; Clark 2005). This insight appears in various forms of sociological systems theory, which treat culture as an autonomous realm comprised of symbolic resources: “although symbols take as referents the elements of other systems... they define and interrelate these elements in an arbitrary manner (that is, in a manner that cannot be deduced from specific exigencies at other system levels). These symbols... form a system of their own” (Alexander, 1988, 25).

For example, sovereignty is a property of units but also a systemic feature of international politics: it authorizes certain actors to ‘participate’ in significant domains of world politics; it would be difficult to make sense of many activities—even interventions and other behavior that violates norms of sovereignty—without reference to this cultural aspect of the international system (Wight 1977; Bull, 1977; Weber 1995; Biersteker and Weber 1996; Wheeler 2000; Holsti 2004). Similarly, particular dynastic norms were generalizable features of international politics in early modern Europe. If an individual was an important member of a dynastic line, let alone a dynastic head of

state, this made them an actor in the ‘international’ arena (Mattingly, 1988, 23, 140; see also Saco 1997).⁸

Thus, we disagree with Waltz that differences in principles of authority⁹ solely reside at the unit level. Rather, structural-realist analytics require casting them in formal, transposable terms. Treating authority systems as varying in their degree of cosmopolitanism and substitutability, as we elaborate below, satisfies this requirement.

Cosmopolitanism and Substitutability

We find implicit variation in cosmopolitanism and substitutability in explanations for absence of formal empires and high costs associated with informal ones, as well as the emergence and maintenance of hierarchical orders. Many scholars point to sovereignty and nationalism as key inhibitors of imperialism (see Go 2012). Gilpin (1981, 116) argues that “the triumph of the nation-state as the principal actor in international relations” is one of the factors that broke the “cycle of empires” of the pre-modern world.

The effect of sovereign nation-states on the possibility of imperial formation disaggregates into several mechanisms. First, the spread of nationalist ideology increases the costs of conquest and prolonged occupation. Nationalism renders foreign control illegitimate while providing a basis for mobilization against external domination (Glaser and Kauffman 1998, 200-201; Go 2008). Second,

⁸ Though dynastic rule was the norm, the early European system also included republican units such as northern Italian city-states, leagues and confederations of city-states, Swiss cantons and constitutional monarchies (Wight 1977: 47, 154-157; Spruyt 1994; Tilly, 1990). Central Asian steppe formations produced tribal groupings as units (Golden, 1982; Barfield, 1989).

⁹ We use this term to distinguish it from “principles of legitimacy”, which for some authors correspond to not just the principles of legitimate authority (as in Wight 1977), but also of legitimate, or appropriate, behavior more broadly (Finnemore 1996; Wheeler 2000; Clark 2005).

sovereignty—and particularly national sovereignty—creates impediments against polities making authoritative claims about the proper behavior of other political communities.¹⁰

Waltz's (1979, 88) definition of anarchy—as an order in which “formally, each [unit] is the equal of all the others. None is entitled to command; none is required to obey”—seems to presuppose a system of authority characterized by national sovereignty (Ruggie 1983; Lapid, 1996; Biersteker and Weber, 1996; Hurd, 1999). Thus, the argument that authority relations are merely a function of capabilities collapses, as authority relations constitute Waltz's particular understanding of anarchy.

We can abstract these claims in terms of transposable structural variables. A system comprised of principles of sovereign national-states tends to make authority less cosmopolitan (more particularistic) and institutions less substitutable. It limits the ability of actors in the international system to make authoritative claims on other polities, while creating barriers against domination seekers incorporating other political communities.¹¹

The distinction between particularism and substitutability is analytical in nature. In concrete historical settings, many of the same factors—such as norms, institutions, and identities—that make systems less cosmopolitan *also* make them less substitutable. In the stylized discussion of national-state systems used throughout this paper, prevalent ideologies of national self-determination simultaneously reduce the force of cross-boundary authoritative claims and reduce the legitimacy of alien rule.¹²

¹⁰ Of course, states may attempt to make authoritative claims about the treatment of their co-nationals by other states; they may even attempt to redraw boundaries to bring co-nationals into their own territory. But these claims are inherently limited and particularistic, since they imply that a state cannot make authoritative claims on the behavior of other nationalities outside their borders.

¹¹ Note a close connection between the reasoning here and that found in offense/defense balance scholarship (Adams 2003/2004). Nevertheless, we wager that some significant aspect of the ease of conquest involves legitimacy, social technology, and other factors that can be parsed in terms of authority.

¹² Of course, they may facilitate both when dealing with co-nationals. We also provide some examples below of the use of self-determination norms to undermine counter-balancing. This kind of real-world messiness, as

Nonetheless, we see good reasons to let them vary independently. Figure 2, which summarizes the implications of the two structural variables, is an ideal-typical property space. Real-world politics involves particular configurations that position international systems within this property space, but those configurations themselves involve factors that push and pull in different directions (see Jackson 2011, 142–46). Overall, the cosmopolitanism-particularism dimension of international authority structures focuses on the ability of units to make claims on the behavior of other units, while substitution deals with the governance costs involved in dominating other polities (see Lake 1996).

Another reason to treat these patterns as distinctive is that substitutability is partially a function of the prevailing organizational logics of units—that is, state forms. National-state, sovereign-territorial systems reduce cosmopolitanism and substitutability when *compared*, in broad terms, to many other systems. But we find variation within the contemporary system. For example, human rights and anti-corruption norms provide vectors of cross-boundary authoritative claims—make the system more cosmopolitan—but do not necessarily increase substitutability. Some features of national-state forms render them *more* substitutable than other organizational logics.

we discuss later, is what we would expect when we move from the discussion of analytical systems to concrete cases.

