Theory of International Politics: can Waltz take us beyond the structure?[1]

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1 Introduction

«Dovete sapere come sono dua generazione di combattere: l'uno com le leggi; l'altro com la forza: quel primo è próprio dello Uomo, quel secondo delle bestie: ma perché el primo molte volte non basta, conviene ricorrere al secondo. (...) Il che non vuol dire altro avere per precettore uno mezzo bestia et mezzo uomo, se non che bisogna a uno principe sapere usare l'una e l'altra natura; et l'una sanza l'altra non è durabile »
(Niccolò Machiavelli, Il Principe)[2]

What does the discussion on international regimes (e.g. Krasner, 1982b, 1982a), world order (e.g. Kacowicz, 2012) and the latter discussion on global projects of the unipole (e.g., Hansen, 2011; Monteiro, 2014) have in common? They all rely to a certain extent on a conception of *power* – however defined. The idea of power permeated the theoretical contributions to IR, ranging from intangible definitions as *soft power* (Nye, 2004) to the most strict and measurable ones, like military capacity (Mearsheimer, 2014). A definition of power, broadly enough to grasp the dynamics of control, domination and resistance on one hand, and observable enough to be described, on the other, seems necessary.

At the same time, the theoretical discussions in IR struggle between the assumption that structure – again, however defined – *determines* the actions of states, and the assumption that it is the action of states – and their domestic characteristics – that determine what the international system will be like. Here, bearing in mind the disposition the structure of the system imposes on its units on one hand, while at the same time not *determining* their actions, on the other, seems to be important.

My point in this paper is that the long criticized, but unavoidable thought of Kenneth Waltz is fundamental for addressing these concerns. Recently, the empirical events in the

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[2] "You must know how there are two ways of contesting, the one by law, the other by force; the first method is proper to men, the second to beasts; but because the first is frequently not sufficient, it is necessary to have recourse to the second. (…) as they had for a teacher one who was half beast and half man, so it is necessary for a prince to know how to make use of both natures, and that one without the other is not durable" (Machiavelli, 1960). Original quote from Machiavelli (1973).

political stage – the war in Europe, the frictions between the US and China, the self-help run for supplies during the Covid-19 pandemics, and the attempts to make new arrangements in this world in transformation, to name but a few – seem to point to a need to return to the often dismissed, too pessimist "realist" approaches. I therefore point to Waltz's contribution as a key element for understanding not only the military/security dynamics of the system (as Mearsheimer's approach unavoidably does), but as an important contribution to make sense of the *politics* of international politics. The political realist approach, I argue, unveils the dynamics of power, control, resistance and dominance that can be found in politics in general, and its specific features internationally.

The launching of Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (K. N. Waltz, 1979) can be considered a benchmark in the development of the theoretical studies of IR as a discipline. Indeed, either in order to complement it (e.g., Keohane & Nye, 1987; Wendt, 1999), or to counterpoint it (e.g., Cox, 1981; Rosenberg, 2016), the work is a central piece of scholarship one cannot bypass when theoretically approaching IR. The main theoretical movement in *Theory* is presenting a concept of the structure of the international system that constrains and incentivizes certain behaviours on the behalf of the states. Certainly, when one thinks of the main contribution that the debate attributes to Waltz from 1979 on, the concept of structure that stands out (see, for instance, Keohane's structurally-modified realist theory of international regimes, or Wendt's cultures of anarchy) (Bittencourt, 2018; Keohane, 1982; Wendt, 1999). Despite its importance, the structural aspect of his work notably wanes other contributions it can present, though. This is where I intend to contribute with this paper.

It constitutes no novel fact that Waltz's work cannot be taken only for his *Theory of International Politics*. Martin Griffiths (2006), for instance, mentions that *Theory* bloomed ideas that were already present in his 1959 *Man, the State, and War*. Johnathan Haslam (2014) also mentions how concerned Waltz's scholarship was on social science. Bearing in mind Waltz's early writings on the origins of wars, his conceptual developments until establishing a *Theory of International Politics*, and his later work on unipolarity, a puzzling possibility opens up: namely, is it possible to understand Waltz's contribution beyond the idea of structure?

