

“Systemic Geopolitical Analysis and Structural Realism: Parallel Routes and Common Challenges”

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Abstract: The current paper aims to offer an analytical description of the legacy and the challenges that modern theory is inclined to face vis-à-vis systemic geopolitical approach and neo-positivism.³ Having different intellectual bases (i.e. geography and political science), systemic geopolitical analysis and structural realism follow parallel routes and struggle to manage common challenges in the light of the utmost epistemological aim; describing and analysing the international system without blinkers and any kind of ideological bias. What is the crux of the matter when analysing international politics? Has geography answered to the questions posed by political science considering the inclusion of human behaviour into the analysis of international system? Without any doubt, systemic geopolitical analysis and structural realism represent complementary theoretical proposals for decoding the causes and the effects of antagonism, balance of power, hegemonism, Great Powers' strategic behaviour, interdependence, the role of international institutions and cooperation. Therefore, they can co-exist for the sake of description and even prediction of certain trends of behaviour and correlation of power.

Keywords: Systemic Geopolitical Theory, Methodology, Geopolitics, Kenneth Waltz, IR Theory, Ontology, Epistemology, Neo-positivism

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I. Introduction

The starting point of any modern discussion, with regard to inter-state relations as well as the causes and effects of human collective action, is defined at the ancient debate of “*what to be*” and “*what should be*” in correlation with “*what could be*”. This debate gives essence to the diachronic conflictual views expressed by important figures; from Aristotle, Plato, Thucydides and Kautilya to Saint Augustine, just war theory and the modern IR theory great debates between neorealists and neoliberals. With reference to geography as the template of its methodology,⁴ systemic geopolitical analysis proceeds into description and prediction, something that IR theory negates to do with a concrete argumentation. With the inclusion of human geography, systemic geopolitical analysis answers to questions, that classical geopolitical theory could not, and offers an innovative proposal into the theoretical fermentations of international politics, making efforts at the same time to address the conceptual challenges posed by structural IR theorists.⁵

In line with such thoughts, the research questions of the current paper are the following: What is the crux of the matter when analysing international politics? Has geography answered to the questions posed by political science considering the inclusion of human behaviour into the analysis of international system? As a theoretical stake, this could be absolutely identified with the definition of geography as “*the science approaching the natural space as well as the dialectic syntheses of this space with human societies, which are*

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³ Mazis, I. Th. (2015) *Analyse Methathéorique des Relations Internationales et de la Géopolitique. Le cadre du Neopositivisme* (in French). Athens: Papazisis. Mazis, I. Th. (2012) *Metatheoretical critical approach of international relations and geopolitics. The neopositivist frame / Metatheoritiki Kritiki Diethnon skhesseon kai Geopolitikis. To neothetikistiko plaisio* (in Greek). Athens: Papazisis. Mazis, I. Th. (2002) *Geopolitics: Theory and praxis / Geopolitiki: Theoria kai praxi* (in Greek) Athens: Papazisis and ELIAMEP.

⁴ Mazis, I. Th. (2012) op. cit., p. 100. Mazis, I. Th. (2015) op. cit..

⁵ Stogiannos, A. (2019) *The genesis of geopolitics and Friedrich Ratzel: Dismissing the myth of the Ratzelian geodeterminism*. Springer Nature Switzerland AG. Pp. ix-x, 2, 6-10, 19-20 about I. Th. Mazis's contribution.

defined as ‘human spaces’. These dialectic syntheses are defined as geographical spaces”.⁶ The aforementioned definition offers the basis of the current paper, which gives emphasis on the intellectual contribution of systemic geopolitical analysis and its parallel routes with structural realism of international relations theory in the prospect of common challenges at the ontological level.

On the systemic geopolitical analysis

Systemic geopolitical analysis takes theoretical and epistemological loans from classical geopolitics and the scientific core of geography⁷ adding innovative methods of quantification⁸ and prediction⁹. Its definition is based exactly on the ascertainment that the geopolitical analysis of a geographical system characterised by an uneven distribution of power is “the geographical method that studies, describes and predicts the attitudes and the consequences ensuing from relations between the opposing and distinct political practices for the redistribution of power as well as their ideological metaphysics, within the framework of the geographical complexes where these practices apply”.¹⁰ Uneven growth is also noted by structural realists, who define it as the most important and usual cause of war, in addition to hegemonism. As it has been written, with reference to the classical masterpiece of Thucydides for the “Peloponnesian War”: “It is significant that Thucydides was the first to set forth the idea that the dynamic of international relations is provided by the differential growth of power among states. This fundamental idea – that the uneven growth of power among states is the driving force of international relations – can be identified as the theory of hegemonic war”.¹¹

The systemic geopolitical analysis can be considered the tool for overviewing these issues confirming that modern methods of classical geopolitical conceptualizations may contribute decisively. Methodological cohesion and epistemological as well as ontological compatibility constitute sine qua non for an analysis aiming to contribute in a productive way. Hence, the definition of systemic geopolitical analysis is allocated on specific methodological stages following the Lakatosian structure:¹²

I. Definition of the fundamental axiomatic assumptions (elements) of the hard core of the geopolitical research programme.

