

## CHAPTER ONE

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## Introduction

TERRORISM, NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION, and regional instability currently top the list of international dangers facing the United States largely by default. Until recently, war with other major powers posed the greatest danger, with the Cold War Soviet threat providing the most recent and vivid example. Now, however, the prospect of war between the globe's major powers is widely viewed as insignificant, and even competition between these powers is muted. The contrast to the previous century is stark, with concern about major-power war dropped from its historical pride of place. While some observers worry that a growing China may eventually challenge U.S. security, most see at worst a distant threat, dwarfed by concerns about economic competition. Conflict within Europe is seen as still more unlikely, a past danger, not a current or future one.

A future of peaceful and relatively tranquil major-power relations would have significant implications for U.S. policy. If conflict is sufficiently unlikely, the United States should give lower priority to maintaining its unipolar military advantages and global reach, and higher priority to increasing its economic growth and prosperity. If confident that good political relations will continue, the United States would be free to adopt otherwise provocative foreign policies—knowing that the United States was not a threat, major powers would neither respond aggressively nor begin to question the United States' benign motives. If not threatened by other technologically advanced countries, the United States should invest less in cutting-edge military forces and possibly give greater weight to forces designed for regional intervention and counterterrorism.

Assessing whether future major-power relations are, in fact, likely to be peaceful, and how if at all this depends on U.S. strategy, requires us to address the most basic questions of international relations (IR) theory. What is the impact of the international system on states' behavior? More specifically, does the combination of international anarchy and states' military requirements consistently favor competitive policies? Or instead, can a state's concern about its military capabilities sometimes make cooperation its best option? What is the impact of states' motives and goals on their behavior? Is it the international system and the insecurity that it generates, or instead the nonsecurity motives of "greedy" states, that

drives international competition? What is the impact of states' political relations on the likelihood of conflict? More specifically, how does states' information about other states' motives influence the likelihood of competition and conflict? Does uncertainty about others' motives require states to adopt competitive policies?

Although extensively studied, these questions require further investigation. None of the major theories of international relations provides a framework for building an integrated, balanced answer to these questions. Instead they tend to emphasize one variable at the expense of others. As a result, their arguments overlook important aspects of international relations and fail to capture interactions between factors that should significantly influence states' decisions. Moreover, some prominent theories suffer deductive flaws that underpin key disagreements about the nature of international politics.

## THE THEORY

### *Type of Theory*

The theory developed in this book is a rationalist, strategic choice theory. It takes the perspective of a state that faces an international environment that presents constraints and opportunities. The international environment is assumed to be anarchic, that is, it lacks an international authority that can enforce agreements and prevent the use of force. The state is assumed to be rational—it makes purposive decisions that take reasonable account of its interests, and the international constraints and opportunities that it faces.

The theory analyzes the strategies a state *should* choose—which is essentially the same as assuming that the state is a rational actor. I focus on cases in which the opposing state is also rational (and in which the state accurately believes this is the case). Evaluation of this rational-state versus rational-state interaction lies at the heart of the entire neorealist/structural-realist international relations theory project, as the major works incorporate either a rationality assumption or an evolutionary mechanism that selects out states that behavior irrationally. Although more general, a substantial portion of the theory I develop in this book can therefore be viewed as working within this realist tradition.

I am, however, skeptical that as a general rule states actually act rationally. Over the past few decades, scholars have developed a range of theories—including domestic politics arguments that focus on state structure and regime type, organizations and bureaucratic politics, and theories of individual decision making that focus on cognitive misperceptions—to explain states' decisions that were seriously flawed. This scholarship pro-

vides strong grounds for concluding that states often fail to act rationally. When states do act rationally, my theory will succeed in explaining much of their behavior. In contrast, when states choose suboptimal policies, the theory will do less well at explaining past state behavior but will remain an essential building block of a more complete IR theory. The rational theory would be necessary to tell us how well a state can do—for example, how much security it can achieve—in the face of the constraints and opportunities imposed by the international system. In other words, understanding the impact of the international system on states' behavior requires a rational theory, even if states do not always act in line with its constraints.

In addition, my theory provides a rational baseline against which actual state behavior can be evaluated. We cannot evaluate whether a state is acting rationally/optimally without such a theory. Bad outcomes—for example, arms races and war—could simply reflect a dangerous international security environment, not flawed policy decisions. Therefore, theories of suboptimal behavior, whether built on arguments about domestic politics or errors in individual decision making, rely at least implicitly on a rational theory. Moreover, if the opposing state is believed to be a rational actor, the theory can provide policy guidance, prescribing strategies based on the state's understanding of its international environment.

### *Independent Variables*

To adequately depict the state and the international situation it faces, I identify three types of variables that are essential to include in an evaluation of states' security policy choices. The decision-making state is characterized in terms of its *motives*. Motives embody what a state values, capturing its fundamental interests and goals. Types of states are distinguished by their motives. The state's international environment is characterized by two types of variables that can significantly influence the opportunities and constraints the state will face for using military force to achieve its goals. *Material* variables largely determine the military capabilities a state can build. *Information* variables, both what the state knows about its adversary's motives and what it believes its adversary knows about its own motives, influence the reactions a state anticipates to its actions and, therefore, the strategy it should choose.

