Realism and Domestic Politics: A Review Essay
Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition. by Jack Snyder
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Realism and Domestic Politics
A Review Essay


In the literature of international relations, it is fast becoming commonplace to assert the importance of domestic politics and call for more research on the subject. After over a decade of vigorous debates about realism, structural realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and hegemonic stability theory, political scientists are shifting their attention to the internal sources of foreign policy. Some even contend that realism’s dictum about the “primacy of foreign policy” is wrong, and that the domestic politics of states are the key to understanding world events. Innenpolitik is in.

Diplomatic history has been under fire for over two decades for its focus on elite decision-making, and with the rise of the “new history,” younger

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3. See, for example, three modern classics in the field: William Langer, European Alliances and

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historians have increasingly written about the underlying social, economic, and ideological influences on high politics. They have not, however, placed their particular explanations within the context of international relations theory. Most theorists of international politics, on the other hand, have focused on the nature of the international system and ignored what goes on behind state doors, treating it as the province of comparative politics, a different sub-field of political science.

Jack Snyder tries to bridge this gap between domestic and international affairs in his ambitious new book, Myths of Empire, constructing a domestic politics model that he claims stays within the realist tradition. The book raises important issues with great sophistication and displays a mastery of both comparative politics and international relations. Ultimately, however, it highlights the difficulties of constructing a theory in which domestic politics determines international events. In this essay I will argue that Snyder, while purporting to combine domestic and international levels of analysis, can do so only because he adopts an erroneous—though increasingly common—interpretation of realism that minimizes the powerful effects of the international system on state behavior. In the end we are left not with a novel combination of systemic and domestic determinants, but with a restatement of the traditional Innenpolitik case. Future research should build on the many insights of Myths of Empire, but must attempt to construct domestic explanations that take full account of systemic pressures. This will require that


scholars develop a tolerance for more limited—but also more accurate—generalizations.

Aussenpolitik and Innenpolitik

The concept of the Primat der Aussenpolitik—"the primacy of foreign policy"—has two distinct, though related, meanings in realist thought. The first, from which the phrase comes, is tangential to this discussion. It is the claim that international relations strongly affects a state's domestic arrangements: "throughout the ages pressure from without has been a determining influence on internal structure."7 In fact, Leopold von Ranke, with whose writings the phrase Primat der Aussenpolitik is most strongly associated, used it in this sense only, urging the Prussian state to organize itself internally so that it would succeed externally.8 More recently Charles Tilly and Peter Gourevitch have elaborated on this concept, which Gourevitch calls "the second image reversed."9

The second meaning of the "primacy of foreign policy," which is more relevant here, is that states conduct their foreign policy for "strategic" reasons, as a consequence of international pulls and pushes, and not to further domestic ends. Realists have long thought of inter-state relations as a realm apart from domestic politics.10 Indeed realism as a school of thought developed in conjunction with the growth of strong states, distinct from the societies that they ruled, interacting with one another. From the sixteenth-century Italians, who spoke of an external force of nature that controlled

state behavior, to Kenneth Waltz’s balance-of-power theory, realists have argued that systemic pressures determine states’ foreign policy behavior. Realists do not deny that domestic politics influences foreign policy, but they contend that “the pressures of [international] competition weigh more heavily than ideological preferences or internal political pressures.”

Critics of realism have typically reversed this logic, asserting that pressure from within determines external politics. Periodically, thinkers from Plato on have espoused this view, and it has become part of a coherent critique of realism over the last two centuries. One of the intellectual legacies of the Enlightenment was a challenge to the assumption, fundamental to realism, that history is cyclical, thus offering hope for a future without perpetual conflict. Since then both Marxists and liberals have argued that all states are not alike, that the causes of international conflict often lie within states, and that peace will be obtained, not when the distribution of external power is stable, but rather when the distribution of internal power is just.

These philosophical critiques led to the growth of what can be termed the Innenpolitik school, an ongoing tradition of scholarship that, dismissing the strategic rationales of statesmen, locates the roots of foreign policy in the social and economic structure of states. Such theories came into prominence in the early twentieth century as intellectuals attempted to explain two particular phenomena: British imperialism and German Weltpolitik. John Hobson’s now famous explanation of Britain’s scramble for Africa began a long and contentious debate about the sources of imperialism. Discussion about the domestic roots of German foreign policy began during the First World War itself with Thorstein Veblen’s study of German industrialization and, in 1919, with Joseph Schumpeter’s more general critique of atavistic expansionism. The interwar German historian Eckart Kehr made more specific claims,

15. Thorstein Veblen, Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution (New York: Viking, 1915,
based on archival research, that the domestic concerns of elites drove German foreign policy.\(^\text{16}\) Kehr has been called the father of modern revisionism because his work has had an important influence on subsequent revisionists in both Germany and America, including Charles Beard, William Appleman Williams, Fritz Fischer, and Hans Ulrich Wehler.\(^\text{17}\)