The point I intend to set forth in this paper is that, yes, there is much more in Waltz's scholarship that helps us make sense of international politics. His work cannot be limited to the theoretical notion of structure. Rather, structure is but one component of the international system, the other being the interacting units. These are widely known as two levels of analysis of his scholarship: what is not structural, is unit-level.

Therefore, by discussing concepts from his work, especially "power", "system, "structure", and "units", I present a theoretical framework that allows comprehending the international system as unavoidably affected by its structure, but also being affected by the attempts of units to resist to its constraints – but in a different manner from the co-constitutionality advanced by Alexander Wendt (1999). The point I present is that the idea of power is key for comprehending not only the constraints of the system, but also the actions taken (by the units) in order to resist these constraints. It is, thus, a way out of the interpretation that the structure *determines* the actions of the interacting units, rather incentivizing them to a range of different actions. It is also a way out of contributions that count on the passivity of the non-polar units, such as that of Nuno Monteiro's (2014).

This paper develops the argument in the following manner: first, I shall make the case for bringing back into analysis the interacting units of the international system, and how these are affected by the structure at the same time they affect it. Then, I shall scrutinize the definition of power in Waltz's writings. Afterwards, I proceed to explaining how the idea of order is related to the idea of power, and how in a unipolar international structure the power cannot be understood simply as dominance or control. Last, I make a case for understanding consensus from Waltz's theory, so that along with violence, international politics gains particular contours due to its ordering principle.

2 The international system: not only structure

In this section, I intend to explore the conception of the international system focusing not only on the structure of the system, but also in the interacting units of it (K. N. Waltz, 1979, 1988, 1997). For that purpose, two insights are necessary: a methodological, first one; and a following theoretical one.

In a very informative article, Joseph MacKay (2022) has recently fleshed out what the guidance for Waltz's reading of political theory is. However idiosyncratic, MacKay presents Waltz's reading of political theory as a purposive, textualist, explanatory, and anti-esoteric (MacKay, 2022)[3]. I shall refer to this bundle of characteristics as "Waltzian approach" for a shortcut.

As for "purposive", McKay refers to general questions or drivers that conduct certain kind of inquiry in political thought. It allows one to make comparisons between authors from

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[3] I would rather use the term "non-esoteric" since Waltz had no active stance in rejecting esoteric readings as he had in rejecting, for instance, reductionist theories (K. N. Waltz, 1975, 1979) and positivist theory-building (Jackson, 2011; Wæver, 2009; K. N. Waltz, 1997, 2003).

different periods, trans-historically. Textualism stands for the use of canons of political thought not as a product of a given historical context, but rather as a raw material that can be used in order to create and refine theories and explanations. The "explanatory" endeavor is at the hardcore of the Waltzian approach: starting from a differentiation between values and facts (or between prescriptions and explanations), Waltz was concerned about the explanations for a given phenomenon (MacKay, 2022, p. 342). As for the idea of "causation", it cannot be misinterpreted as the neopositivist notion of causation; rather it is more "ideal-typically" constructed in order to give a certain explanation for a given phenomenon (Jackson, 2011; Wæver, 2009).

Last, Waltz's reading of canonical texts was not of an esoteric kind. In this sense, *contra* the straussian fashion in vogue in the United States in his period of formation as a scholar (MacKay, 2022), Waltz did not assume that texts had a hidden message whose meaning was only conveyed after a detailed and detained exegesis of the text. Quite the contrary, Waltz's method bears some resemblance to Quentin Skinner's point that political texts are not tricks the dead play on the living (Skinner, 1969). This resemblance cannot be taken any further, though: the former was, as mentioned earlier, a textualist, while the latter was a key figure of the contextualist approach.

Taking all these four features into consideration, Waltz's case for theory was to render it useful both for constructing and further refining theory and also for explaining phenomena. Usefulness – not narrow actuality or mirroring of reality (K. N. Waltz, 1997, 2003) – is the guiding principle for theory and also for theory reading. I claim that it is also possible to explore Waltz's work through this approach: using his texts, comparing them trans-historically, and bearing in mind that his intention was to create a coherent corpus of theoretical scholarship. This position seems to be shared by Griffiths (2006) and Haslam (2014) alike.