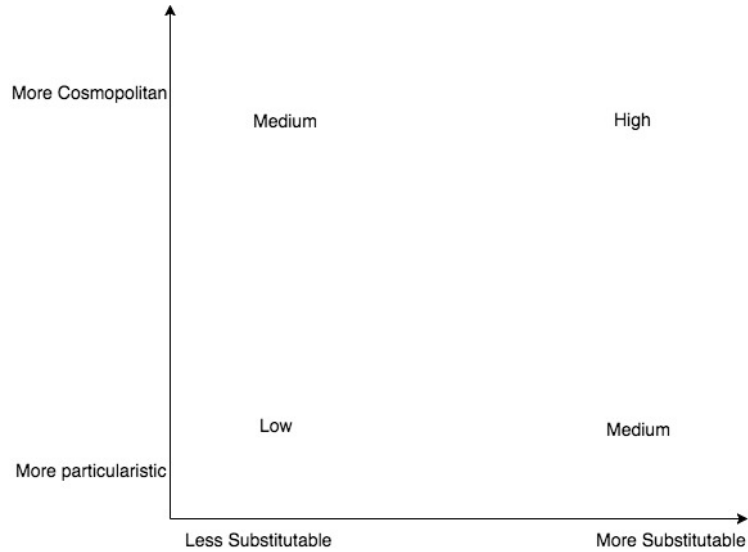


Figure 2: Structural Disposition for Transforming from Anarchy to Hierarchy

Along these lines, principles of authority that derived from, for instance, membership in a Latin Christian community are more cosmopolitan; they facilitated a wide variety of cross-cutting authoritative claims based upon common normative standards (Hall 1999; Spruyt 1994, 42-57). In the medieval period, they provided a justification for military aggression against adjacent social and political communities, as well as ones further afield, that violated these standards, deviated from proper religious practice, or belonged to non-Christian faiths (see Bartlett 1993).

We find echoes of this continuum in Kaufman's (1997, 193-196) discrete typology of principles of identification, which ranges from personalism (kinship, patrimonialism) to (proto-)nationalism (ethno-linguistic) to imperialism (mostly religious or ideological). Kaufman offers various examples of the dynamics we suggest in the ancient Near East and Middle East: from Sumerian and Greek city-states—strongly attached to their independent status, resisting unification and imperial control—to large ethnic empires that faced difficulties in ruling alien peoples, to universal/multi-ethnic empires that crumbled when faced with proto-nationalist forces within them.

This dimension also exists in Watson's (1992) typology of international systems, which vary from multiple independences, to hegemony, dominion, and finally empire. Each differs from the preceding in the extent of authority exercised by one political community over the others. Watson concludes that systems marked by independence—what in the language of structural realism we would call anarchic—tend towards more hegemonic or imperial forms, and that principles of legitimate (alien) rule are crucial in explaining why some systems fall closer to one or another end of the spectrum. The “claim to empire naturally came sooner in areas where imperial rule or suzerainty was traditional, and met with less resistance because those communities regarded a degree of imperial control as the natural order of things.” (Watson 1992, 124, See also Wight 1977, 43-44).

Consider also what patterns of authority sustain hierarchy.¹³ Relative material power matters, but so does the structure of authority relations. Hierarchies are unlikely to remain stable if their legitimating principles are not somewhat cosmopolitan; if members reject the authority of a polity, then they will resist its attempts to wield power.¹⁴ Such resistance need not result in civil war and the breakdown of effective authority, but durable hierarchies require authority that is widely accepted among segments of their constitutive populations (Lake 2009; Mattern and Zarakol 2016, 7, 9-10). Modern states that base their authority on representation of a particular ethnic group typically face trouble commanding the allegiance of other ethnic groups and non-coethnic polities. The United States learned a version of this lesson during the early years of the Cold War, when attempts at preserving white supremacy domestically undercut American relations with newly independent states

¹³ Our reasoning is unapologetically functionalist. That is, we ask the counterfactual question: in order for hierarchies to persist, how must authority be structured? Since functionalist reasoning is used here to establish a set of counterfactual conditions, rather than substitute for causal analysis of actual outcomes in international politics, such reasoning is appropriate (Giddens, 1995: 18-19). Goddard and Nexon (2005) suggest that structural realism is riddled with functionalist reasoning, while Krasner (1999: 45) describes it as, among other things, a “functional” theory.

¹⁴ We use ‘cosmopolitan’ with respect to the system itself, not with respect to other systems. We do not mean to restrict to ‘universal empires’ that claim authority over the *entire* world by virtue of their political and moral aspirations.

in Africa and Asia and undermined claims of American global leadership (Fraser 2003; Dudziak 2003; Borstelmann 2003).

For hierarchical systems to be stable, moreover, they need mechanisms by which rule can be smoothly transferred—or substituted—from one ruler or faction to another. Democracies that lack such mechanisms and monarchies without functioning succession principles degenerate into anarchy when parties change or kings die. If these two systemic variables are important in governance hierarchies, it suggests that when patterns of authority are cosmopolitan and substitutable the international system will have a high structural disposition towards transformations from anarchy to hierarchy (figure 2, upper right quadrant). If one element is present, anarchy will have a medium level of proclivity for transitioning to hierarchy (upper left and lower right quadrants). If neither element is present, imperialization should be hard and therefore unlikely (lower left).

Substitution takes at least two forms: *direct substitution* and *supervenience*. Direct substitution occurs when a ruler simply takes over the domestic institutions of another state. In the dynastic-states period of European history, the King of Aragon could become the King of Naples through marriage or inheritance. Having done so, the dynast could continue to rule as King in Aragon while also ruling as King of Naples. In this sense, he could *substitute* for the previous ruler of Naples without requiring a disruption of its institutional arrangements (see Bonney 1991; Nexon 2009a).