**Myths of Empire**

Jack Snyder's work follows explicitly in the *Innenpolitik* tradition. Joining together the German and English schools of revisionism, he asks the broader question: why do great powers “overexpand” so often? (p. 1) By overexpansion he means expansion that provokes an overwhelming balancing coalition or where the costs exceed benefits (pp. 6–7). He thus combines Kehr's concern about Germany's self-encircling policies with Hobson’s concern about Britain's costly imperialism. Snyder's answer is also a composite, mixing and matching individual revisionist arguments to create a complex domestic politics model to explain the overexpansion of the great powers over the last two hundred years (pp. 61–62). He applies his model to five great powers during what he deems their periods of overexpansion: Germany (1866–1945); Japan (1868–1945); Britain (1830–1890); the Soviet Union (1945–1989); and the United States (1945–1989). He considers, but discards as inadequate, realist and cognitive explanations for these states' behavior.

Snyder's argument has three steps:

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(1) **Why overexpansion?** A state overexpands because expansion always benefits a few people greatly and costs many people only a little. Parochial interest groups—such as the military, foreign offices, and big business—may or may not want imperialism per se, but they benefit from imperial, militarist, or autarkic policies. These groups hijack the organs of government for their selfish goals. The taxpayers who foot the bill lack the organization and access to the state that would allow them to lobby successfully for their interests (pp. 31–33).

(2) **How?** In order to gain broad support for their narrow policies, pro-expansionists create strategic rationalizations for their policies and hoodwink the public with these “myths of empire,” which include a belief in the riches to be gained through conquest, falling dominoes, the advantage of offensive strategies, and the efficacy of threats. Over time some elites begin to believe the myths that they themselves created, which makes retrenchment highly unlikely (pp. 2–6, 35–39).

(3) **Why acute overexpansion?** Expansion is often so extreme, beyond what any one group wants, because of a process of logrolling between various factions, each of whom is willing to back the others’ imperial projects if its own ambitions are supported in turn. This synergy usually creates “multiple expansion,” though if the bargaining process also involves key anti-imperial interests it may result in an awkward combination of aggressive behavior in some areas and conciliation in others, which Snyder terms “offensive detente.” It follows that overexpansion will be most acute in countries with many concentrated interest groups, a phenomenon that Snyder calls “cartelization” (pp. 39–49).

Snyder distinguishes unitary, democratic, and cartelized systems and explains that overexpansion is “moderate” in the first two (pp. 43–54). Unitary systems are ruled by a single leader or an oligarchy whose members share common interests. Dominant and self-confident oligarchies—Snyder’s examples are the British Whig aristocracy, the American East-coast establishment, and the post-Stalin Soviet Politburo—have a proprietary interest in the long-term health of the society, and are unlikely to engage in ruinous expansion. Dictators, Snyder concedes, are unpredictable. They may be gross overexpanders, since nothing in the domestic system checks them, but they have the power to overrule imperial cartels and may hence behave sensibly. Democracies are only moderate expanders because they empower the many who pay for expansion and allow them to check concentrated interests through elections and accountability. Though overexpansion is least common
in unitary and democratic states, all domestic systems have periods of cartelization, and therefore of overexpansion. An uneasy coalition of elites anywhere may lead to logrolling, myth-making, and overexpansion.

To explain why some states develop cartelized systems, Snyder examines the timing and pattern of industrialization in the countries under study. In Britain and the northern United States, “early” industrialization ensured that social and political changes moved in step with economic transformation, and these societies modernized in an evolutionary manner. Wilhelmine Germany, however, experienced “late” industrialization. Because Germany was, in a sense, “catching up” with Britain, German industrialization was rapid, centralized, and state-assisted. This created large business interests and left pre-industrial feudal and military elites unassimilated into the nation’s economic transformation. The Japanese pattern of development was similar to the German one. Russia’s variant, “late late industrialization,” created a new pattern of development, vesting power in a modernizing elite with broad interests (the Communist party). This made it a unitary system in Snyder’s terms. Snyder summarizes his causal chain succinctly: “Late industrialization produces a cartelized political structure, which magnifies the effectiveness of concentrated interests in expansion, favors the development of expansionist strategic myths, and promotes self-encirclement and imperial overexpansion” (p. 58).

The first step of Snyder’s model (why overexpansion?) derives from the work of Hobson, Schumpeter, and Stephen Van Evera, all three of whom emphasize the selfish imperial motivations of powerful groups within states (pp. 14–15, notes 44 and 45). The second (how?) applies Van Evera’s ideas about “national mythmaking,” and strategic “non-evaluation” to the cases under study (pp. 2–3, notes 2–3). The third step (why acute overexpansion?) turns Eckart Kehr’s model of elite logrolling in Wilhelmine Germany into a general model (p. 18, note 51). Snyder’s discussion of industrialization and its effects on elite politics draws heavily on the work of Veblen, Schumpeter, and especially Alexander Gerschenkron and Barrington Moore (p. 18, note 51; pp. 55–60, note 95).