Basic intuition suggests that each of these types of variables—motives, material potential, and information about others' motives—should influence a state's choice of strategy. Motives translate into the benefits states see in maintaining the territory they possess and in acquiring more, and therefore can influence their strategies. A state that is satisfied with the status quo is less likely to see benefits in changing it and, therefore, is less

likely than a dissatisfied state to try to change it. More precisely, a state that is motivated only by security, and therefore would accept the status quo if secure within it, should be more inclined toward cooperative policies than a state with more ambitious motives. Nevertheless, under certain conditions a security-seeking state will value changing the status quo—if more territory would increase its ability to defend itself—and value war—if fighting would reduce its adversary's current or future ability to attack it. In contrast, states with the more ambitious motives, which I term “greedy” states, are fundamentally dissatisfied with the status quo, desiring additional territory even when it is not required for security.<sup>1</sup> These nonsecurity goals result in a fundamental conflict of interests that makes competition the only strategy with which a greedy state can achieve its goals.

Material variables should influence a state's choice of strategy because they influence its ability to acquire military capabilities, which in turn influence the outcome of efforts to deter and coerce, and to defend and attack. A state must consider not only the military forces it can build, but also the forces its adversary can build in reaction; the overall result of both states building determines a state's military capability, that is, its ability to perform relevant military missions. A state that is more powerful than its potential adversary—that is, has more resources—is more capable of winning an arms race and, if fully armed, winning a war. Consequently, a more powerful state is more willing to adopt these competitive policies. Closely related, power should influence a state's assessment of the danger posed by potential adversaries—more powerful adversaries have greater potential to damage and conquer it. During the Cold War, the U.S. decision to defend against and compete with the Soviet Union, which was the only other superpower, partly reflected these basic power considerations. Current concerns about a future China largely reflect its growing power.

In addition to power, a state's ability to acquire military capabilities also depends on the relative effectiveness of forces deployed to defend (hold) territory compared to forces deployed to attack (take) territory, a comparison that is captured in what is termed the “offense-defense balance.” When defense is easier than offense, equally powerful states should have better prospects for defending against each other and be more secure. If the advantage of defense is large, even a much weaker state should be able to effectively defend itself, which could change the strategies of both the more and less powerful states. Nuclear weapons are the clearest example of a technology that provides a large advantage to defense: at

<sup>1</sup> A state can be both security seeking and greedy; I explore this issue in chapter 2. I will often refer to these mixed-type states simply as greedy.

least for major powers, the nuclear forces required for deterrence by retaliation are much less expensive than the forces required to deny these retaliatory capabilities, which would be required for offense. This fact lies at the heart of the theory of the nuclear revolution, which explains why nuclear weapons should lead to a reduction in military competition between the major powers, an increase in their security, and a reduction in conflict and war.<sup>2</sup>

A state's options will also be constrained by the nature of military capabilities. A state that can deploy forces that are good for defending, but are of little value for attacking, has different options than if the available forces are equally good for both types of military missions. In the former case, when offense and defense are "distinguishable," a state can defend itself without threatening an opposing state's ability to defend itself, while in the latter it cannot. Offense-defense distinguishability has significant implications for states' political relations, as well as their military capabilities. Consequently, the material situation a state faces depends on both of these offense-defense variables, as well as power.

Finally, a state's information about its adversary's motives should affect its choice of strategy because this information influences its expectations about the adversary's behavior, including reactions to its own policies. A state that believes it likely faces a security seeker should find defending itself to be less necessary and valuable than if the adversary is believed to be a greedy state because the greedy state would be more determined than a security seeker to alter the status quo. Closely related, beliefs about others' motives influence the proper balance between cooperative and competitive strategies. When the adversary is likely motivated by security, the state should anticipate that cooperation is more likely to be reciprocated than when the adversary is likely motivated by greed and, therefore, has larger incentives to take advantage of the state's restraint. When uncertain about the adversary's type, the state needs to balance the merits of cooperative and competitive strategies. Post-Cold War reactions to U.S. power are most easily understood in terms of other states' beliefs about U.S. motives. The United States' tremendous advantage in material power has generated little if any reaction from other major powers, certainly from European powers, at least largely because they believe the United States will respect the major-power status quo.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the United States' understanding of the danger posed by opposing nuclear forces is heavily colored by its assessment of others' motives—small Iranian or North Korean forces generate great concern, as such states are

<sup>2</sup>Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup>Kier A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World Is Not Pushing Back," *International Security* 30, 1 (Summer 2005): 109–130.

viewed as driven by nonsecurity interests, while much larger Russian forces now receive little attention because Russia is believed to be motivated by security alone.

While the intuitive case for including all three types of variables in the theory is strong, whether they should influence a state's strategy is a different question. It is possible one or more of the variables do not matter, that is, variation should not lead the state to choose different policies. Deciding which variables to include is therefore essential for starting to build a theory, but it is only a beginning. To answer the question of which variables should influence a state's policy, we require a deductive theory. Whether certain variables have substantial influence and others have little or no influence will be a finding of the theory. In contrast to this approach, influential strands of international relations theory have been built on the assumption that the impact of a single type of variable far exceeds that of all others. Most prominent is Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, which focuses almost exclusively on material power and argues that the international environment created by the distribution of power leads states to adopt competitive policies, even when they are motivated only by security.<sup>4</sup> Largely in response to this material emphasis, Alexander Wendt, a structural constructivist, focuses on ideas, which for him include information about others' motives, in making possible cooperation as well as competition.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars have emphasized the role of states' nonsecurity (greedy) motives as the key source of international competition.<sup>6</sup>

### *Deductive Arguments*

The deductive theory that I develop demonstrates that all three types of variables should in fact influence a state's policy, and that in general one type of variable is not more important—should not play a greater role—in determining a state's strategy than the others. Furthermore, a state's strategy should often depend on the combined effect of different variables. The result is greater complexity and less parsimony than theories that argue for the importance of a single type of variable. The price is warranted, however, because it turns out that theories that emphasize one

<sup>4</sup>Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979). John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), also emphasizes the importance of material variables; while dealing explicitly with uncertainty about motives, he argues it should not influence variation in states' choices.