This methodological approach to political theory has also theoretical consequences. This is where the second insight starts. What use would there be for the thoughts of many philosophers and theorists, "much of them living far in the past", for the urgent and pressing problems of the present (K. N. Waltz, 2001, p. 2)? By textually analyzing their works, Waltz organizes his classical three-heading framework for the causes of war: or, as he calls it, "images". This organization would bear the first elements of a concept of the international system, to be further developed years later in his *Theory of international politics* (Griffiths, 2006; K. N. Waltz, 2001).

In *Man, the state, and war*, Waltz would conclude that war has two distinctive causes. One is *permissive* – anarchy –, to be described by the third image; the other one is *immediate* –

which can be found in the first and the second images – and even in the third itself to be fair (K. N. Waltz, 2001). There is a road for theoretical development in this acknowledgement: even though anarchy is an important feature of the international system (indeed, in 1959, "anarchy", "international system" and "system of states" seem to be interchangeable expressions, to be refined only later in his scholarship), the international system cannot be reduced to it alone (K. N. Waltz, 1979). Waltz makes an interesting point on the role the "images" have on analysis:

> in a manner of speaking, all three images are a part of nature. So fundamental are man, the state, and the state system in any attempt to understand international relations that seldom does an analyst, however wedded to one image, entirely overlook the other two. Still, emphasis on one image may distort one's interpretation of the others (K. N. Waltz, 2001, p. 160).

This passage is a very important one. It stresses the importance of the three images of international relations for analysis. Interestingly enough, this is a claim also made many years later, in an exchange between Waltz and Colin Elman:

> a neorealist theory of international politics explains how external forces shape states' behavior, but says nothing about the effects of internal forces. Under most circumstances, a theory of international politics is not sufficient, and cannot be made sufficient, for the making of unambiguous foreign-policy predictions. **An international-political theory can explain states' behavior only when external pressures dominate the internal disposition of states, which seldom happens**. When they do not, a theory of international politics needs help (Waltz, 1996, p. 57, emphasis added).

The latter passage points to two very important conclusions that can be drawn. The first one is that it reinforces the need to adapt both permissive and immediate causes to international outcomes in order to present a less idealized analysis. Theory is highly idealized for explanation purposes (K. N. Waltz, 1979, 1997), but the analysis can account for more particular outcomes.

The second conclusion is perhaps the most interesting one for the purposes of this paper. From the stressed passage, it is possible to grasp that there are certain adaptations made domestically to the conditions given internationally. What does it mean? It means that the international structure does not *determine* the actions of states; rather, it disposes them towards a range of possible behaviours. In Hans Mouritzen's (2022) terms, the range of possible behaviours is the "freedom of manoeuvre" of the state.

This idea is implicit in Waltz's thought. In his 1967 *Foreign policy and democratic politics*, Waltz (1967) mentions, for instance, the possibilities presented to the United Kingdom during the multipolar period of great powers in Europe: due to "international conditions", it was possible to Britain to "play the role of balancer". These "conditions" would be theoretically refined into the structure of the international system. This structure, being multipolar at that

moment, allowed for alignments to play a decisive role in international politics. The range of behaviours was set; what path to follow, thus, was not – and it was a matter of domestic formulation, however processes it went through.

In short, the foreign policy of state is formed "by its political institutions, tempered by its experiences and traditions, and shaped by the pressure of other states upon it" (K. N. Waltz, 1967, p. 1). Nevertheless, still according to Waltz, foreign policy is still one face of the domestic politics of the state (K. N. Waltz, 2001). How do these domestic and international features interact, then? Waltz (1979, p. 100, 1997, p. 914) proposes the following pattern:
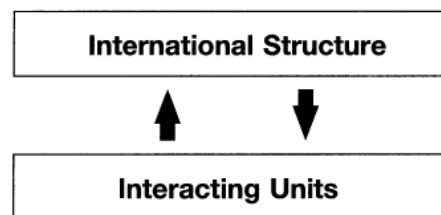
It is possible to understand, from this very simple graphic representation, that the units and the structure affect each other simultaneously. Nevertheless, the actions of a state do not create an intended outcome internationally – when it does. And I claim that this is so because not only the units at the pole of the structure are units with power. Power is an attribute of all the units, which are not differentiated in Waltz's theory (K. N. Waltz, 1979). *Power* is an attribute of the state. The *distribution of power*, on the other hand, is a structure-level concept, that allows one to think of the structure in the first place.