Evaluating Myths of Empire

Myths of Empire is a work of scholarly synthesis rather than one of original historical research, and should be judged as such. Specifically it should be evaluated on two grounds. First, is Snyder’s domestic politics model—his
independent variable—a powerful and generalizable explanation of overexpansionist foreign policies? Second, how much of his dependent variable—overexpansion—is explained by domestic factors as opposed to systemic ones? I will discuss the first question only briefly, because the various theories that Snyder draws on to make up the logical chain of his model have been subjected to substantial scrutiny by historians and scholars of comparative politics.\footnote{Many of Snyder's domestic variables and relationships—though not all—are derived from the Innenpolitik–neo-Marxist school that I have outlined above, critiques of which are well known. See for example, Craig, "Political History"; James J. Sheehan, "The Primacy of Domestic Politics: Eckart Kehr's Essays on Modern German History," Central European History, Vol. 1, No. 2 (June 1968); Charles Maier, "Foreword to the Cornell University Press Edition," in Alexander Gerschenkron, Bread and Democracy in Germany (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); David Blackbourn, Class, Religion, and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980); D.C.M. Platt, Finance, Trade, and Politics in British Foreign Policy, 1815–1914 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); D.K. Fieldhouse, Economics and Empire (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973); and Benjamin J. Cohen, The Question of Imperialism (New York: Basic Books, 1973).} More important, the value of this model for the literature of international relations depends on how well it integrates domestic and systemic levels of analysis, and thus turns on the second question.

As a theoretical synthesis, Myths of Empire is a tour de force. Snyder brings together previously compartmentalized scholarly discussions about imperial overextension and about provocative foreign policies, arguing persuasively that both should be considered part of a state's grand strategy. He creates a complex argument that focuses on crucial domestic factors like industrialization and domestic coalitions, and then connects them to foreign policy. His own theoretical contribution, the discussion of cartelized, unitary, and democratic systems, is ingenious and provocative, leading to some counter-intuitive hypotheses, for example, that dictators and clubby oligarchies may be good for a state's foreign policy.

Does the book, however, advance the debate over Aussenpolitik versus Innenpolitik, moving us beyond simple assertions of the primacy of one or the other? Does it integrate international and domestic sources of international relations into a coherent model of state behavior? Is it, as Snyder claims, compatible with a realist systemic theory? (pp. 11–12). Unfortunately not. The central flaw in Myths of Empire is that it accords little weight to systemic causes. This would be less troublesome but for the fact that the phenomenon Snyder wishes to explain is a systemic outcome. Snyder defines his dependent variable not as attempted expansion, which can be measured by looking at a state's policies, but rather as overexpansion—which he defines
as unsuccessful expansion—which must be measured by looking at the success of a state’s policies in the international arena. The attempt at expansion may be chiefly linked to a state’s domestic politics, but the success of its expansionist policies is surely related to the international environment in which it was tried. By failing to separate systemic and domestic factors, Snyder’s treatment of his cases remains incomplete.

Consider, for example, Snyder’s discussion of the Soviet Union and the United States (pp. 212–254). Finding equally “moderate” patterns of cartelization in both domestic polities, he labels both countries equally “moderate” overexpanders (pp. 63–64, 212). By his own criteria, however, the Soviet Union was clearly an “extreme” overexpander, closer to Wilhelmine Germany and pre–World War II Japan than to the United States. Snyder measures overexpansion by its success, specifically by whether a state’s policies provoke an overwhelming coalition and whether its costs exceed benefits. On this score the Soviet Union can hardly be placed in the same category as the United States. The Soviet Union’s postwar expansionism provoked a balancing coalition of states that comprised between 60 and 80 percent of world gross national product (GNP). In forty years its behavior resulted in collapse, bankruptcy, and dismemberment, reducing Russia, for the first time in two hundred years, to a second-rank power.

U.S. expansion, by contrast, never resulted in the formation of a countering coalition that even approached its own industrial power, let alone the combined power of its allies. It remains today, as it was in 1945, the strongest nation in the world, and even if the “declinists” are entirely right, it will move only to second or third place over the next twenty-five years. Were Snyder explaining the two state’s attempts to spread their influence and interests abroad, measured by the number of interventions initiated or missiles built, the Soviets and the Americans come out roughly similar. But if the yardstick is success, their behavior falls into very different categories. This is not simply a miscoding of one case, but rather points to Snyder’s general error. Why do two equally cartelized states have different levels of overexpansion? It is because of the international context in which their actions

occurred. The failure of Soviet expansion—its extreme overexpansion—and the success of American expansion—its moderate, even low, overexpansion—had little to do with their levels of cartelization, but rather more to do with a key systemic variable: relative power. Soviet expansionism’s failure and American expansionism’s success were caused by the same set of factors: the West’s vastly greater relative economic power, the technological gap between the two blocs, and the productivity of capitalism versus communism. Gerschenkron points out that France, Italy, and Austria-Hungary also experienced the “German” pattern of late industrialization.22 Yet Germany alone was overexpansionist, in part because it faced unusual systemic pressures and opportunities.