<sup>5</sup>Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), who emphasizes motives but also gives weight to power in determining states' strategies.

of these types of variables at the expense of the others risk miscalculating states' options and prescribing the wrong policies, under a range of conditions. Moreover, by starting with a more general framework, we can see that battles between theories that emphasize one type of variable or another have been unproductive or misleading because they fail to provide an adequate deductive foundation for reaching their conclusions.

To analyze the impact of the international environment on a state's behavior, I focus on the decisions facing security seekers. If these states choose competitive policies, the international environment must be the source of this competition because such states lack fundamental conflicts of interest that could drive arms races, opposing alliances, crises, and war. I find that although competition is a security seeker's best choice under some conditions, cooperation is preferable under other conditions. The international system does *not* consistently favor competitive policies. Variation reflects both material and information variables. Defense advantage reduces pressures for competition by making effective deterrent forces relatively easy to acquire, creating the possibility that two states can simultaneously possess the ability to perform the military missions required for their security. Information that the adversary is likely to be a security seeker can make cooperation a state's best strategy for two reinforcing reasons: cooperating is less risky because it is more likely to be reciprocated; and cooperation is more valuable because restraint can lead the adversary to conclude that the state is more likely to be a security seeker, which increases the adversary's security, which in turn increases the state's own security. The state's strategy should depend on the combined impact of material and information variables. For example, there are cases in which material conditions would favor competition, but a high probability that the opposing state is a security seeker makes cooperation a state's best option.

At the core of competition between security seekers is insecurity, which can create incentives for states to build up arms to acquire military advantages and to deny them to potential adversaries, and to weaken opposing states by taking their territory and destroying their military forces. As a result, a security seeker should be interested not only in being capable of defending itself, but also in increasing its adversary's security. The state can do this by reducing or forgoing the military forces it can use for attack, thereby making its adversary less vulnerable. The state can also increase its adversary's security by taking actions that convince the adversary that the state is more likely to be a security seeker and therefore less likely to attack it. This requires the state to send a "costly signal"—to take an action that a security seeker would be more likely to take than would a greedy state because the action would be less costly for a security seeker. An effective costly signal convinces the adversary to revise its information about the state, reducing its estimate that the state

is greedy, thereby increasing the willingness of an opposing security seeker to cooperate.

States should not, however, always find that policies designed to increase their adversary's security are their best option. Increasing the adversary's security will sometimes require the state to increase its own vulnerability to attack and will therefore be too risky. This trade-off occurs when the state faces a security dilemma. The security dilemma is usually described as a situation in which the measures that a state takes to increase its own security reduce its adversary's. Closely related, a state faces a security dilemma when the actions it would take to increase its adversary's security would increase its own vulnerability to attack and, therefore, might decrease its own security. This increased military vulnerability is a barrier both to reducing its adversary's military vulnerability and to signaling its benign motives, and it can therefore lead a security-seeking state to pursue a competitive strategy instead of a cooperative one. The security dilemma lies at the core of competition between security seekers: when the security dilemma is mild or ceases to exist, avoiding competition should be relatively easy.

The magnitude of the security dilemma depends on both material and information variables. The standard formulation focuses on material variables—the offense-defense balance and offense-defense distinguishability. For example, when offense and defense can be distinguished, a state can choose not to acquire offensive capabilities while deploying defensive ones, thereby reducing the adversary's vulnerability without increasing its own, and signaling its benign motives because a greedy state would be less willing to forgo offense. When offense has a large advantage, security seekers face large incentives to adopt competitive military strategies that resemble those that greedy states would choose.<sup>7</sup>

However, although they have received relatively little attention in this context, information variables also influence the severity of the security dilemma.<sup>8</sup> If both states are sure that the opposing state is a security seeker (and if both also know that the other knows this), the security dilemma is eliminated and neither state has incentives to compete, even if

<sup>7</sup>Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, 1 (January 1978): 167–214; Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics* 5, 1 (October 1997): 171–201; and Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), chap. 6.

<sup>8</sup>The key exception is Andrew H. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), who develops game-theoretic models of the effect of these information variables. In contrast, costly signaling has received extensive attention. The information variables I am focusing on here refer to the information that a state has prior to a given strategic interaction, not to signaling, which is designed to lead its adversary to revise the information it has about the state's motives as a result of the interaction.

material conditions would otherwise fuel insecurity and competition. And certainty is not required to moderate the dilemma—under uncertainty, higher estimates that the adversary is a security seeker make cooperation less risky, increasing the range of material conditions under which a state can afford to adopt strategies that would reduce the adversary's insecurity. As a result, the information that states have at the beginning of their interaction can determine the future path of their political relationship. A state that believes that its adversary is likely to be greedy should be more inclined to adopt competitive policies, which could signal malign motives and fuel a negative spiral in political relations. Similarly, initial beliefs that the adversary is likely to be a security seeker can support policies that set in motion a positive political spiral. A history of international conflict, if it informs states' beliefs about their adversaries' motives and intentions, will therefore create a tendency toward competition; likewise, a history of international peace will fuel cooperation.