Another unit-level trait that tends to produce system-level substitutability is the existence of a professional civil service, or bureaucracy. It was this institution—together with more or less cosmopolitan principles, as noted above—that allowed successive “non-Chinese” tribes to rule China by creating a two-tier system in which Manchurians replaced the native Han Chinese rulers but preserved Chinese law, administrative practices and civil servants (Barfield 1989, 38; Phillips 2017). On the other hand, institutions of direct participation and popular representation reduce substitutability by creating a bond of identification between rules, ruler, and ruled. Overcoming or

replacing these bonds has been a particular challenge for the establishment and exercise of supranational authority in the European Union (Cowles et al. 2001; McNamara 2010). Highly personalized rule should also be harder to substitute for than impersonal, contractual relations, (Weber 1978, 215-216) which in turn are less substitutable than more overtly coercive rule or indirect rule. In systems of pure coercive domination, the ruler is whomever holds the gun, making for easy substitution.

Substitutability is also influenced by a systemic (or at least relational) trait that is central in English School theorizing: cultural unity.¹⁵ Wight's (1977, 43) claim about the imperial fate of most international societies was "particularly clear in the case of the primary states-systems, those that are the political expression of a single culture. The Chinese was unified by the Ts'in Empire, the Hellenistic by the Roman, the Indian by the Moghul." This, of course, stands in stark contrast to the expectation that collective identification is strictly a route to peace (Wendt 1999, 106, *passim*); it can also produce fierce competition for rule of the collective.

Substitution through supervenience occurs when rulers incorporate formerly autonomous polities by establishing external control over them. For example, the Mongols imposed systems of rule *over* the independent cities of the former Kievan Rus', yet they left many elements of city administration more or less intact—as long as they didn't resist Mongol authority—and ruled through the local power structure, extracting tribute and maintaining predominance—although not a monopoly—in the use of force (Halperin 1983).¹⁶ Supervenience is the preferred mode of hierarchical authority in confederative and federative systems, and can be limited to certain domains

¹⁵ Cultural unity is commonly identified by English School theorists as a key factor in the development of international societies. Wight claims that "We must assume that a states-system [what Bull would call an international society] will not come into being without a degree of cultural unity among its members." (1977: p. 33). Bull (1977: 304) and Watson (1992: 120-122) disagree with the absolutist position, arguing instead that cultural heterogeneous international societies are viable provided that there exists a minimum level of shared understandings and shared values.

¹⁶ Our language is drawn from Tilly's (1990: 1-2) definition of the state.

of governance. Whether the systemic patterning of institutions favors supervenience or direct substitution is an interesting question, and should help us to identify variation in historical systems, but not direct relevant here.

Substitutability might seem to be a unit-level attribute *par excellence*; it is a product of domestic institutions. However, conceiving of social structure as networks (see Goddard 2009; Hafner-Burton and Montgomery 2006) makes it clear that substitutability can, just as with capabilities, be thought of in distributional and positional terms.

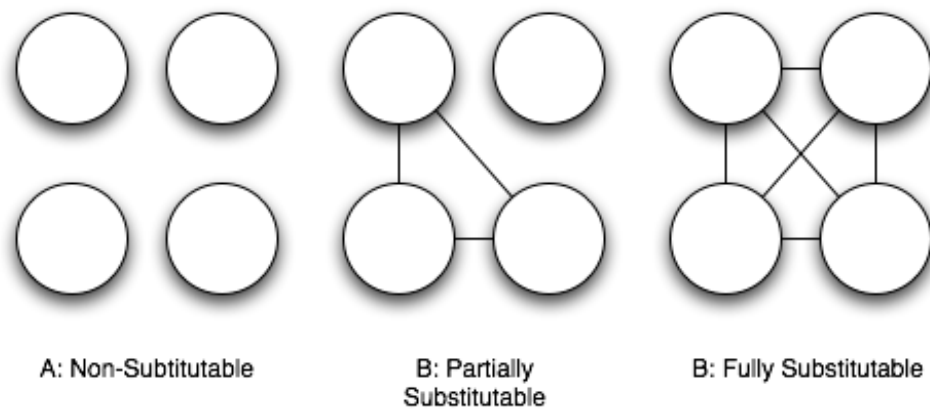


Figure 3: Substitutability as a Positional Attribute

Figure 3-a shows a system with no substitutability. All the units are ‘billiard balls.’ In Figure 3-b, some units of the system are linked by networks of substitutable authority. Notice that these ties position some units outside of substitution networks and others inside. In Figure 3-c, all units have substitution relations with one another. Each of these possible distributions of substitutability within the system creates different structures and different positionalities. Substitutability has systemic properties, which operate regardless of the specific unit-level attributes of actors in the system. These three are, of course, illustrative. There are many gradations along the continuum of

substitutability between specific units and across systems; most real-world examples will fall somewhere in that spectrum.

Measuring Cosmopolitanism and Substitutability

Measuring authority in the way we propose involves familiar challenges. Measuring authority (or legitimacy) at the “domestic” level—and distinguishing it from mere *compliance* with commands—proves notoriously difficult. It matters not just that actors comply, but also *why* they comply, but it is difficult to measure the latter directly, and in particular *ex ante*.

One solution, as some of the examples above illustrate, is to focus not just on the behavior of actors—and whether they acquiesce to orders—but also on the discourse and practice of diplomacy, the claims, counterclaims, and justifications for behavior, as well as the formal and informal institutions of rule “domestically”. To code authority structures in transposable ways we need to abstract from particular cultural contexts. International-relations scholars have long known how difficult it is to measure putatively material structures (capabilities) and devise indicators that are valid across time and space. The challenge is even greater when it comes to measuring authority structures. Claims to transboundary authority can have different content but reflect similar levels of cosmopolitanism. Finally, as indicated above, particularism-cosmopolitanism and substitutability-non-substitutability are not dichotomous, but rather continuous dimensions.

We consider a system as tending more toward the particularist end of the spectrum when the constituent actors reject most claims of trans-boundary authority and identify legitimate authority within narrow group boundaries. In contrast, a system tends toward the extreme cosmopolitan end when actors accept claims of universal transboundary authority, whereby, in principle, any actor can

make claims over any other actor. It is not necessary that all actors in the system (or sub-system) subscribe to these principles, but they must be widely held. Some contestation occurs in all systems.