Snyder’s five cases provide an opportunity to demonstrate how a sparse systemic explanation can better explain systemic outcomes than a complex domestic politics model does. For simplicity’s sake I will use two key variables only: the relative power of the expansionist state, and the polarity of the international system in which the expansion was attempted (unipolar, bipolar, or multi-polar).23 Consider two more of Snyder’s cases: he terms Britain a “moderate” overexpander and Japan an “extreme” one (p. 63). Yet during the nineteenth century, Britain asserted political control over one-quarter of the world’s population and built the largest imperial bureaucracy and navy in history. In 1914 it ruled over a world empire twice as large as the Roman empire at its peak.24 Japan, by contrast, made a bid for regional supremacy in what was then a peripheral area of the world. Because he measures their respective expansionism by the results that followed, however, Snyder comes to the conclusion that Japan was the greater overexpander. Britain’s policies, however, met with greater success than Japan’s not because it was a less cartelized state, but rather because it was more powerful state.

In the mid- and late nineteenth century Britain’s relative power was greater than any European state’s since Rome. If we use GNP as a crude but simple measure of a state’s relative power, we find that during this period Britain comprised over 20 percent of world GNP and, more important, close to 50

23. Introducing additional factors such as technology, the offense-defense balance, and geography would help explain each case even better.
percent of Europe's GNP. Such a raw measure underestimates British power, if anything. With Napoleonic France defeated, Britain was the superpower of the nineteenth century: it was the financial center of the world, the balancer of Europe and the unrivaled hegemon outside it (in what Michael Doyle called a "unipolar world-peripheral system"). Britain could not have been met with an "overwhelming" balancing coalition. Furthermore, the absence of strong nationalism in its colonies kept imperial costs down until well into the twentieth century. In Paul Kennedy's words, "[Britain's] successful imperialism and world influence on the cheap was due, of course, to the fact that outside Europe Britain largely operated in a power-political vacuum." Japan, on the other hand, entered the great power system during a period of intense and competitive multipolarity. From the Meiji restoration to the Second World War it never rose above a 4 percent share of world GNP (in 1938). Hence it is hardly surprising that its expansion met with quick resistance.

Overexpansion, in other words, is easily and simply correlated with relative power and the degree of competitiveness in the international system. The two states that Snyder places at the extreme end of his spectrum of overexpansion, Germany and Japan, accounted for a small percentage of world GNP—between 4 percent and 14 percent—and both rose to great-power status in a multipolar world, i.e., a world in which the possibilities for a countervailing coalition were great. Britain and the United States, in contrast, rose to great power status in unipolar and bipolar systems respectively. If Britain's share of world and European GNP made formation of an "overwhelming" coalition against it virtually impossible, in the case of the United States, it was power made it literally impossible. With 50 percent of world GNP in 1945, the United States could not provoke a balancing coalition greater than its own strength, no matter what kind of expansionism it engaged in. The Soviet Union, with under 15 percent of world GNP, fits in along with Germany and Japan as a weak and therefore unsuccessful great power, though since it expanded in a less competitive, bipolar system—and one with nuclear deterrence—the result was less catastrophic for it than for those two states.

25. All of the following figures are taken from Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers, pp. 149, 330, 436.
One might rephrase Snyder's question to be: Why do states foolishly attempt expansion when they know it will fail? The question points to a flawed understanding of both realism and systemic pressures, which I discuss in greater detail in the next section. But briefly, there are two responses to this question. First, states can rarely "know" beforehand what specific international outcomes will follow from their individual actions. Outcomes in the international system result from the myriad interactions of myriad actors, further complicated by system-wide forces like polarity and technological change. Uncertainty, misperceptions, and unintended consequences characterize anarchic systems. In fact if specific systemic outcomes could be predicted from any one state's actions, then the rationale of conceiving of the system as a separate analytic concept would disappear. The international system is central to international relations theory precisely because its characteristics intervene powerfully between state actions and international outcomes.

Second, states do not choose in what era they will rise to great wealth and power. Traditionally, realists have argued that a state's intentions are shaped by its capabilities; in Hans Morgenthau's terms a nation's "interests" are shaped by its "power." Differential rates of national growth mean that some states grow rich, others poor. As a state's relative power increases, it attempts to expand its interests and influence abroad. Part of this process is almost involuntary; a growing state acquires more and more economic and political interests in the outside world, often bumping up against the interests of other states. When a state climbs to the highest rungs of the international ladder it will, in Robert Gilpin's words, "try to expand its economic, political, and territorial control; it will try to change the international system in accordance with its own interests." Sometimes this rise to great power status succeeds and sometimes it fails; realists argue that these systemic outcomes might depend on the international environment. The external structure does not always determine outcomes, but if structural causes are not separated from domestic ones, we cannot know when it does.

