

Is the anarchical international system the cause of war?

Written by Morgane Griveaud

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MORGANE GRIVEAUD, MAY 22 2011

When thinking about anarchy in international relations, we have to consider world order and how it is organised. Can an anarchical system be ordered? It would be too easy to assume that anarchy is just complete disorder where subjects can do what they want. This image could be compared to the Hobbesian state of nature, but rather than having a “war of every man against every man,” (quoted in Brown, Nardin and Rengger, 2002: 338) we should picture a war of every state against every state. In such an environment then, the absence of war is not conceivable. However, the anarchy present in our system is not really as such. States care too much about their survival, and if they wage war it is mainly because of the pressure the structure of the system places on them. Nonetheless, we will see that the cause of war in an anarchical system is not only systemic, but that states can generate conflicts by their own choice, mainly because of self-interest and a thirst for power. Furthermore, this essay will discuss some criticism, try to understand to what extent the system is actually anarchical if we take into consideration international law and institutions, and determine other causes of war that could come from the structure of the system.

The term anarchy can have different meanings. However, in this essay we will only focus on one definition. Anarchy in the context of the international system implies there are no higher authorities, and because nation states are considered by many as primary actors in international relations, an anarchical world would be one where there is no higher authority than that of the state (Bull, 1995). The state exists as a full sovereign of its people and territory, and which enjoys the ultimate power of being completely self-determined. By taking into account Waltz’s structure of the international system, there are three elements that define it; its “ordering principle,” “the character of the units” that compose it, and “the distribution of capabilities” between these units. For the neorealist two of these elements never change. Neorealism considers the international system to be permanently anarchic because of the absence of a superior authority, and believes that all the units, or states, are “functionally alike” (Elman in Williams, 2008: 18). To some extent, states retain the same rights, the principal one being the right to do as they wish because no institution has the capacity or power to control their actions. Therefore, no order is established in this system because all actors can do whatever they want, because nothing prevents them. Nonetheless, even though states have the same rights it does not mean they have the same capabilities. The distribution of power in the international system is far from a “perfect equilibrium” (Walzer, 2006: 77). Distinct states have different powers, and the significance of these powers shift from one to another. Capabilities are not constant in the system, only the gains and “losses of power” are (ibid). States exist in a hostile global environment because nothing will hinder the possible aggression of a powerful state, and the future of a state is never certain as its power can wane.

Hence, when states try to survive in such a world, their survival becomes their principal motivation. In order to survive, a state will try to reduce any external threats that could endanger its existence. As seen before, the distribution of power within the system is not equal, as some states enjoy more influence than others. However, to prevent states from becoming too dominant, a balance of power will emerge through which a state will be able to counter the growing strength of a neighbour, insofar as the neighbour threatens its security, as “balancing is the appropriate response to threatening concentrations of power” (Elman in Williams, 2008: 21). Therefore, wars happen when states fear for their safety. As Walt would suggest, a states behaviour “is determined by the threats they perceive and the power of others is merely one element in their calculations” (ibid). If we follow the balance of power theory, war occurs because they are used as preventive actions against “any state or bloc” that “becomes, or threatens to become, inordinately powerful,” because “the aggrandisement of one nation beyond a certain limit changes the general system of all” states, especially the status quo (Claude quoted in Sheehan, 1996: 3; Fenelon

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quoted in Sheehan, 1996: 2). Thus, if the balance of power is well managed, the status quo of the system would remain static. As long as states do not feel threatened by others, stability follows because the balance of power will not change.

Nevertheless, keeping the balance of power is not an easy task for nation states. States are naturally very competitive, and an anarchical international system just intensifies interstate competition as they are allowed to act freely. State behaviour is related to competition, and in order to survive states need to show they are acting in a way where they can benefit the most from competing with other states. Neorealist states “that do not exhibit such behaviour are selected out of the system” (Elman in Williams, 2008: 18). For instance, states constantly compete over various issues to satisfy national needs. In correlation to that, the security dilemma intensifies as well (Sheehan, 1996: 8). Let us say two states are competing militarily, such as the arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union during Cold War. One state would face a security dilemma which was dependant on whether the other state is increasing its military capabilities. If this state chooses to believe that the possibility of an invasion is not relevant, the whole of its national security would be completely at risk and unprepared in the eventuality of an offensive, whereas if the state chooses to counter balance the other military’s capacities then it will be able to defend itself against an aggressor. The main problem with the security dilemma is the misinterpretation of neighbouring states activities. It creates issues within the balance of power because some actions that seek only “to preserve the status quo” can often be “ambiguous” and “indistinguishable” from offensive preparations (Elman in Williams, 2008: 21-22). Hence, if states have a slight misunderstanding regarding intentions, it could eventually evolve into a full scale war.