Historically, most systems located toward the cosmopolitan end of the spectrum are at least somewhat bounded. For example, the Soviet empire shares space in this dimension with certain iterations of the Islamic Caliphate, ancient Greece, and the Sinocentric system, in that claims to legitimate authority by the Caliph over other Muslim polities, the Soviet Union as the leader of the revolution, the Hegemon, or the Emperor of all-under-heaven, are restricted to a specific sub-group of actors in the system, while excluding, or at least differentiating, others: apostates, capitalists, and barbarians.

The level of substitutability in a system, in turn, depends on the degree that prevailing norms and institutions at the unit and system level allow for “alien rule.” If a system is composed of units for which the legitimacy of rule is bound to a particular individual or group, the system displays low levels of substitutability. A system will have greater levels substitutability if the constituent parts have institutions or norms that allow for the subordination of local rulers and rulers—or their replacement—with nominal outsiders.

Interactions Between Cosmopolitanism and Substitutability

From an analytical perspective, shifts in the relationship between cultural referents can be analyzed in and of themselves. The spread of religious beliefs or ideologies can alter the constitution of the international-authority system by changing the values associated with certain kinds of action and the relationships among actors. Although ideological diffusion cannot ever be fully explained without

reference to material and actor-level factors, we can analyze the *consequences* of such diffusion *within* the realm of a cultural system qua system.

Systems of symbols and meanings “tell us the meaning of the elements of social systems, and they provide through their valuation the crucial references upon which economic, political, and integrative processes build” but they do not “enter into the social system as socially embodied causal forces in their own right” (Alexander, 1988, 53-321). And norms and values impact the international system directly, as they structure responses to institutional forms, coercive action, and definitions of membership and exclusion (Alexander, 1988, 322; Wendt, 1999).

Thus, we accord autonomous logics to the international-authority system. Cosmopolitan and substitutable patterns of authority can be treated as relatively autonomous, but they interact in a variety of ways. Patterns that produce more cosmopolitan forms of authoritative claim making will often also increase the substitutability of political institutions. Cosmopolitan systems make it easier to substitute authority, in that actors in a dominated polity will be more inclined to recognize external control as legitimate. The reverse should also hold.

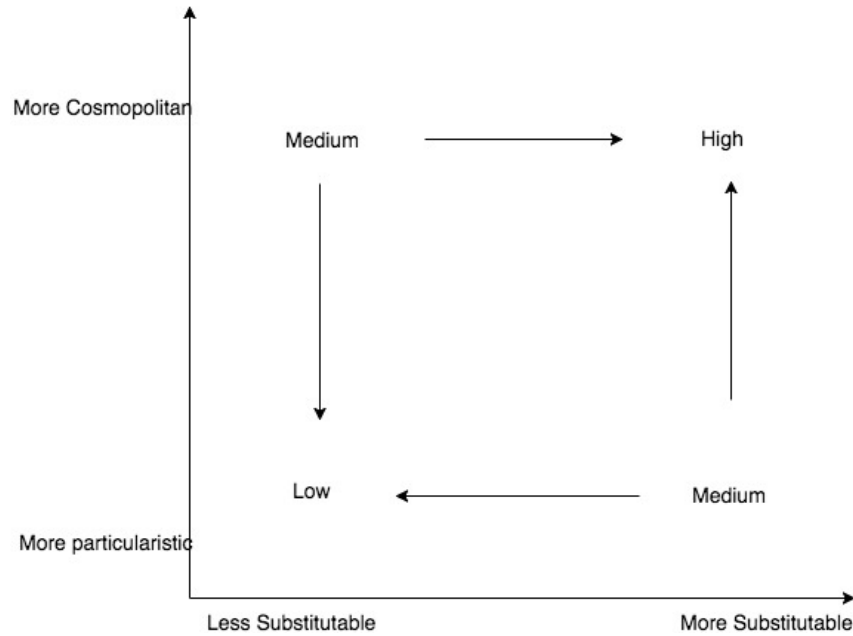


Figure 4: Endogenous Structural Tendencies of the International-Authority System

Over time, the international-authority system should tend towards *either* more cosmopolitan and more substitutable or more particularistic and less substitutable configurations (from medium to high or low in Figure 4). It is hard to imagine an international system where authority is justified primarily upon nationalistic grounds and states lack a shared sense of identity, but countries swallow each other up without friction; similarly, a domestic system in which parties seamlessly transfer dominance over political institutions but authority is justified by principles specific to one party should be uncommon. Structural-realist mechanisms of selection and emulation matter here. Either polities seeking to stabilize their dominance over others will succeed in promoting principles of authority that legitimize their rule or they will tend to dissolve into the constituent parts that enjoy that legitimacy. Great asymmetries of capabilities will surely help, buying the necessary time for these principles to take root where they are absent or where alternative principles coexist. But coercion and induction should only go so far.

Interaction Between Authority and Power Structures

If we are to add another system to structural-realist accounts of international politics then we should specify how these systems interact with one another. We first hypothesize how cosmopolitanism and substitutability affect tendencies of balances to form. We then explore how anarchy and self-help influence relevant patterns of international authority, and proposes a few basic vectors of interaction.

Bandwagoning should be more common in cosmopolitan authority systems. In such systems, political communities can more easily make authoritative claims on the behavior of other polities. Without reference to anarchy, such effects are indeterminate. To the extent that a polity seeking to dominate another political community can demand its obedience, so can the latter demand that the former behave in normatively appropriate ways. However, the logic of anarchy suggests capabilities will also shape the practical dynamics of authority.

Hence, we propose that: First, powerful political communities will more easily be able to compel weaker polities to capitulate. Second, powerful units will tend to form alliances based upon principles of domination rather than equality, since their superior capabilities will more easily translate into relations of authority. Third, polities with incentives to bandwagon for profit (Schweller 1994) will be more likely to do so, since the system facilitates recognizing the authority of more powerful actors. For example, nomadic steppe cultures were permeated by the notion that military prowess was a sign of legitimate rule. This cosmopolitan principle inclined many clans and tribes towards bandwagoning and, according to some, helps explain recurrent patterns of nomadic-empire formation (Golden 1982, 50; Khazanow 1980, 30-31).