In short, the anarchic international environment does not create a general tendency toward competition: under some conditions it can fuel rational competition between states that lack a fundamental conflict of interests; under other conditions, the international environment can encourage cooperation between such states. Both information and material variables play important roles in establishing the international environment, and in turn the security dilemma, that a state faces, and they can determine the relative merits of cooperation and competition. When the security dilemma is severe, states will be insecure and competition may be less risky than cooperation. In contrast, a mild security dilemma can moderate or eliminate pressures for competition, making cooperation a state's best strategy. Depending on their values, both information and material variables can favor cooperative or competitive strategies; neither type of variable consistently overshadows the other and a state's strategy should often reflect their combined impact.

The end of the Cold War provides a useful illustration of the combined effect of material and information variables, and the limitations of theories that envision the international environment more narrowly. The Cold War ended without a reduction in the Soviet strategic nuclear capabilities that were commonly viewed as the most dangerous component of the Soviet military machine. The Soviet Union retained not only forces capable of annihilating the United States many times over, but also the advanced forces required to destroy much of the U.S. nuclear force, which had generated great concern, particularly among American hard-liners, during the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, although the Soviet Union did announce significant reductions of its conventional forces in Europe, these reductions had only begun and were reversible. Yet arguably the Cold War was over by the spring of 1989 and almost certainly by the end

of that year, following the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe but preceding the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup> U.S. security increased disproportionately relative both to the reductions in Soviet deployed forces and to Soviet military potential.

This increase in U.S. security was driven largely by the changed U.S. understanding of Soviet motives.<sup>10</sup> During the Cold War, the vast majority of American experts believed the Soviet Union was dangerous, but there was not a consensus on the reason. Views of Soviet motives ranged from pure security seeking to high levels of greed (nonsecurity motives) and included the view that the Soviets had mixed motives (security plus greed). Even those who believed that Soviet motives were likely to be benign saw danger due to Soviet insecurity and the competition they believed it fueled. U.S. policy reflected a mix of these views, which shifted across time during the Cold War. In contrast, by the end of the Cold War a strong consensus had emerged that the Soviet Union was unlikely to be greedy. The result was a dramatic increase in U.S. security that reflected its new security environment. In response, the United States reduced its force posture, including the cancellation of nuclear modernization programs, deep reductions in theater nuclear forces, significant decreases in U.S. conventional forces in Europe, and large cuts in its overall conventional force structure.<sup>11</sup> The United States and NATO continued to rely on nuclear deterrence, but now the previously most worrisome and risky Soviet attacks were considered implausible, which eased U.S. force requirements; nuclear weapons became a type of insurance policy against future unpredictability. Theories that focus only on material variables face a daunting challenge in explaining the U.S. understanding of its increased security at the end of the Cold War and the policies it adopted as a result.

At the same time, a theory that focuses only on information misses a key piece of the explanation for Soviet decisions that led the United States to revise its assessment of Soviet motives. Existing material conditions enabled the Soviet Union to adopt a number of policies that would likely have been too risky under different material conditions. Specifically, nu-

<sup>9</sup> Making the case for the earlier date is John Mueller, "What Was the Cold War About? Evidence from Its Ending," *Political Science Quarterly* 119, 4 (2004–05): 606–631.

<sup>10</sup> On the key events and their impact, see Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transformation: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994); Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), esp. part 4; Richard K. Herrmann and Richard Ned Lebow, eds., *Ending the Cold War: Interpretations, Causation, and the Study of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, chap. 8.

<sup>11</sup> The United States did, however, pursue a number of potentially provocative policies in subsequent years, including NATO expansion and withdrawal from the ABM Treaty.

clear weapons provided the Soviet Union with a highly effective deterrent capability for protecting its homeland. This reduced the value the Soviet Union placed on maintaining Eastern Europe as a buffer against Western attack, which in turn reduced the risks of accepting some increased weakness in its conventional forces.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the Soviet Union was able to signal its security motives without having to accept large risks in its ability to deter attacks against its homeland.<sup>13</sup> In addition, material considerations played an important role in U.S. decisions, although this may be less obvious because such considerations were more in the background. Nuclear weapons reduced how confident the United States had to be that Soviet motives were benign; if an increasingly unlikely dangerous scenario nevertheless occurred, the United States retained formidable deterrent, and potentially coercive, capabilities. As a result, the case for not reciprocating restraint in deployed military forces and instead actively pursuing military advantages was weak.

In addition to the international environment, a state's own motives can influence its choice of strategy. All else being equal, a greedy state that also values its security will place greater value on additional territory than will a comparable pure security seeker and, therefore, should be willing to run greater risks and accept greater costs to acquire it. As a result, for a given international environment, this greedy state will have larger incentives for adopting a competitive strategy than will the pure security seeker. For greedy states, material variables are more important as a barrier to expansion, and less important as a source of insecurity. Although greedy states will adopt competitive policies under a wider range of conditions, material conditions that promise to make competi-

<sup>12</sup>This argument is made by Kenneth A. Oye, "Explaining the End of the Cold War: Morphological and Behavioral Adaptations to the Nuclear Peace," in Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen, eds., *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

<sup>13</sup>This leaves open the question of why the Soviet Union did not pursue these policies earlier. Three strands of argument, all of which lie outside the bounds of the strategic-choice theory but influence its variables, contribute to the answer: (1) New ideas about the security dilemma and defensive defense were accepted by the new Soviet leaders, who then adopted more cooperative and defensive policies. See Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces*; and Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Ideas Do Not Float Freely: Transnational Coalitions, Domestic Structures, and the End of the Cold War," *International Organization* 48, 2 (Spring 1994): 185–214. This line of argument implicitly includes an important material dimension because it requires that the Soviet Union had military options that could signal information without being too risky. (2) Severe economic decline required Soviet leaders to find conciliatory policies; Soviet leaders then adopted ideas to support this shift. See Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case," *International Security* 25, 3 (Winter 2000/01): 5–53. And (3) Soviet motives and preferences changed, providing the foundation for policies that made this clear; see text below and note 15.

tion ineffective should still lead to restraint. Moreover, for greedy states that also value security (which seems likely to be most all greedy states), there are conditions under which they should choose cooperative policies that reduce their ability to attack because these policies also reduce their military vulnerability.