Therefore, wars happen because the international system is anarchic. Some realist theorists believe in the idea of “international politics as tragic,” (ibid: 19) which to some extent means that war appears as a necessity on a structural level, so even if states wage war, they are not fully involved in the decision to go to war. Rational choice or not, war is the only solution to reduce security threats because the decision to make war imposes itself as the only option. This is the tragic element of this system, because even if states are considered as rational actors, they do not have the possibility to choose another alternative. It sounds very paradoxical if one thinks about the state in the system, but we have only to think about the structure of the system, which puts the state in a particular situation that forces it to go to war.

Nonetheless, states do cause wars by themselves. We cannot deny the anarchic system, but causes of war can also be found on a domestic level, rather than on a systemic one. These causes are very much correlated with structural ones, and they can be emphasized or intensified by anarchy, yet states are ultimately the ones generating wars. States are rational actors and everything they do is related to how much they want increased security, power, and wealth. The policies they adopt are essentially based on short-term needs and they will do anything to pursue their own interests (Levy in Carlsnaes, Risse and Simmons, 2002: 352-353). Their main interest is essentially power, and as classical realists such as Morgenthau believe, states will engage in an endless struggle for power. Moreover, they will try to maximise their power because they consider it to be the “ultimate safety” against other states (Elman in Williams, 2008: 22-23). Hence, states will feel a need to accumulate more resources so that they can increase their wealth, which they can use to strengthen their military capacities (ibid: 16, 23). As a consequence of clashing interests they will become warier of their neighbours and begin to distrust all states. Therefore, because states are driven by power and self-interest, they will not act morally, and will pragmatically choose war over diplomatic solutions because the advantages of doing so are much greater if they win. Machiavelli is one of the main advocates of pragmatism. In *The Prince*, he explains how it is more beneficial to do what should be done rather than act according to morals and do what ought to be done. Following this logic, if a state is persuaded that waging war is the best choice, it will do anything to win because for Machiavelli the ends justify the means. If the state wins the war and acquires new land, these results would justify the war. Clearly, states are the main decision-making actors when it comes to wars.

Related to self interested states and the struggle for power, there are a few theories which suggest that in an anarchical world you can have order through the hegemony of one, or more, superpowers. This situation drastically changes the balance of power, yet some theorists believe that an anarchic system with hegemon(s) is actually more stable than the system just studied. It would imply a shift in the system’s structure, but it would remain anarchic because states would still have full power over their sovereignty. The global order here would be characterised by the

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idea that 'might is right,' and as Thucydides said "the weak accept what they have to accept" while the most powerful do as they wish. In a unipolar world, for instance, one state would have to acquire significant power compared to others in order to claim leadership over the international system. States would have to follow rules that the hegemon thinks are best to maintain global stability. The interest of the hegemon is that all other states accept its position and keep to the new status quo. The interests of the other states in a hegemonic system are very different, and relative to how much power they have, either they can align with the hegemon in the hope of getting advantages by following its rules, or they can resist its influence. Within realist thought, especially power transition theory and dynamic differentials theory, the existence of a hegemonic power implies its fall and the rise of another. The fall of a hegemon can be felt by the rise of other powers, as these powers will become unhappy with the status quo and will want to change it, and the hegemon, sensing it is losing control will want to reinforce its power (ibid: 24-25). Consequently, war happens because of different interests. However, as suggests Wohlforth, unipolarity might be more stable than any other form of system. With only one hegemon in place, conflicts cannot be abolished because the superpower has to intervene to resolve them, but conflict is limited compared to bipolar systems, because "hegemonic rivalry and security competition" through the balance of power are absent in unipolarity (Wohlforth, 1999: 26-28). Nevertheless, other realists like Waltz or Mearsheimer think that the best way to limit instability would be a bipolar system, such as that existed during the Cold War. The former believes that unipolarity is very unlikely to last and that multipolarity requires too much interconnectedness between the powers, while the latter believes that great powers benefit more in a bipolar world because it involves less risk of war. However, we are now witnessing more interconnected states through globalisation. Politicians such as former British Foreign Secretary David Miliband believe that by taking into account Japan, the U.S., the EU, Russia, and China, that "the multipolar world is here" (Miliband, 2009). Furthermore, to emphasise this point, Huntington said that "global politics has become multipolar and multicivilizational" (2002: 21).