Cosmopolitan patterns of authority can also contribute to *widespread underbalancing and balancing failures*. First, they can incline states to seek universal domination and to eschew alliances designed to protect lesser powers. This seems to have happened during the latter phases of the Warring States period of Ancient China. The remaining powers sought, at a minimum, to divide China into spheres of hegemony and, at a maximum, to conquer the entire system. As Hui (2004, 190) argues:

Qin's strength ascended, a *hezong* or balancing strategy, which called for the uniting of weaker states to resist domination, emerged in the 330s and 320s b.c. However, the neighbors of Qin's victims rarely "flock[ed] to the weaker side" as Waltz would expect. As diplomatic strategist Zhang Yi explained to Qin's king: "Even blood brothers fight over money, the impracticability of the *hezong* strategy is obvious." Indeed, Qin's targets – Chu, Han, Qi, Wei, Yan, and Zhao – were "indifferent to mutual cooperation." They were overwhelmingly concerned with short-term gains and pursued their own opportunistic expansion. They fought bitterly amongst themselves to scramble for territories from weaker neighbors and from one another. As many as twenty-seven – or 28 percent – of the ninety-five wars involving great powers in the period 356–221 b.c. involved mutual attacks among these six states.

Second, cosmopolitan authority systems may make polities less inclined to respond to the expansionist policies of other polities. If a polity can rationalize its expansion in ways consistent with common normative standards, such as the deviation of a target of expansion from acceptable religious or governance standards, then potential rivals will be less likely to see that expansion as threatening. They may also have a more difficult time justifying a robust balancing response to important domestic interests. Schweller (2004, 171) argues that lack of "elite cohesion" on the question of whether or not another polity's actions are threatening is a source of underbalancing. He roots his argument in domestic politics, but cosmopolitan authority systems may contribute to that lack of cohesion. At least some elites will be more likely to view expansion by another state as

legitimate, or to argue that it is in order to oppose the allocation of resources towards costly balancing efforts. Similarly, an expanding polity can deploy arguments, based on existing norms, to create dissension among third party elites about whether or not its actions are threatening (Goddard 2008/2009; Goddard and Nexon 2016, 12-14).

In contrast, *particularistic patterns of authority tend to reinforce the balance-of-power mechanism*. When states reject notions of supranational authority—or leadership by the powerful—they will be less willing to compromise their autonomy through, for instance, bandwagoning behavior. They will be more likely to feel threatened by others’ growing power and influence; they will find it easier to justify balancing and hostile responses to attempts to dominate a third party.

Circumstantial evidence exists in the development of balance-of-power practices in early modern Europe. There, the early diffusion of ideas about the balance of power was related to the propaganda war fought over the Habsburg and Bourbon bids for hegemony. During the reign of Charles V, pro-Habsburg propagandists asserted principles of cosmopolitan authority as a rationale for Habsburg hegemony and political leadership. Anti-Habsburg writings inverted this argument, insisting that Charles, and then his son, Philip, were usurping “the traditional rules of good government” because of his “thirst for glory and honour, in Latin called *libido dominandi*.” In practice, *monarchia* would represent a “mere tyranny,” an “unchristian slavery” (Bosbach, 1998, 89-90).

The rejection of cosmopolitan authoritative claims, later echoed in debates over Louis XIV’s apparent interest in European hegemony led to the further popularization and crystallization of the doctrine of the balance of power, despite French officials’ opposition (Butterfield 1966, p. 138-140). As Armitage (1998, xx) argues, “apprehensions that one European power was aiming at universal monarchy could be used to inspire others to ally against the potential aggressor, so that what began as an analytical theory of empire ultimately became a justification for defensive aggression within Europe.”

This shift was not, we believe, simply a matter of socialization into the balance-of-power mechanism, but reflects important changes in patterns of authority in early modern Europe. It involved the consolidation of princely authority in the context of claims *against* cosmopolitan (or universal) imperial authority, the simultaneous articulation by political communities of specific and differing customary rights, and the emergence of Protestantism. The last amounted to a practical challenge to the notion of a unified *Respublica Christiania*, and Protestant powers proved particularly insistent on the necessity of state autonomy in order to protect Protestantism against the imposition of Counter-Reformed Catholicism (Philpott, 2001; Elliott, 2000; Koenigsberger and Moose, 1968).

Substitutability reduces the costs of expansion and control. Realists, particularly in the hegemonic-stability traditions, argue that expanding powers experience diminishing marginal returns from conquest. As a polity's territory and influence expands, it faces growing transaction costs associated with increasingly distant force projection. At some point, these costs surpass the wealth and resources gained from increasing territorial control and influence (Hui, 2004, 177; Gilpin, 1981, 121; Snyder, 1991; Kennedy, 1987). In systems with high substitutability, expanding polities can more easily incorporate formerly autonomous political communities. Expansion is more likely, *ceteris paribus*, to be net profitable for polities and overextension less likely. The system is more "offense dominant" and transformation from anarchy to hierarchy more likely.

Anarchy and Authority Systems

In general, structural-realist logic suggests that anarchy should *incline* the international-authority system towards particularism and non-substitutability. At the same time, mechanisms of selection and emulation can, under specific circumstances, provide countervailing tendencies towards cosmopolitanism and substitutability.

Anarchy and Cosmopolitanism

Anarchy influences the international-authority system primarily through the same dynamics by which it interacts with domestic politics: competition, socialization, and self-help. Self-help inclines the international-authority system towards particularism. Units that accept appeals to cosmopolitan authority by other units are unlikely to maintain their autonomy. Thus, selection effects work to eliminate such units from the system. Political communities should draw this lesson and adopt the behavior of units that are more selective about their adherence to cosmopolitan appeals (Krasner, 1999). Communist China, for example, ultimately reduced international practices oriented toward universal revolution and adapted, in important respects, to pluralist (more particularist) principles of sovereignty and non-interference (Foot 2001).