The paradigmatic example of a greedy state is Hitler's Germany. Hitler's unrelenting pursuit of hegemony in Europe is hard to explain as driven by insecurity, but relatively easy to explain as a reflection of the nonsecurity value he placed on expansion, which supported a risky set of military and diplomatic policies. A number of material considerations contributed to Hitler's successes, but these created permissive conditions, not the deep source of competitive expansionist policies.<sup>14</sup> Depending on one's understanding of the Cold War, it too can require including states' motives as part of the explanation. As sketched above, explanations that focus on the international environment can explain much about the end of the Cold War. However, hard-line and deterrence model arguments that emphasize greedy Soviet motives as the source of the Cold War reject these explanations as at best incomplete and giving too much weight to the security dilemma.<sup>15</sup> Given this reading of the Cold War, changed Soviet motives, from greed to security seeking, become a central element of the explanation.<sup>16</sup>

The theoretical importance of greedy states is increased by my conclusion that the international system does not consistently favor competition. If the international system did consistently make competition a security seeker's best option, greedy states (including states that have a mix of greedy and security-seeking motives) would matter relatively little. Across the full range of international conditions, both security seekers and greedy states would adopt competitive policies. From a theoretical perspective, focusing on greedy states would be less important. The sim-

<sup>14</sup>For an assessment of the debate over Germany foreign policy, see Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems of Perspective and Interpretation*, 4th ed. (London: Arnold, 2000), esp. chap. 6; on the role of Germany's revisionist motives in combination with polarity, see Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*; on perceptions of the offense-defense balance generating alliance behavior that created opportunities, see Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chained Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization* 44, 2 (1990): 137–168. For dissenting views and more extensive discussion, see chapter 8.

<sup>15</sup>One the deterrence model and the opposing explanation, the spiral model, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), chap. 3; and Charles L. Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models," *World Politics* 44, 4 (July 1992): 497–538.

<sup>16</sup>Reviewing work on the impact of ideological changes on Soviet policy is Jeremi Suri, "Explaining the End of the Cold War: A New Historical Consensus?," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4, 4 (Fall 2002): 60–92, esp. 73–81.

pler, more purely structural theory would offer greater parsimony at little cost. This is essentially the claim that Waltz's structural realism makes. However, because the theory developed here shows that security seekers should pursue cooperative policies under a range of material and information conditions, greedy states gain theoretical importance because they might prefer competition when a security seeker facing the same international environment should choose cooperation.

### *Relationship to the Realisms*

A substantial body of international relations theory grapples with the questions I address in this book and explores them from a broadly similar perspective. Taking a moment here to place my book in that literature helps to clarify its goals and define its contributions.

In many ways, my theory is the logical extension of Waltz's structural realism. The strategic-choice perspective has much in common with Waltz's structural approach, which envisions states as largely separate from the international environment they face and analyzes their options for achieving their goals in light of the constraints their international environment imposes.

In the end, however, my theory is radically different from Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*: it adds material and information variables that are essential for characterizing the state and its international environment; identifies missing types of interaction—most importantly, signaling; corrects flawed deductions; and reaches quite different conditional conclusions about the prospects for international cooperation. Although Waltz's structural realism did a great deal to advance IR theory, his characterization of the international environment is too thin, focusing solely on power. In combination with deductive flaws, this limitation undermines what is probably Waltz's key conclusion—his contention that international anarchy generates a strong general tendency for international politics to be competitive.

Defensive realism corrects many of the limitations of Waltz's structural realism and can be viewed as a way station along the route to the full theory I develop in this book. Defensive realism puts the security dilemma at the center of its explanation for international competition, adds offense-defense variables that explain variation in the security dilemma, and explains that states can provide information about their motives by employing costly signals. It is important to note here that I am using "defensive realism" more narrowly than has become common in the literature. Defensive realism is often used to refer to a theory that combines the rational theory that flows from the security dilemma with unit-level theories that are designed to explain states' suboptimal policies. In contrast, I

am using defensive realism to refer only to the rational security-dilemma foundation.

Although the two theories share many key similarities, my theory is significantly more general and complete than is defensive realism. It broadens defensive realism by including variation in states' types and by making more explicit the importance of information that states have about others' motives when they choose their strategy. Defensive realism assumes that the state making a decision is a security seeker, whereas the theory developed here allows for variation in the state's motives, addressing both security seekers and greedy states. And although defensive realism does suggest the importance of information about the adversary's motives, by the significance it places on the signaling of information, it is silent about the importance of the presignaling information that partially defines the state's international environment. As a result, although defensive realism makes prescriptions that match my theory's over much of its range, it yields divergent prescriptions when information or motives play a decisive role. For example, when a state is not militarily secure but believes that its potential adversary is highly likely to be a security seeker, I find greater opportunities for restraint and cooperation than defensive realism does.