Summing up, it is accurate to mention that the international structure affects the interacting units and that the interacting units affect the structure (K. N. Waltz, 1975, 1979, 1997). However, maybe because of his effort to flesh out the definition and the effects of the structure of the international system, how the effects of structure can be resisted or mitigated was underdeveloped in Waltz's scholarship. To use Booth and Wheeler's (2008) metaphor, Waltz's train had the right fuel but failed to leave the station. A Waltz-inspired theoretical framework can be presented, bringing the interacting units back in. And this can only be done, I argue, through the concept of power.

3 A necessary discussion: power

Power is perhaps the most direct concept one links to realist (or neorealist) scholarship. Indeed, despite the differences between different realisms, power is constantly at the core of their considerations. Nevertheless, it is important to understand where the discussion of power

comes from, what the definition of power is, and what are the theoretical consequences of it. My goal in this section is exploring these aspects of the concept.

First of all, it is important to understand what power *is not*. Power is *not* control. It seems obvious at first sight, but this identity merges power and control of situations in a way that hinders comprehension of some facts of international politics and the interaction between units and the structure. By establishing this difference, Waltz dismisses Dahl's definition of power, which states that "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1957, p. 202–203). To that definition, Waltz makes the following criticism:

> To define "power" as "cause" confuses process with outcome. To identify power with control is to assert that only power is needed in order to get one's way. (…) The common relational definition of power omits consideration of how acts and relations are affected by the structure of action. According to the common American definition of power, a failure to get one's way is proof of weakness. In politics, however, powerful agents fail to impress their wills on others in just the ways they intend to. **The intention of an act and its result will seldom be identical because the result will be affected by the person or object acted on and conditioned by the environment within which it occurs** (Waltz, 1979, p. 191–192, emphasis added).

This explanation for the dismissal of the identity between power and control is important because it sets the parameters for a definition of power that takes into consideration the environment of action of a unit while at the same time not assuming that the other unit(s) are not provided with power. Again, one should recall Waltz's claim that the international structure only *determines* the actions of a state when it is totally devoid of power, which seldom happens (K. N. Waltz, 1996).

It takes me to the discussion of what power is used for. First and foremost power is a *means* (K. Waltz, 1990; K. N. Waltz, 1979). The ordering principle of anarchy sets as fundamental task for every unit to survive, i.e., to maintain its autonomy as a political unit (K. Waltz, 1970; K. N. Waltz, 1979).

That states act to ensure their own survival is also something that has become very attached to the thought of Waltz. Indeed, this is a very important point, either as a logical necessity for whatever other goals the state has (K. N. Waltz, 2001), or as useful assumption for the sake of developing a theory (K. N. Waltz, 1979). Nevertheless, the games that are played – involving both the constant possibility that force can be mobilized and also that the stakes are always too high for the games to be played unattentively –, usually require that the players do use whatever resources they have at their disposal to win it: "in domestic politics one of the possible capacities – the use of physical force – is ordinarily monopolized by the state. In

international politics there is no authority effectively able to prohibit the use of force. The balance of power among states become a balance of all the capacities, including physical force, that states choose to use in pursuing their goals" (K. N. Waltz, 2001, p. 205).

Interestingly enough there are some points I should like to address in from this excerpt. The first one is that sometimes the use of force is not an opportunity, but a necessity. It bears a huge theoretical implication as I see it. Not necessarily a *strong* state is the one that makes use of force constantly. It may do so because the political costs for using it are low, or because it is the sole capacity it has in order to alter the course of a policy another state is trying to implement[4].