On the other hand, great powers tend to justify their status, and to rationalize their exercise of power, through appeals to cosmopolitan principles (Carr, 1946, 71-75; Morgenthau, 1958, 10). Lesser powers should, *ceteris paribus*, be disinclined to accept these claims to authority. But some may be swayed either by selective material inducements or by the promise of enhanced status and prestige (compare Ikenberry and Kupchan, 1990; Schimmelfennig, 2000). Even if great-power appeals to cosmopolitan norms are nothing more than “cheap talk,” the practice of deploying them ensures the circulation of elements of cosmopolitanism in international-authority systems. And if the great powers succeed in promoting these principles—even in a limited area—their reward is increased power and longevity of domination, preserving cosmopolitan principles and pressuring others to emulate relevant practices.¹⁷

¹⁷ The very idea of great powers as a class apart, with distinct responsibilities, rights, and spheres of influence is in large part a notion cultivated historically by the great powers themselves. See Wight (1977).

If we set aside factors related to the distribution power, we find reasons why polities embrace cosmopolitanism despite the incentives created by self-help. Political communities, and their leadership, may suffer a variety of costs from resisting such norms, including loss of face, social ostracism, and an erosion of domestic support (see Risse and Sikink 1999; Schimmelfennig 2001; Acharya 2004; Alder-Nissen 2014). Thus, a variety of processes mediate the tendency of anarchy to push intersubjective structures in a particularistic direction.

Anarchy and Substitutability

In general, anarchy should work against substitutability: increasing the cost of conquest is an important mechanism of ensuring state survival.¹⁸ However, it also creates pressures for units to emulate or conform to successful authority structures (Waltz, 1979). The role of institutional emulation and mutual recognition in promoting ‘state sameness’ are well documented (Spruyt, 1994; Strang, 1991; Simmons et al. 2006). It follows that, if successful authority structures include elements that make authority substitutable across units, then structural-realist mechanisms can push the international-authority system towards substitutability. Thus, anarchy may, in some circumstances, actually help create the conditions for its own transformation.

Net Effects of Interaction

At an abstract level, it is difficult to precisely predict how the interaction between anarchy, international-authority structures, and domestic politics will play out in the context of specific forms of cosmopolitan and substitutable authority. The particular content of authority, the distribution of power, and other factors will combine to produce different trajectories in different settings. Still,

¹⁸ Compare Waltz’s (1979) discussion of why states will seek to limit interdependence.

anarchy should exert some influence on the international-authority system. Although politics may emulate successful forms that are substitutable, self-help always creates incentives for restricting the substitutability of authority. Put together, and compounded by the inherent instability in configurations that combine high and low combinations of the two dimensions, the aggregate effect of anarchy on international-authority should be to push its structure towards the lower left-hand quadrant (see Figure 5).

Ultimately, our theory on the effect of anarchy on authority differs from structural realism in three ways. First, in our account structural-realist mechanisms do not overdetermine the patterns of authority in international politics. Second, the international-authority structure mediates the implications of structural-realist mechanisms, in some cases overcoming their effects or channeling them towards outcomes unanticipated in structural-realist analysis. Third, even if left to operate without resistance, structural-realist mechanisms don't produce *extreme* particularism and non-substitutability; they create incentives for *some* cosmopolitanism and substitutability in the system.

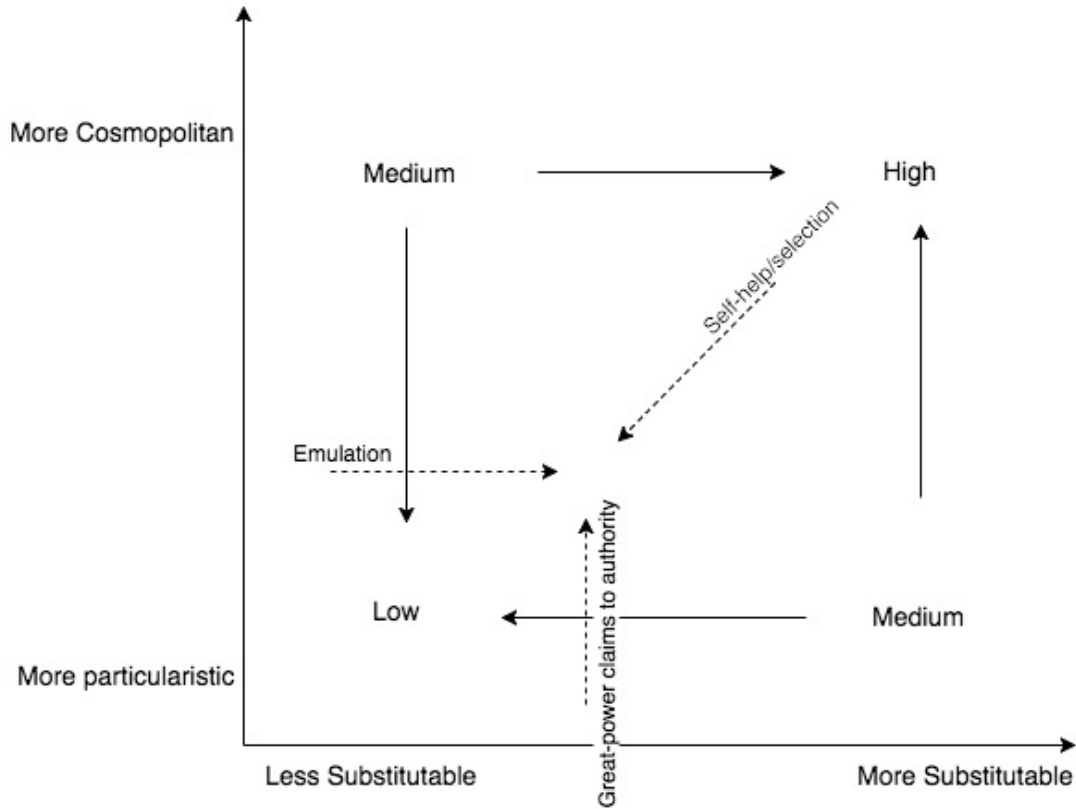


Figure 5: Effects of anarchy on authority structures (traced arrows). Solid arrows represent endogenous effects of authority (see figure 4).