My theory can also be understood partly as integrating defensive realism with neoclassical realism, which can be defined by its focus on the decisions of greedy states.<sup>17</sup> Neoclassical realism, however, in contrast to my theory finds that rational security seekers should be able to avoid competition, which leads to its emphasis on the central role of greedy states. My theory provides a more balanced picture of how both the international environment and a state's motives should influence its decisions between cooperative and competitive strategies.

Whether my theory is a realist theory is open to debate, at least over terminology. Letting the motives of the decision-making state vary—that is, including greedy states as well as security seekers—puts the theory clearly beyond the boundaries of structural realism, including defensive realism, but might leave it within the larger realist family. Whether a realist theory can include information about motives as a defining component of a state's international environment is more controversial. Realist theories are frequently described as defining the international environment entirely in terms of material variables. I would emphasize, however, that information about motives emerges as an organic element of the

<sup>17</sup>As with defensive realism, neoclassical realism has a rational foundation that has been combined with a variety of unit-level explanations of states' limitations. My discussion here refers only to the rational foundation; chapter 6 provides a fuller discussion.

theory, not simply as an additional variable: the security dilemma is necessary to generate competition between rational security seekers; uncertainty about states' motives is an essential element of the security dilemma; and variation in this information leads to variation in states' preferred strategies. From this perspective, therefore, there is not a logically coherent structural-realist theory that does not include information about states' motives as a key variable. Another common characterization of realism focuses on its findings that the international system is highly competitive and that institutions can play little role in moderating this competition. If realism must have these features, my theory clearly is not a realist theory. However, given its realist lineage and, closely related, the extent to which its analysis begins from many similar premises, one could argue that my theory must be realist. In the end this will be a debate over terminology, not the substance of the analysis of rational international politics that this book provides.

#### STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND SUMMARY OF ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

Chapters 2 and 3 develop the points summarized above at greater length. Chapter 2 describes the type of theory I am building, lays out the theory's key assumptions, and explores its variables in some detail. It locates the theory as the middle layer of a more complete explanatory theory: a preceding layer would explain the inputs to the strategic choice theory; a following layer would explain the types and sources of suboptimality that have led states to deviate from the theory's rational baseline. Although these types of theory are frequently characterized as competitors to the strategic choice theory, I view both these other layers as complementary.

Chapter 3 presents the core of the deductive portion of the theory. It begins by explaining why states should not always cooperate. The chapter next sketches why states should not always compete and compares this argument with the divergent one offered by standard structural-realist arguments (Waltz and what is termed "offensive realism"). The chapter then examines the ways in which a state's choice of strategy can influence its political relationship with an opposing state, exploring both how cooperative policies can serve as costly signals that provide reassurance and generate positive spirals, and how competitive policies can convince a rational state that its adversary is more likely to have greedy motives and generate a negative spiral. The following section looks in some detail at how material and information variables combine to influence the magnitude and nature of the security dilemma and a state's strategy. The

chapter ends with a discussion of the importance and decisions of greedy states.

Chapter 4 adds breadth and depth to the theory by exploring a range of simplifications and extensions. The chapter begins by exploring a number of simplifications that were useful for building the core theory but now deserve further attention. The theory has characterized states in terms of their type, either security seeking or greedy (or mixed). However, variation within these types is also possible and important. The first section explores how variation in the value that security seekers place on protecting their territory can influence states' interaction. If the adversary is uncertain about this value, the state will want to communicate its resolve to protect its interests, which can require competitive policies. Competitive policies can serve as a costly signal of resolve because states that place greater value on protecting their interests are willing to invest more in military forces, which is costly because they have to forgo more consumption. This incentive for adopting competitive policies is a defining feature of the deterrence model and an element of the security dilemma, adding to the already complicated balance that a security seeker must make between cooperative and competitive policies. The next section addresses variation within greedy states, including variation in both the extent of a state's greediness and the scope of its aims—whether they are limited or unlimited. Following sections relax other simplifications. The theory has emphasized the importance of uncertainty about information variables but has not addressed the implications of uncertainty about material variables—power and the offense-defense balance. And the theory has characterized the state's material environment in static terms, not tackling the implications of a changing material environment, in which, for example, a state's power is declining. These sections explore the implications of moving beyond these simplifications.

The chapter then addresses two major topics—war and international institutions. The theory has been cast in terms of the broad categories of cooperation and competition, with most of the more specific arguments focused on states' decisions between arming and restraint, ranging from formal arms control to unilateral restraint. This section begins by addressing a different type of outcome—war. It draws on arguments from offense-defense theory and from formal theories of bargaining and war to explore how the probability of war varies with my theory's key variables. In line with basic intuition, war becomes more likely when the state is greedier and when the offense-defense balance favors offense. The impact of power is less clear, with different formal models and assumptions providing different results; probably the most convincing result is that the probability of war increases as the gap increases between a state's power and its share of benefits in the existing status quo.