The problem of defining and measuring state strategies by their success reappears in Snyder’s discussion of states that are “bad learners.” Snyder assumes that failed expansion must be the result, in part, of bad learning; why, after all, would states take actions that result in their own ruin? Conversely, successful expansion must be the result of good learning. As with expansion, however, Snyder should have defined and measured learning separate from the outcomes that followed it. For example, Snyder labels the United States a “good learner” (when in Vietnam) and the Soviet Union a bad one (when in Afghanistan). But if one examines the actual process of learning, the United States comes across as a terrible learner. It took six years for Washington to decide to withdraw from Vietnam, and another six years to actually pull out. Snyder calls this good learning because it did not result in the catastrophe that Soviet overextension in Afghanistan did. But American expansion was less costly than the Soviet experience in Afghanistan only because the United States was a stronger power.

The outcomes of national policies—such as overexpansion or war—cannot be simply explained by placing states in two categories, one good and the other bad. There may well be types of states that are more greedy and rapacious than others. But to directly infer such attributes from international outcomes is to make what psychologists call the “fundamental attribution error” and physical scientists call “reductionism.” The situation in which states are placed contributes to these outcomes, and an analysis of these environmental effects must take the environment into account. Often it remains unclear—especially to the leaders of a state—whether its policies will trigger a balancing coalition or whether their expansion is in fact part of a balancing process. Was Britain’s climb to world empire an example of expansion that led to Wilhelmine Germany’s balancing response? England itself

32. Recall Churchill’s famous counsel to the British cabinet during the Anglo-German arms race: “We have got all we want in territory, and our claim to be left in unmolested enjoyment of vast and splendid possessions, mainly acquired by violence, largely maintained by force, often seems less reasonable to others than to us.” Quoted in Kennedy, Realities Behind Diplomacy, pp. 69–70.
was balancing against Napoleonic France and then the Holy Alliance. The tragedy of international relations, as theorists from Thucydides to Rousseau to Waltz have understood, is that it does not take bad states to produce bad outcomes.

That systemic pressures on state behavior are greater than Snyder acknowledges does not mean that domestic politics was irrelevant to foreign policy choices in the five case studies he looks at. Snyder’s theory persuasively demonstrates how pro-imperial interests can fool the public, and how log-rolling over foreign policy can result in multiple imperial projects. The theory rings truest for pre–World War II Japan and Wilhelmine Germany, but those countries’ expansionism is overdetermined; there are powerful international, domestic, bureaucratic, ideological, and personality-based explanations for their aggressive behavior. Germany and Japan were militarized states with powerful pro-expansionist elements. But these domestic traits ensured only that the states would be expanders, not that they would be unsuccessful expanders. Louis XIV’s France and Elizabethan England were also militarized and expansionist states; their expansion happened to work. Some expansion may well be doomed from the start by the folly of statesmen or the domestic political process in which they operate, but some unsuccessful expansion is caused by the anarchy of international life. Because Snyder does not weigh the systemic causes of overexpansion, he cannot separate these two factors and determine when internal factors caused external failure and when environmental factors conjoined to undo a rising power’s bid for influence.

**Defensive Realism**

Snyder argues that he has, in fact, taken systemic factors into account in his model. His interpretation of realism, which he calls “defensive realism,” assumes that the international system provides incentives only for moderate, reasonable behavior. Immoderate, unreasonable behavior contradicts “true” systemic incentives and must be caused at some other level of analysis (pp. 10–13, 108). Thus he asks why states overexpand, and when he finds unsuccessful expansion, he assumes that by definition this behavior could not explained by systemic causes because it results in a sub-optimal outcome.

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33. See Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, pp. 73–139.
(p. 117). Systemic factors then drop out of his analysis and he moves to a
domestic explanation. Myths of Empire highlights an increasingly common,
but erroneous, starting point that has been adopted by many scholars, often
referred to as neo-realists (many of them are, in fact, students of Kenneth
Waltz). The rest of this essay will argue, however, that these scholars have
misinterpreted realism substantially. While they have different approaches
and concerns, they do adopt certain key assumptions that drive their work,
and hence they can be thought of as a school. Since this school is currently
at the center of the field of international security studies, an analysis and
critique of its assumptions should prove useful—particularly in this journal
which has been the forum for much of its work.