Our empirical expectations are somewhat closer to, though distinct from, Watson’s (1992) pendulum. In his survey of international state systems, Watson identifies four types, located along a spectrum, ranging from independence to empire. He sees neither extreme as stable. Opposing forces push toward the center, somewhere between hegemony and dominion, like a pendulum. For him, the distribution of capabilities and principles of legitimate authority primarily determine where a system winds up. But unlike Watson, we expect that endogenous logics of each system—and their interactions—can create relatively stable equilibria at each end of the spectrum, as well as the middle.

These general structural proclivities suggest a number of possible pathways for structural transformation. In one, the development of a more cosmopolitan-substitutable structure creates a “window” for transformation from anarchy to hierarchy, but this window erodes over time due to

the structural pressures associated with anarchy. For instance, a polity begins a process of expansion in which it incorporates an increasing number of formerly autonomous units. The remaining units in the system respond by pressing for particularistic norms and adapting their institutional practices in ways that make incorporation more difficult. The resulting barriers of expansion help block future expansion, leading to the formation of a balancing equilibrium underpinned by a rejection of cosmopolitan norms and increasingly non-substitutable distributions of authority. As discussed previously, one can make a case for this kind of pathway in the wake of the Habsburg bid for hegemony.¹⁹

It is also possible to contemplate scenarios in which cosmopolitan-substitutable patterns of authority become increasingly “locked in.” In this case, the rising power of a domination seeker makes the system increasingly “hierarchical” in terms of the scope of hegemonic or imperial control. Many other polities adapt by acceding to cosmopolitan authority claims and emulating aspects of the most powerful polity’s authority structures. Changes in the distribution of power and the distribution of authority create mutually reinforcing feedback loops towards hierarchy.²⁰

¹⁹ With the caveat that “autonomous” changes in the international-authority system associated with the rise of Protestantism pushed the system towards particularism and non-substitutability. Religious fragmentation limited the marriage prospects of dynasts and made it more difficult for them to assert control over foreign territories that did not share the same religious orientations (Philpott, 2001; Mattingly, 1988).

²⁰ Kang (2003/2004) explains the “natural” hegemony of China in East Asia using actor-level cost-benefit calculations, but his invocation of cultural-institutional logics suggests the kind of dynamic described here.

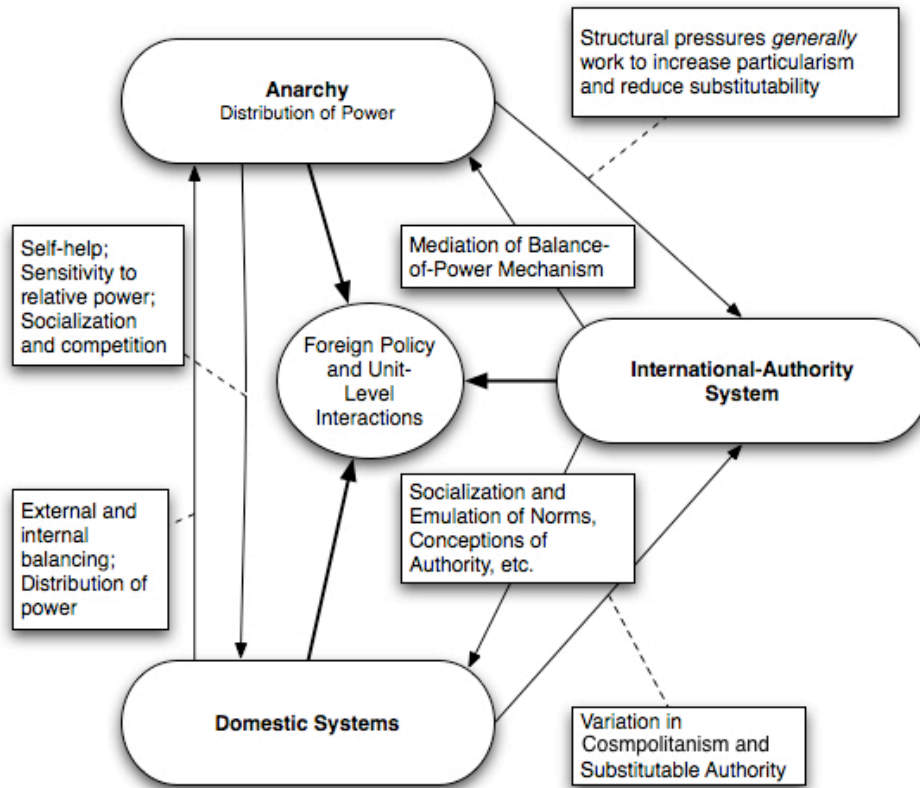


Figure 6: Modified Structural Realism

Bringing it all Together

The preceding sections detailed a number of salient vectors of interaction between the international-authority system and domestic systems. As is the case with the distribution of power in structural-realist analysis, the distribution of authority is an emergent property of unit-level factors. At the same time, the distribution of authority shapes the structure of domestic systems, in terms of both norms of appropriate practice and of governance. Moreover, the distribution of authority at the international level shapes unit-level perception of threat, inclination towards various forms of alliances, and so forth. The focus here is not on domestic systems, but the model of international process specified here includes them.

Even if we exhausted all of the interactions between systems illustrated in Figure 6, we would lack a complete account of international outcomes. The structures of systems—domestic, international, or otherwise—rarely provide sufficient explanations for social and political action. Structural analysis calls our attention to dispositional tendencies; these tendencies, whether transformative or reproductive, are only actualized through the decisions, choices, and strategies of agents (Archer, 1988; Wight, 2006; Parsons, 1951; Wendt, 2003; Dessler, 1989; Alexander, 1988; Waltz, 1986).