However, these formal models have not yet captured some key features of the theory developed here, including those that have their roots in neorealism and security-dilemma theories, and these limitations could undermine their results. Prominent formal models take the value of territory as exogenous; in contrast, my theory understands the value that a security seeker places on territory to be endogenous, reflecting the international situation that it faces. States that are more secure place less value on acquiring additional territory (and, more generally, on weakening their adversary). Once this perspective is built into the argument, there are conditions under which the probability of war should decrease as a state's power increases. These bargaining models have also not adequately included information about motives. Following their basic setup, including uncertainty about the adversary's type produces a somewhat counterintuitive result—higher estimates that the adversary is greedy could result in a lower probability of war because the higher probability leads the state to make larger concessions. However, broadening the perspective of this analysis to more fully capture the key features of my theory draws this result into question. High estimates that the adversary is greedy would influence not only crisis bargaining, but also the value the state places on territory, the military doctrine that it chooses during peacetime, and the military and political interactions that precede a crisis. All of these tend to push in the opposite direction, with the probability of war increasing with estimates that the opposing state is greedy. One broad point that emerges is that the key bargaining models of war have not yet captured many of the central key features of the theory developed here. This is somewhat surprising given that many of these arguments have roots in neorealist and security dilemma theories, which the bargaining models are often considered to reflect.

On institutions, my theory finds that they “matter” but does not establish a central role for them that is comparable to the one identified by neo-institutionalism. The theory understands institutions as primarily endogenous, reflecting states' motives and their international environment, and providing states with a means for achieving their goals. They are first and foremost policy choices to be evaluated. As a result, the theory finds the deep sources of international security cooperation in the states' international environment and their motives, not in the international security institutions that they create.

Chapter 5 evaluates some of the key arguments that challenge my theory's findings. Many of these arguments hold that the theory underestimates the barriers to cooperation because, among other reasons, (1) the possibility of cheating on agreements makes cooperation in the security domain too risky because falling behind can have dire consequences; (2) states' concern about how the relative gains of cooperation are distrib-

uted adds significantly to their reluctance to engage in security cooperation; (3) a host of problems with the offense-defense variables—including the vagueness of key concepts, the indistinguishability of offense and defense, and the difficulty of measuring the balance—undermines their utility, thereby eliminating the possibilities they create for cooperation; and (4) states should assume the worst about others' motives, which eliminates their incentives to cooperate by signaling benign motives and leads them to focus solely on others' capabilities. This chapter shows that at a minimum each of these critiques suffers important shortcomings, and consequently they do not require modifying the theory's central findings.

Chapter 6 explores how the theory I have developed compares with other leading IR theories that address essentially the same questions in broadly similar ways. These include Waltz's structural realism, offensive realism, defensive realism, neoclassical realism, and neo-institutionalism. The chapter also compares the theory with structural constructivism—although different in significant ways, the questions the two theories address, the arguments they employ, and the answers they offer overlap more than is generally recognized. These comparisons are valuable for better understanding both the theory itself and some of its strengths relative to these other IR theories.

Because I have already commented briefly on most of these theories in the preceding section, here I only summarize my arguments about offensive realism and structural constructivism. The theory finds serious problems with offensive realism, which holds that the international system is still more competitive than does Waltz's structural realism. John Mearsheimer argues that states face uncertainty about others' intentions and, given the pressures created by international anarchy, should therefore assume the worst about them.<sup>18</sup> Given this decision-making criterion, he concludes that states should maximize their power as a means of increasing their security. The problem is that states should not, as a general rule, employ worst-case assumptions—doing so means always forgoing the potential benefits of cooperating with a security seeker, including when the state believes the opposing state is likely to be one. In effect, assuming the worst requires the state to ignore a key aspect of the security dilemma—the costs and risks of arming—while giving undue weight to the benefits of competition.

Alexander Wendt's structural constructivism, although different from my theory in important respects, shares some striking similarities. This is surprising given the supposed gap between constructivism and realism, with my theory having deep roots in the latter. Constructivists describe their theory as ideational, which is a broad category that includes infor-

<sup>18</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 45.

mation (as well as norms and identities) in contrast to material, which is their characterization of realism. However, the rationalist theory I develop emphasizes that information about motives is an essential component of a strategic choice theory. Consequently, the material versus ideational distinction fails to characterize the difference between these theories. In addition, my theory emphasizes the possibility that interaction can lead states to revise their estimates of each others' motives and thereby reduce insecurity and competition, which parallels key arguments in Wendt. Moreover, in line with one of Wendt's central claims, the theory finds that a wide range of state behaviors is possible under anarchy; in contrast to Waltz, anarchy does not have a single logic. Although narrower in significant ways than Wendt's, my theory has important advantages, including providing a fuller analysis of the combined effect of material and information variables, and an explanation of sustained major-power peace that does not rely on his more demanding assumptions about collective identities and shared interests, but instead requires only states that seek security.

Chapters 7–9 evaluate the theory from three complementary perspectives. Chapter 7 addresses a challenge that flows from the rational/normative character of the theory combined with my skeptical position on whether states consistently act rationally. The standard approach for evaluating an international relations theory (and a social science theory more generally) is to explore how well the historical data support its hypotheses. If, however, a state fails to choose optimal policies, a rationalist theory will not do well at explaining its strategic behavior. International relations research over the past few decades supports the possibility of frequent suboptimal behavior. Thus, we need to be careful not to discard a rational theory too quickly simply because it does not excel at explaining state behavior. The lack of a tight fit between the theory and some state behavior might reflect suboptimal decisions, not flaws in the rational theory. And as discussed above, even if states sometimes act suboptimally, the rational theory remains valuable for a variety of reasons, including providing a rational baseline against which actual behavior can be compared and prescribing strategies for a state that faces a rational adversary. This raises the question of how to evaluate the rational theory.