Snyder begins his analysis with assumptions about how the international
system affects a state’s foreign policy. He argues that his domestic politics
model accounts for state behavior that contradicts these systemic incentives,
and thus is compatible with defensive realism (pp. 10–13). Defensive real-
ism’s base assumption is that a rational state expands only to achieve security.
Snyder and other defensive realists argue that the systemic cause for state
expansion is its attempt to “cause” or “buy” security and that state behavior
is best explained as a response to external threats. When the defense has the
advantage (technologically and geographically), states are more likely to feel
secure and hence to behave calmly. When the offense has the advantage,
states will feel threatened and become aggressive. Expansion thus results
from insecurity. Notice that this assumption is strikingly different from the
traditional realist one, that states expand as a consequence of increasing
power resources.

34. The important works espousing these views include: Stephen Van Evera, “Causes of War”
(Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1984); Van Evera, “The Cult of the
Offensive and the Origins of the First World War,” International Security Vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer
(October 1985), pp. 80–118; Barry R. Posen, The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain,
and Germany Between the World Wars (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); Barry R. Posen
and Stephen Van Evera, “Reagan Administration Defense Policy: Departure from Containment,”
in Kenneth A. Oye, Robert J. Lieber, Donald Rothchild, eds., Eagle Resurgent? The Reagan Era in
American Foreign Policy (Boston: Little Brown, 1987); Stephen M. Walt, The Origins of Alliances;
40, No. 1 (October 1987), pp. 82–107; Jack Snyder, The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision
Making and the Disasters of 1914 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984); and Ted Hopf,
2 (June 1991), pp. 476–493. Much of the inspiration for this school’s assumptions comes from
Defensive realists make a second assumption: that the workings of the international system demonstrate that a state’s security requires limited external interests, small armies, and carefully restrained foreign policies. States expand for security, and neo-realism shows that “security [is] plentiful,” defensive aggression is quickly counter-balanced, and technology and geography usually favor defenders. Anything beyond a moderate, incremental foreign policy is unnecessary and counterproductive. In practice, of course, states often try to expand beyond these objective security requirements, but defensive realism refuses to attribute any of this expansion to systemic incentives. The international system pressures states towards moderate behavior only; anything else must be explained at some other level of analysis because it cannot be a rational response to the international environment. Thus defensive realism’s systemic explanation of state behavior actually explains very little foreign policy behavior. From this perspective most great powers in modern history are exceptions to be accounted for; indeed much of the scholarship of defensive realism strives to explain behavior that, as Snyder admits, is “common” and “widespread” (pp. 1, 2–10). Not only is most great power behavior inexplicable, it is also pathological. The diagnoses offered by defensive realists invariably revolve around domestic deformities within the body politic of states that cause them to expand—for example, militaristic general staffs, strategic mythmakers, and imperialistic cartels.

The assumption that the system provides incentives for cautious behavior explains little great power behavior in history. Thus it proves to be unhelpful, and defensive realists must construct theories of domestic politics that try to explain the anomalies that their “first-cut” assumption has generated. These auxiliary theories, like Snyder’s, must find similarities at the domestic level across a wide spectrum of domestic regimes. Neorealism is often loosely characterized as “leaving domestic politics out,” but in fact defensive realism

35. Walt, Origins of Alliances, p. 49.
38. “[Imre] Lakatos’ discussion of scientific research programs leads us to expect that when confronted with anomalies, theorists will create auxiliary theories.” Robert Keohane, “Theory of World Politics,” in Keohane, Neorealism, p. 185.
has the opposite tendency; it uses domestic politics to do all the work in its theory. Defensive realism begins with a minimalist systemic assumption that explains very little state behavior, generating anomalies instead. It then uses auxiliary domestic politics theories to explain away these inconvenient cases—which comprise much of modern diplomatic history. Imre Lakatos terms such projects theoretically “degenerative.”

Defensive realists assume that the international system provides incentives for moderate behavior because they misconstrue the manner in which the system affects states. Defensive realism is premised on the notion that the system teaches states to seek only minimal security because aggression always faces balancing, the costs of expansion quickly exceed the benefits, and defenders usually have the advantage. But systemic imperatives do not operate in this manner. Waltz suggests that the international system affects states in two ways: “socialization,” and “competition and selection.” Socialization causes all states to become more alike; competition and selection generates an order because some states do better than others. This does not mean, however, that the system teaches states wisdom.

To develop an analogy that Waltz and others have used, the international system affects states in much the same way that the market affects firms. Economists assume that a self-help environment forces firms to attempt “profit-maximization.” In reality, some firms choose risky, short-term, high-profit strategies and others pursue more cautious, longer-term strategies that generate smaller immediate gains. Rather than assume that all firms strive for “reasonable” profits, microeconomics starts with the theoretical assumption that firms attempt to maximize profit. Periodically, technological shifts, recessions, bankruptcies, and market failures cause many firms of both types to lose money; some even go bankrupt. Yet few economists would argue that these market outcomes can be predicted from the behavior of individual pathological firms. Rational strategies by firms can lead to sub-optimal out-

40. See especially Posen, Sources of Military Doctrine, pp. 67–69; and Walt, “The Search for a Science of Strategy.”
42. Despite all the additional constraints placed on the concept of profit-maximization, economists believe it is “certainly the place to start.” Stanley Fischer and Rudiger Dornbusch, Economics (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), pp. 139–141.
comes. The nineteenth-century company that made stage-coaches may have been the best-run company in the world; it went bankrupt for systemic reasons. To assume rationality is not to assume foresight.