Second, and perhaps the most important point Waltz makes in this moment of his presentation, is also the most overlooked. In writing about the differences between balances of power in international and domestic politics, Waltz states the following: "in both cases we can define power, **following Hobbes,** as the capacity to produce an intended effect" (Waltz, 2001, p. 205, emphasis added). I judge to be necessary to quote Hobbes in turn so we can have a clearer picture of his definition of power.

Hobbes (2012, p. 62) defined, in a short way, "the power of a man, (to take it Universally,) is his present means, to obtain some future apparent Good". This definition of power as a means is the fundamental definition for Waltz. Hobbes proceeds by saying that these characteristics that define power can either be original (natural) or instrumental: the former refer to "eminence of the Faculties of Body, or Mind", i.e., are some characteristics the individual possesses and that were not acquired; the latter ones are acquired means that help to obtain more means, such as wealth : "For the nature of Power, is in this point, like to Fame, increasing as it proceeds; or like the motion of heavy bodies, which the further they go, make still the more hast" (Hobbes, 2012, p. 62).

Waltz, departing from this Hobbesian sense of power, states it as a means for the maintenance of the state as an independent autonomous unit (survival). In short, having power means that "an agent is powerful to the extent that he affects others more than they affect him" (K. N. Waltz, 1979, p. 192). This is, indeed, a broad definition that allows one to grasp the dynamics of control and dominance, while not merging them all into a single concept. By

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[4] I cannot help but think of the annexation of Crimea, where through the use of force a country was invaded and part of it was militarily conquered. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 can also be understood through these lenses, and the argument of the expansion of NATO eastwards gains more relevance bearing in mind this theoretical background. Incapable of changing the course of expansion of NATO eastwards through the use of other political means, the raw exercise of violence by a nuclear state became perhaps a necessity out of the fear of the existence of the very state as found in contemporary Russia. An idea of what the state is seems to be inescapable here. Indeed, that using force is no proof of strength.

defining power as a means, Waltz moves away from the views of international politics as a *struggle for power* (as for Mearsheimer, 2014; Morgenthau, 2006), but as a *power struggle* for whatever goals states have – provided that the ground of action is their survival.

On the other hand, what are the tangible aspects we can observe for power? Again, power is an attribute of the state; but the *distribution* of power is a characteristic of the structure and it makes possible to understand the system as a whole. Power is, then, the assemblage of the capacities of a state, and its distribution allows one to define what the structure of the international system is like in a given period of time (K. Waltz, 1990). These characteristics are presented as follows:

> States, because they are in a self-help system, have to use their combined capabilities in order to serve their interests. The economic, military, and other capabilities of nations cannot be sectored and separately weighed. States are not placed in the top rank because they excel in one way or another. Their rank depends on how they score on all of the following items: **size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence**. States spend a lot of time estimating one another's capabilities, especially their abilities to do harm. States have different combinations of capabilities which are difficult to measure and compare, the more so since the weight to be assigned to different items changes with time. (…) Ranking states, however, does not require predicting their success in war or in other endeavors (K. N. Waltz, 1979, p. 131, emphasis added).

The definition provided by Waltz presents us with more tangible characteristics while allowing for the differences in historical periods assigned to each of them. Certainly, the size of the population in a moment of automated economy and non-populated warfare devices is less important than it used to be during the Napoleonic wars, for instance. But it does not change the basic fact that power, as a means to achieve a certain goal, and as the capacity to inflict damage is still present.

If having power, then, does not provide one with the certainty that their preferred outcomes will prevail, what is its use? Waltz proposed, at the end of his *Theory*, four advantages of ranking high in capabilities and, thus, being a pole of the system. The first one is that if power is a means, it is a means for maintaining one's autonomy. Second, it also provides one with wider margins of actions, augmenting one's "freedom of manoeuvre" (Mouritzen, 2022), "while leaving the outcomes of action uncertain" (K. N. Waltz, 1979, p. 194). Third, since power is conceived as the capacity to affect others more than be affected by them, higher capacities allow one to have wider ranges of actions when dealing with states with less capabilities. Last, by being a pole of the system, a state can act for the sake of this same system (K. N. Waltz, 1979, p. 194–195). It is this fourth characteristic, for instance, that allows for tasks of managing system-wide problems and offering solutions, even though at a lesser degree

than it is possible to do domestically. It works, so to say, as a by-product of the balance of power.