The chapter adopts an unconventional approach to dealing with this challenge: it explores the theory *from within*. To perform this evaluation, it explores the theory's key components, including its explicit assumptions about how to characterize states and their international environment; its implicit assumptions about states' abilities to understand their international environment, utilize their resources, and analyze their options; and its deductions. If the theory's assumptions are sufficiently ac-

curate, its variables sufficiently complete, and its deductions logically sound, then the theory will effectively identify the trade-offs facing rational states and the strategies they should choose.

This evaluation provides substantial confidence in the quality of the theory. Key assumptions, including that the state faces an anarchic international environment and acts rationally, do not raise serious problems. Anarchy is an accurate description of the international environment. Rationality is central to the theory—because it is designed to analyze the choices states *should* make, the theory needs to assume the state acts rationally.<sup>19</sup> The assumption that the state is a unitary actor is trickier. Although states certainly are not unitary, characterizing a state in terms of a single set of motives and situational preferences is appropriate and productive for answering the key questions the theory is designed to address. For example, when we ask, “What strategy should a state choose?,” we are usually concerned about (and envision) an actor that knows what it wants and is simply trying to decide how best to achieve these objectives given the international environment it faces. We are not primarily concerned with the politics of domestic preference formation and bargaining. Moreover, even if we wanted to address these issues, we would first need a theory that understood the relationship between the motives and the strategic-choice preferences of each of the various domestic actors. In other words, the first order of business is to understand how a single unitary actor should act. In comparison, assuming the adversary is a unitary actor is potentially more problematic. In cases in which a state’s choice between competitive and cooperative policies can significantly influence the balance of domestic power in an opposing state, and in turn the adversary’s reactions, a state should not overlook this possibility. Recognizing this limitation suggests the need for caution in applying the theory to certain types of cases.

The chapter goes on to explore whether modern major powers have the resources required to act as the theory requires: for example, are they capable of measuring power and the offense-defense balance, and assessing an opposing state’s motives, sufficiently well to influence their choices? Although states sometimes fail in these efforts, the chapter finds that they nevertheless are often capable of these essential judgments. Overall, while making clear that further evaluation is required, the chapter provides grounds for confidence that the theory can provide valuable insights into the basic international politics questions it is designed to address.

Chapter 8 employs a complementary, more standard approach to eval-

<sup>19</sup>The chapter addresses a number of potential complications that concern the stage in the decision-making process at which we assume rationality. For example, there is little question about assuming rationality in the evaluation of military options, but greater leeway concerning states’ extraction of resources.

uating the theory. It looks briefly at a number of important cases and shows that my theory both explains them well and performs better than the key alternative theories. Although research on suboptimality provides an important caution, it does not suggest that states usually or always adopt flawed military and foreign policies. When states do act rationally, the theory should do well at explaining their behavior. Thus, we gain further confidence in the theory by exploring these cases of rational behavior. In addition, identifying important cases in which the theory does explain state behavior raises the question of whether the theory performs better at explaining these cases than similar theories that include fewer variables. If this were not the case, the theory's additional complexity might not be warranted—the standard argument is that the simpler theory would be preferable, explaining as much but with greater parsimony. To this end, the chapter extends the brief discussion of the end of the Cold War presented above and presents a comparison of current security politics in Europe and Asia. Both cases explore the central role of information and its interaction with material variables; although defensive realism captures some of what is most important, exploration of these cases demonstrates the advantages of my more general rational theory. The chapter then looks at the case of Hitler's Germany, showing that greedy motives are an essential component of this case and therefore that it cannot be dealt with adequately without including variation in states' motives in the theory.

Chapter 9 applies my theory to the question of whether arms races are dangerous and employs a third approach for evaluating the theory—considering whether states that according to the theory adopted suboptimal arming policies would in fact have done better if they had chosen alternative policies. This long-standing question in security studies is usually framed in terms of whether arms races increase the probability of war and studied by exploring their historical correlation with war. The chapter begins by explaining that the question needs to be reformulated—whether an arms race is dangerous depends not on whether it ends in war, but instead on whether building up arms was the best option available to both states for achieving their goals. The theory provides a rational baseline that enables us to make a distinction between a state's international security environment and its decision to build arms. If a state's international environment necessitates an arms buildup, then arming, as well as the competition that ensues if the adversary responds, is rational and the state's best available policy option. For these types of cases, even if arms races correlate with war, they do not cause it. Instead, the state's international environment causes the arms race and in turn war.

Policies that diverge from this rational baseline are suboptimal, that is, dangerous in the sense just described—the state could have better

achieved its goals if it had chosen a different arming policy. The chapter employs the theory to assess many of the past century's key arms races, as well as cases of cooperation. It finds that a number of these arming decisions were suboptimal, including the German decision to build a large battleship fleet in the decades before World War I, the Japanese decision to build up its naval forces in the intrawar period, and the U.S. decision to build multiple independently targeted reentry vehicles (MIRVs) during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

For these divergent cases, the chapter considers the counterfactual possibility that the state would have been better off had it pursued more cooperative policies. In each of these cases the counterfactual analysis shows that cooperation had better prospects than the competitive policies that the state chose for achieving its goals. According to the theory, a state should do less well when it fails to choose the strategy that the theory prescribes. Therefore, the counterfactual finding that states would have been better off adopting cooperative strategies instead of engaging in suboptimal arms races provides additional support for the theory.

Chapter 10 concludes, providing a short summary of the book's central arguments and exploring implications for current U.S. international security policy. It addresses the likely impact of a rising China and how U.S. policy can reduce (or, if misguided, increase) the potential dangers.