The international system affects states similarly; therefore even though states behave in various manners—some are cautious appeasers, while others are bold risk-takers—we must start with the theoretical assumption that the existence of an anarchic environment causes states to attempt self-help continuously. States are driven by the system’s competitive imperative, which produces what could be termed “influence-maximizing” behavior. The results are not always salutary either in economics or international relations, due to “the tyranny of small decisions”:

It is an inherent characteristic of a consumer-sovereign, market economy that big changes occur as an accretion of moderate-sized steps, each of them the consequence of “small” purchase decisions—small in their individual size, time perspective, and in relation to their total, combined ultimate effect. Because change takes place in this fashion, it sometimes produces results that conflict with the very values the market economy is supposed to serve.

In the same way, rational short-term behavior on the part of individual states can lead to sub-optimal outcomes in the international arena. Charles Maier has explained, for example, that the length and terror of World War I, not desired by any of the states involved, was the result of individual decisions

43. I use the term “influence-maximizing” rather than “power-maximizing” to avoid the pitfalls of the vague concept of power. Realists in the past have used power-maximization to suggest alternately that states expand for increased resources or as a consequence of increased resources. I adopt the second meaning. The stronger a state gets, the more influence it wants. Waltz’s own writings are confused and contradictory on this issue. He attempts—for almost aesthetic reasons—to distance himself from the classical realists’ concept of power (influence) maximizing, but at the same time he makes clear that the opposite—influence-minimization—is implausible, because states can never have limited conceptions of their security. See Waltz, Man, the State, and War, pp. 37–38, 227. He also frequently cites the example of firms attempting profit-maximization as a parallel to state behavior and insists that units in any self-help environment will display “maximizing” behavior. Waltz chooses, however, not to regard influence-maximizing behavior as the equivalent of profit-maximizing behavior, using instead the concept that states constantly attempt self-help or seek survival. The difference between this assumption and influence-maximization is semantic. The urge to “constantly seek survival” will produce the same behavior as influence-maximizing, because anarchy and differential growth-rates ensure that “survival” is never achieved and the state is never allowed to relax its efforts. See Waltz, Theory of International Politics, pp. 74–76, 117–119, 136–137.

that were rational "given what was known to the decision-makers at the time, and yet each [led] to horrendous consequences."45

Defensive realists have confused the system's effects on states with the lessons that they believe states should learn from that system's operation. In fact, such "lessons" unfold over long time spans and are highly subjective. (Did the outbreak of World War I teach nations that they balanced too much, or too little?) Outside of the general influence-maximizing imperative that the system forces on states, longer-term lessons have always been the subject of heated debates. The key points of all of the writings on the lessons of international history are that nations rarely learn any one lesson from specific events in the past, what each nation learns is never the same as the other, and each applies these lessons in a different manner.46 Moreover if states were socialized uniformly by the lesson that balancing occurs, a massive collective action problem would inevitably result, since for any given state the incentive to "free-ride" would be enormous. Thus, the logic of defensive realists' understanding of systemic incentives would make balancing behavior less common than they claim it is.47 This flawed understanding of socialization makes Barry Posen refer to his theory as "historical" realism versus the older and cruder ahistorical realism.48 For Waltz, however, realism is explicitly ahistorical. It rests on the assumption that "through all the changes of boundaries, of social, economic, and political form, of economic and military activity, the substance and style of international politics remains strikingly constant."49

One may agree with defensive realists that states should learn certain lessons from the international system, but good theory explains how the

49. Waltz, "A Response to My Critics," p. 329. Virtually the same sentence can be found in Waltz, Theory of International Politics, p. 110.
world does work, not how it should work. By smuggling in normative assumptions about state behavior, defensive realism ends up regarding much foreign policy as abnormal and then explaining it by attributing abnormality to guilty parties. Ironically, one detects in this school of thought many of the idealistic assumptions that realists have traditionally scorned: the assumption that states can be easily satisfied; the conviction that nations can learn the “true” lessons of the past; and the belief that expansionism and international conflict, far from normal, are the result of domestic disorders within states. One wonders if defensive realists believe that if the diseases were cured—the military bureaucracies, mythmakers, and cartels abolished—states would pursue enlightened self-interests that would never trigger balancing coalitions, and the result would thus be a perpetual peace.50

Conclusions and Future Research

Jack Snyder’s Myths of Empire is an ambitious attempt to enlarge the discourse of international relations by studying domestic politics. He demonstrates how comparative-politics theories can be used and expanded to shed light on foreign policy. Future work in international relations should build on the three great strengths of Myths of Empire: first, its insistence that imperialism in the periphery and foreign policy at the core should be studied together because they emanate from the same metropol; second, its impressive synthesis of comparative politics theories, in particular its emphasis on logrolling; and third, its demonstration that strategic rationales are often cynically put forward by statesmen to garner popular support for their policies.