From the discussion, one retains that the distribution of power generates a certain kind of order that is derived from the expectations, constraints and incentives provided by the structure of the system. This is what I shall concentrate on the next section.

4 Order and violence in international politics

A marked difference between domestic and international realms is that they are structurally different. What does that mean? It means that their ordering principle is different and it fosters a series of further differences that end up accounting for the possibility of establishing centralized authority. Domestic realms we are informed, are hierarchically defined, fostering integration ("interdependence") between polities, that end up getting more and more specialized. Authority is centralized and no polity needs to worry with duplicating tasks because there is an orderer that provides it and that can enforce its decision though the monopoly of violence (K. Waltz, 1970).

Internationally, however, there is no centralized authority beyond the state. It means that each state must provide for their own needs, either in terms of security or otherwise. The capacity to perform certain tasks are bound to be duplicated, because anarchy fosters a system of self-help where the provider of certain goods for the state is the state itself. Think of national security: one state cannot provide for the security of others, because it is concerned with its own security; on the other hand, one cannot rely on other's security providence because it may at any time decide to stop providing it. This is what it means to be functionally indifferentiated: the units in an anarchical realm are expected to develop the same tasks, and so is the duplication of capabilities.

With each state deciding for itself how to deal with its internal and external affairs, that some might be more prone to the use of force is something expected. They can be aggressive due to domestic (first- or second-image) factors. They can also feel insecure about other states' intentions and decide to attack preemptively. Or they can develop defensive buildups that, for its turn, makes their peers insecure. All these factors can be immediate causes for the breakout of violence in an environment whose ordering principle, anarchy, acts as permissive cause. In anarchy, "there is no automatic harmony" (K. N. Waltz, 2001).

It does not mean, however, that the international system is a realm where violence does not stop. It means that war may at any time break out, because "that among particularities accidents will occur is not accidental but necessary. And this, in turn, is simply another way of

saying that in anarchy there is no automatic harmony" (K. N. Waltz, 2001, p. 182). The breakout of violence internationally, thus, does not mean that the international realm is devoid of order, for "the use of force, or the constant fear of its use, are not sufficient grounds for distinguishing international from domestic affairs. If the possible and the actual use of force mark both national and international orders, then no durable distinction between the two realms can be drawn in terms of the use or the nonuse of force. No human order is proof against violence" (K. N. Waltz, 1979, p. 103). This excerpt is important for two reasons.

First, it is possible to infer that, for Waltz, violence is a possible feature of politics. It does not mean it is normatively desirable, nor that it should be praised; rather, for analytical purposes, it is an unfortunate occurrence[5]. It manifests differently in domestic and international affairs, though[6]. With each unit deciding how to deal with its internal and external affairs, and with no central authority to avoid violence to breaking up, the system constrains units not to what is best for them in terms of costs and benefits, but pushes them towards what is necessary to be done in order to ensure survival.

The second reason is that the implication anarchy has for the states is that everyone's strategy depends on everyone else's (K. N. Waltz, 2001). For this reason, the structure of the system is not defined by the will of a certain state, but by the overall distribution of capabilities among all the units. The distribution of power leads to the formation of balances of power which, depending on the number of poles, brings along certain expectations. These expectations are the order one can expect to find internationally.

When comparing international systems (and he does so for multipolar and bipolar ones), Waltz comes up with the following patterns that are expected to be found structurally (Bittencourt, 2018; K. N. Waltz, 1979, 1988):

Multipolar structure	Bipolar structure
Interdependence (external balancing)	Autonomy (internal balancing)
Diffusion of threats	Certainty of threats
Confusion on who must address the threats	Certainty of who must address the threats

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[5] It should be stated that Waltz opens his *Man, the State, and war* by reminding that "asking who won a given war, someone has said is like asking who won the San Francisco earthquake. That in wars there is no victory but only varying degrees of defeat is a proposition that has gained increasing acceptance in the twentieth century" (K. N. Waltz, 2001, p. 1). Again, recalling Joseph MacKay (2022), the analytical concerns took precedence to normative ones for Waltz.