Conclusion

Structural realism has trouble accommodating transitions in ordering principles—that is, from systemic anarchy to hierarchy. We address this problem by synthesizing insights from other system-oriented theories, including English School and Constructivist ones, with structural realism. We add an independent system of authority—with its own internal structural logic. It interacts with the Waltzian ‘deep structure’ of anarchy and the distribution of capabilities. Certain authority systems (more particularistic and less substitutable) reinforce, and are reinforced by, anarchy and balanced distributions of capabilities while others (more cosmopolitan and more substitutable) facilitate roll-up and domination and are likely to emerge—or be maintained—in hierarchic and highly asymmetric systems.

While our approach cannot generate point predictions regarding the fate of international systems—recurring balances versus succession of hegemonies—it generates probabilistic expectations about when we should expect balances to form or roll-up to occur, depending on the specific configurations of the capability structure and the authority structure. Moreover, it suggests a need to take seriously the systemic and structural implications of contestation over symbolic

resources, norms, and meanings in world politics. While scholars now call for broadening our understanding of power politics to incorporate such contestation (see Goddard and Nexon 2016), we lack ways of thinking about it in systemic terms.

Consider the notion of “soft balancing.” Its proponents initially conceptualized it as describing a range of tactics that states might use to constrain, or hedge against, a preeminent power. But scholars have expanded the idea to cover a range of behaviors oriented toward checking the power of a dominant actor: from forming alternative institutions, to diplomatic maneuvering, to balancing economic power (see Chan 2017; Friedman and Long 2015). The general tendency is to dismiss such efforts as “balancing” if they do not aim to check, erode, or hedge against, power asymmetries.

We suggest that a variety of such efforts are not, indeed, balancing in the classic sense, but rather matter in terms of patterns of authority. To the extent that international order threatens the autonomy of actors, then states have incentives to push back by making the system more particularistic and less substitutable. We might better understand some of supposed examples of “soft balancing” as efforts to contest the terms of international order itself—of international authority structures. In hegemonic systems, these counter-order efforts become difficult to distinguish from counter-hegemonic strategies. But they nonetheless point to discrete logics of power-political competition not easily captured under the rubric of balancing (Cooley et al. 2015, 3).

The current authority structure, in the absence of profound changes, should be less amenable to hegemonic roll-up than past systems. It contains elements of cosmopolitanism and substitutability, with great powers and certain international institutions—over which the former wield outsized influence—having some measure of legitimate authority (Cronin and Hurd 2008; Bukovansky et al. 2012), but is still predominantly defined by relatively particularist and non-

substitutable principles and practices of national sovereignty. Attempts at direct substitution, at influencing or manipulating other countries' domestic politics, while commonplace, are usually seen as illegitimate and generate political backlash (Levin 2016; Downes and O'Rourke 2016). In recent years, international NGOs and civil society organizations with foreign ties have come under close scrutiny and faced harsh legal restrictions in autocratic and democratic countries the world over, from Hungary and Russia to India and Nepal (Chaudhry, 2016). The existence of a vast number of international rules and standards that enjoy at least partial compliance from a large number of countries in a wide array of issue areas may suggest a relatively high degree of substitutability by supervenience.²¹ However, it may be a mistake to infer authority from compliance. In fact, it is more accurate to say that international institutions such as the WTO, IMF and World Bank shape policies *despite* severely lacking legitimate authority (Buirra 2005; Scholte 2011; Hopewell 2017). On the other hand, international institutions tend to enjoy a degree of legitimacy insofar as they replicate and “plug into” the technocratic bureaucracies and epistemic communities of their member states (Weichselbraun 2016).

This prevalence of a largely particularist and non-substitutable authority structure despite the vast asymmetries in capabilities between the leading power and most other states (Brooks and Wohlforth 2008) reflects the fact that the “unipolar era” was the product of unique contingencies—most notably the collapse of the Soviet Union—rather than a sustained and successful campaign of hegemonic/imperial roll-up founded on or buttressed by a transformation of the international-authority structure and the vesting of such authority in the United States or a supranational institution.

²¹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

Contemporary contestation over the responsibility to protect (R2P) and other qualifications of national sovereignty, debates about the secular and religious basis of legitimate rule, and struggles over the nature and value of popular government, democratic institutions and international democracy promotion, and the legitimacy of international institutions, all matter for the structural dynamics of world politics. Insofar as they will affect the potential and limits for trans-border authority claims-making, the outcomes of these contests will likely shape the functioning of the balance of power and broader patterns of international politics in coming years.

Our framework also offers a language to explore the potentially profound systemic consequences of the contemporary rise of particularly virulent forms of (ethno-)nationalism and the revolt against “globalism” in key countries, and the likely long-term implications of the Trump administration’s vocal rejection of cosmopolitanism. If they continue to gain steam, these challenges to (liberal) cosmopolitan ideals coming from the core of the system have the potential to do far more to move the international-authority structure toward the particularist-non-substitutable end of the spectrum than any challenges mounted by peripheral or rising powers in the short run. The fact that Xi Jinping is repositioning China as a maintainer of the status quo, rebuking US threats to unravel important elements of the architecture of global governance signals a perception that there is an opportunity to seize a leadership position and whatever legitimacy it affords. Replacing the US at the helm of an already existing institutional and normative structure is, after all, less costly than tearing the existing order down (or letting others tear it down) and rebuilding one in its own image, or even building a parallel order that cribs from the existing order but rests on alternative principles of legitimate authority (Stuenkel 2016).²²

²² America’s own imperial expansion, from the Caribbean to the Middle East to Southeast Asia, would have been far costlier and looked much different if it hadn’t been able to largely fill the vacuum created by Britain’s managed decline (Fraser 2000; Go 2012).

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