Multipolarity and 'multicivilizational' politics can make us wonder about the anarchical aspect of the international system. Not everyone, especially liberals, believes in an assumption that there is no higher authority to manage complex interstate relations. Of course, realists cannot deny cooperation between states and the existence of international institutions, such as the UN. Bull acknowledges the fact that a "society of states exists" where they are "bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one and another and share in the common working of institutions," because they realised they had "certain common interests and common values," (1995) but realism will not go to the extent of saying that these institutions are sovereign over the nation state. There are fundamental distinctions between both schools of thought regarding cooperation. Realists tend to argue that states cooperate because it serves their national interests, yet institutions have no power whatsoever over a state's sovereignty and self-determination. However, these institutions reinforce international law, which to a great extent dictates national behaviours, so we cannot really say that the nation state is fully self-determined. Since Grotius, it has been accepted that international law regulates interstate relations and conflicts, and if states cooperate under the same law it is not only because of self-interest but because they all have common interests, those of the international community, and especially peace. Moreover, Kant would argue that men have categorical imperatives that push them to act morally, a state would necessarily follow international law, not because it is practical but because it has to (Navari in Williams, 2008: 30; Waltz, 1962: 338-339). Neoliberal institutionalism does not particularly disagree on the argument that the system is anarchical, but neoliberals tend to believe that opportunities for cooperation and peace are much greater than realists believe they are. Indeed, for them, those institutions can "increase cooperation," and so there is quite a big scope of "unrealized" cooperation that has resulted in "unnecessary" and "avoidable" conflicts (Jervis, 1999: 47, 53). The latter happens because states rely too much on their preferences and not enough on the "collective interest" which is promoted by the institutions as "international stability" (Navari in Williams, 2008: 40).

There is a question that needs to be asked, why does war still occur if the international system promotes cooperation between states with the aim of ultimately creating peace? There are many answers, but we will only focus on a few. First, it could be a problem related to the economy and how it is managed on a national level. Liberals, especially advocates of commercial liberalism, will argue that by liberalising trade, conflicts are less likely to happen, as it offers a "degree of economic freedom" that cannot be neglected, because if governments are too involved in the "economic sphere," then conflicts emerge in the political sphere (ibid: 34-36). Second, international institutions are quite liberal and they are the ones promoting peace. Hence, in correlation with the democratic peace theory, non-liberal states will more likely "distrust non-liberal states." Wars occur because, for instance, a liberal state will try to free another state

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from a non-democratic regime (ibid: 36-38). Third, globalisation is an integrated process of our world system today, but this increased interconnectedness brings many problems that make it very vulnerable to war and coercion (ibid: 36). Therefore, we can see that even a system that tries to enhance cooperation and peace is not without defaults that can cause wars.

In conclusion, many different people agree that the international system is anarchic, in the sense that there is no overarching power to control nation states and their actions, yet the anarchical feature can be reduced by increased cooperation between states, and the establishment of international organisations. However, the system being anarchical is not the only cause of war. In being part of a structure, the nation state does not really have a choice when it comes to war, and war is just another tragic outcome of global politics. Nonetheless, states are rational actors in international relations, so their interests greatly influence their behaviour. If states go to war it is because they strive for power, are self-interested, and pay particular importance to their security. Finally, because of the creation of supranational organisations that aim to promote peace by strengthening cooperation between states, new causes of war have appeared. The spread of capitalism and liberalism has encouraged states to free other states, and the development of new global processes, such as globalisation, have increased links between individuals, which has increased the risks of conflict through arms traffic, as one example. As the global system evolves, the causes do as well, and current states now face new important issues.

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