[6] For a description on the possibilities of the use of force and manifestation of violence internationally, see Waltz (1981).

By the moment of launching his theory of international politics, though, Waltz would not have clue that the cold war would end up with the dismissal of one of the poles, turning the system a unipolar one. Indeed, I prefer referring to unipolarity as a "structural configuration", since it is not a balancing system. Some years later, Waltz would refer to the basic dynamics of unipolarity as follows: "unbalanced power, whoever wields it, is a potential danger to others" (K. N. Waltz, 2000). Despite not saying much, this passage is very informative on the dynamics of unipolarity if one bears in mind the whole reading we have been doing on Waltz's thought.

Following this passage, the author explains that "the powerful state may, and the United States does, think of itself as acting for the sake of peace, justice and well-being in the world. These terms, however, are defined to the liking of the powerful, which may conflict with the preferences and interests of others. In international politics, overwhelming power repels and leads others to try to balance against it" (K. N. Waltz, 2000, p. 2).

As the discussion seems to lead us to understand, power is not a characteristic only of the poles of the system, but of all the units in it. The highest capabilities combined by states can position them in the poles of the system, but this is not *necessarily* something the states themselves intentionally do. While states can – and actually do – improve their capabilities, the distribution of it is a prerogative of the structure of the system.

We know until now that the system can be a very dysfunctional one, leading to policies that may not be the best for the units, either in the poles or not. However, structure is not *determinant*: even though it presents a range of action, it does not determine a state to choose one or another road of action. These choices are subject of internal deliberation and not of structural determination. This is a different way to say that the structure and the units interact internationally. Then, one question arises: by possessing some margins of action ("freedom of manoeuvre"), would it be possible for units to follow a certain path that not necessarily of balancing, but of internal improvement and international prestige? The answer is yes, this is perfectly possible. I argue in the next section that this is due to another component of politics: consensus.

5 Consensus in international politics

Conflicts are inherent to social interactions. Two individuals, states or other units can be in conflict with one another over a given path to follow or something both want. Conflict is in the relationship itself, and there are many ways to solve it. One way to solve conflicts is through violence (K. Waltz, 1971). In international politics, one state may be more prone to using violence to solve its conflicts than others. It may be because of its institutional characteristics,

or because of the personality of a leader – these are domestic, immediate causes for the outbreak of violence internationally. But other, less costly alternatives can exist.

That power is a feature that all states have is something that may have already been made clear in this text. The more capacities one state has, the more it can resist to a certain change one is trying to impose, or even to negotiate this change so that it can be more favourable to oneself. Negotiations are part of the political endeavor – and Waltz was not alien to it when proposing which capabilities to rank in order to make sense of the power of the state.

Political stability and competence are included in this ranking. Therefore, the margin of action for a state that is not in the pole can coincide with some modifications the pole(s) is trying to set. Or it can be a more advantageous outcome. Or, even, it can be a path the state chooses to follow out of ideology or other internal processes that allow it to happen. Whatever these are, they belong to the realm of domestic decision making of the states. But, at the same time, it is an interaction between domestic and structural politics. And all of these paths are related not to the use of violence, but through an alternative we can call consensus.

According to Wyn Grant (2003, p. 112), "Max Weber defined consensus as existing when expectations about the behaviour of others are realistic because the others will usually accept these expectations as valid for themselves, even without an explicit agreement". This definition works for the discussion presented so far, because, since the states are always taking into consideration the possibilities that they have in a certain structural set, and since power allows them with some margin of action, the expectations can be negotiated. Therefore, again bearing in mind Grant's definition, and bringing some inspiration from domestic cases, consensus can be understood also as "broad policy objectives", like the establishment of international institutions and organizations, or even the promotion of certain political values. While in multipolarity consensus was important including for the great powers because of the external balancing (and here, the broad policies would be narrowly linked to containing rivals), in unipolarity it becomes paramount. And this is so to (try to) avoid – or delay – the balancing against the unipole and, thus, keep the stability of the system[7]. Therefore, it becomes very evident Hansen's (2011) statement that in unipolarity, the political projects of the unipole tend to gain more salience. And this is so, I argue, because the structural incentive to the unipole is that it maintains its position unchallenged. Knowing it cannot count on the passivity of the other units, it must try through establishing consensus and acceptance of its position.