But future work should also avoid Snyder’s pitfalls. He is unable to provide a model of domestic politics that is compatible with system-level influences chiefly because his theoretical ambitions undermine his analysis. Snyder attempts to build a domestic explanation with the same power and sweep as systemic ones. (This may explain why he, and other Innenpolitik, are drawn to neo-Marxist explanations. Only Marxist explanations can match realism’s generalizability.) He fails for two reasons. First, he tries to explain an international outcome, the success of expansion, which cannot be explained without recourse to system-level factors. Second, even if he were explaining state policies, he should have begun by separating the systemic

50. I have benefited from conversations with Andrew Moravcsik on this point.
causes of state behavior from the domestic ones. A good theory of foreign policy should first ask what effect the international system has on national behavior, because the most powerful generalizable characteristic of a state in international relations is its relative position in the international system. A first-cut theory of foreign policy should begin by looking at the effect of this relative standing on a state's preferences. Theories of foreign policy that place chief emphasis on internal—national, bureaucratic, or individual—causes often make hidden assumptions about the way the international environment shapes a state's range of choices. Such theories typically consider only those cases where the behavior they are examining exists, biasing their conclusions. Snyder's case selection is an example. He only considers great powers "at the height of their expansionism," thus selecting only those cases where the behavior he expects occurs (p. 2). Had he chosen other powers with similar patterns of industrialization or cartelization but without a pattern of overexpansion, he would have recognized that systemic factors were present in the cases of overexpansion and absent in other cartelized systems.

A good explanation of foreign policy should not ignore domestic politics or national culture or individual decision-makers. But it must separate the effects of the various levels of international politics. In order to achieve balance between the parsimony of a spare theory and greater descriptive accuracy, a first-cut theory can be layered successively with additional causes from different levels of analysis focusing on domestic regime types, bureaucracies, and statesmen. As Robert Keohane writes:

The larger the domain of a theory, the less accuracy we expect . . . The domain of theory is narrowed to achieve greater precision. Thus the debate between advocates of parsimony and proponents of contextual subtlety resolves itself into a question of stages, rather than either-or choices. We should seek parsimony first, then add on complexity while monitoring the adverse

51. Gerschenkron's complete list of countries that experienced late industrialization includes Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, France, Belgium, and large parts of the Austro-Hungarian empire. See Gerschenkron, Economic Backwardness, p. 16.

52. Snyder avoids an interesting and hard case for his analysis that would possibly falsify his thesis. The U.S. period of industrialization in 1865–1929, with a mixed pattern of industrialization, early in the north and late in the south, produced an uneasy coalition of elites who logrolled on many policy issues. It was also a period of foreign "under-expansion" compared with any other great power. Yet Snyder chooses to consider post–World War II American foreign policy, clearly selecting "on the dependent variable." Schumpeter's discussion of atavistic imperialism has the same case-selection bias.
effects this has on the predictive power of our theory: its ability to make significant inferences on the basis of limited information.\textsuperscript{53}

Over the last decade, scholars of international relations have either ignored the international system or never moved beyond it. Instead, a good account of a nation’s foreign policy should include systemic, domestic, and other influences, specifying what aspects of the policy can be explained by what factors. Paul Kennedy’s essay on the Kaiser’s role in German \textit{Weltpolitik} is a rare example of this kind of comprehensive analysis.\textsuperscript{54}

Domestic politics has a crucial influence on foreign policy. It is a mistake, however, to place it in competition with international factors when constructing general explanations of state behavior, not least because it will lose the contest. Domestic factors often seem more important than international ones in any particular case, like Hitler’s Germany, but \textit{in general}, across time and space, states’ positions in the anarchic international system prove to provide the simplest, shortest guide to international relations. This is hardly a cause for disappointment. The parsimony of a systemic theory is useful for some purposes, but more accurate theories are far more useful for many other purposes.\textsuperscript{55} Domestic politics explanations can be most useful in explaining events, trends, and policies that are too specific to be addressed by a grand theory of international politics. That comprises most of international life.

\textsuperscript{55} Robert Keohane starts his analysis of the sources of cooperation with a structural realist theory of international politics and then layers onto it additional variables that provide more determinate predictions. See Keohane, \textit{After Hegemony}, pp. 5–31. Other works that blend levels of analysis include Doyle, \textit{Empires}; and Katzenstein, \textit{Between Power and Plenty}. For a recent analysis that starts with systemic factors and then layers on domestic ones to yield clearer predictions, see Randall L. Schweller, “Domestic Structure and Preventive War,” \textit{World Politics}, Vol. 44, No. 2 (January 1992), pp. 235–270.