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[7] By stability I mean, following Waltz, the maintenance of the principle of anarchy and the number of poles of a certain period (K. N. Waltz, 1964, 1979).

Because of the absence of an authority to enforce agreements or to avoid aggression or defection, consensus in international politics is fragile. Nevertheless, it is one important way of making politics and to resist the dysfunctionalities the structure constrains one to. Consensus is not something observable only in unipolarity, but also in multi- and bipolarity. And, I must state, this consensus is based upon a material power (and force, to be more explicit). And this is a conclusion that theorists of order such as Ikenberry (2019), however detached from realism, also reach: a certain kind of order (or arrangement) between states is only possible upon a given hard structure of power.

That consensus is fragile and needs a material basis so it can work is not a limitation of this work, nor a novel fact. Indeed, the excerpt that opens up this paper, by Machiavelli, is a very good illustration of what has just been stated. The merit of the endeavor proposed here is framing it theoretically for international politics and the discussion of polarity.

As a matter of conclusion, I could try to add a table in order to summarize the structural expectations one can expect in unipolarity, in comparison to multi- and bipolarity:

Multipolar structure	Bipolar structure	Unipolar structure
Interdependence (external balancing)	Autonomy (internal balancing)	Autonomy (for the pole)
Diffusion of threats	Certainty of threats	Diffusion of lower threats for the pole
Confusion on who must address the threats	Certainty of who must address the threats	Certainty of who must address threats and crises

It is also possible to address how consensus is one link between the structure and the interacting units of the system:

Unipolar structure	Interacting units
Autonomy (for the pole)	Internal and external balancing (domestically decided and strategically swapped)
Diffusion of lower threats for the pole	Certainty that unbalanced power is a threat to all others
Certainty of who must address threats and crises	Certainty that the unipole is answering to threats and crises but also negotiating and helping

6 Conclusion

The question that gave origin to the argument developed in this paper is expressed in its title. So, after all the discussion presented, it is important to ask once again: can Waltz take us beyond the structure. And the answer is yes, he can.

Waltz's work, it was once said, was so important for the theoretical studies of international relations that all the discussion after him was but a footnote to his work (Dunne et al., 2013). Indeed, it can be so stated. Furthermore, many of the criticism set forth to his work did not take into consideration many aspects of his theoretical production. Therefore I believe that it is necessary a theoretical and conceptual scrutiny of his work in a vogue similar to that that MacKay (2022) conducted. By scrutinizing his conceptual work, much light can be shed to different aspects of theory.

The role of consensus in mitigating the effects of structure is one of them. Rather than being deterministic, I argue that, being units with power, states can act to mitigate the effect of the structure. However fragile consensus can be, and however linked to force it is, one cannot say that states are mere "billiard balls" navigating the inertia of structure. Therefore, international politics can be characterized as a power struggle, where power is a means to whatever ends states may have (even though survival is the logically immediate one).

The insight contained in this paper need still some refinement. It seems, at first glance, that the role of consensus, as proposed here, is less important in bipolar systems already established (as was the case of the order emerged in the after Second World War), then for multipolar and unipolar systems. How much it depends on how the order emerged and on how fierce the competition in the previous order was is still to be discussed. Furthermore, the role of control and dominance by great powers can also foster or minimize the possibilities of establishing consensus in some states – think of the role of regional rivalry, for instance.

One thing, however, seem to be certain from the established framework: it is not possible to analyze international politics only through the lens of violence, however important it is, nor is it possible to assume passivity of the units populating the international system. How the order and arrangements emerge over the basis of force and the possibility of outbreak of violence is an interesting avenue that opens and that demonstrate how active international politics can be, despite the structural stillness that one may focus on.

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