II. Definition of the auxiliary hypotheses (elements) of the protective belt of the geopolitical research project.

III. The issue of the positive heuristics of the geopolitical research programme.

IV. The elements of the positive heuristics of the geopolitical research programme.

Respectively, these stages include: (a) Decoding the title of the topic, (b) Identifying the boundaries of the Geopolitical Systems under study including their definition as system, sub–systems and supra–systems, (c) Defining the fields of influence of the “geopolitical factor” including the identification of its function for the specific pillars of influence, (d) The Synthesis referring to “the procedure through which we can detect the Resultant Power Trend of the given Geopolitical factor on whichever final systemic scale (e.g. Sub–system, System or Supra–system level)” and (e) The Conclusions where the description of the geopolitical dynamics and trends takes place.¹³

The main epistemological “rule” of the methodology above is the avoidance of – geostrategy–like – proposals and this interlinks systemic geopolitical analysis with structural realism. Both traditions are inclined to describe and be oriented to ontology, without making any proposals. They are both dedicated to present “what is really going on” at the level of balance of power and the actors’ initiatives on the margins of such correlations of “realpolitik”. This explains why central figures of these approaches conclude to common results, feeling at the same time the need to answer to common challenges and epistemological pathogenies. In practice, “balance of power”, “security dilemmas”, “geographical stakes”, “uneven growth”, “hegemonism”, “causes of war”, “Great Powers”, “projections of power”, “capabilities Vs intentions”, “international system” represent only

⁶ Mazis, I. Th. (2002) op. cit., p. 30.

⁷ See indicatively: Mackinder, H. J. (2018) *Democratic ideals and reality: The geographical pivot of history*. Moscow: Origami. Spykman, N. J. (1944) *The geography of peace*. Harcourt: Brace and Company.

⁸ Mazis, I. Th. and Darras, N. (2015) Systemic Geopolitical Modelling. Part 2: Subjectivity in Prediction of Geopolitical Events. *GeoJournal*, Spatially Integrated Social Sciences and Humanities, Springer Verlag, 80 (4).

⁹ Mazis, I. Th. and Darras, N. (2014) Systemic Geopolitical Modelling. Part 1: Prediction of Geopolitical Events. *GeoJournal*, Springer Verlag, 79 (4).

¹⁰ Mazis, I. Th. (2017) Methodology for Systemic Geopolitical Analysis according to the Lakatosian model. *Geopolitics Academic Dissertations*, LXVI, p. 676.

¹¹ Gilpin, R. (2008) The theory of hegemonic war. In: Rotberg, R. I. and Rabb, T. K. (eds.) *The origin and prevention of major wars*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 15–37. P. 15.

¹² Mazis, I. Th. (2017) op. cit., p. 682.

¹³ Mazis, I. Th. (2017) op. cit., pp. 676–81.

some of the core terms met in both the systemic geopolitical analysis and structural realism of international relations theory.

On structural realism

The “father” of structural realism Kenneth Waltz proceeded into producing an amalgam of theoretical hypotheses explaining how international politics evolves, but he never promised that his tool could cure any disease and offer a full description for the whole spectrum of causes and effects. On the contrary, Waltz warned that unit-level analysis is a desideratum, even if it is seemingly impossible, due to the uncountable variables included at the practical level. It is often neglected that Waltz noted in his research, in addition to his acclaimed *“Theory of International Politics”*,¹⁴ that:

“The bothersome limitations of systemic explanations arise from the problem of weighing unit-level and structural causes. [...] One cannot say for sure whether the structural or the unit-level cause is the stronger. The difficulty of sorting causes out is a serious, and seemingly inescapable, limitation of systems theories of international politics. Structures shape and shove. They do not determine behaviours and outcomes, not only because unit-level and structural causes interact, but also because the shaping and shoving of structures may be successfully resisted. We attribute such success to Bismarck when we describe him as a diplomatic virtuoso. [...] With skill and determination structural constraints can sometimes be countered. Virtuosos transcend the limits of their instruments and break the constraints of systems that bind lesser performers. Thinking in terms of systems dynamics does not replace unit-level analysis nor end the search of sequences of cause and effect. Thinking in terms of systems dynamics does change the conduct of the search and add a dimension to it. Structural thought conceives of actions simultaneously taking place within a matrix. Change the matrix – the structure of the system – and expected actions and outcomes are altered”.¹⁵

It is commonly admitted that survival is the upmost aim of every actor and its efforts to achieve it are measured via the capabilities acquired, since *“success is the ultimate test of policy, and success is defined as preserving and strengthening the state [...] as they are in a self-help situation, survival outranks profit as a goal, since survival is a prerequisite to the achievement of other ends [...] maintaining the status quo is the minimum goal of any great power”*.¹⁶ Towards this aim, the analysis can be reflected on several aspects of the first (man), the second (the state) or the third image (the international system).¹⁷ However, only in the margins of the third image (that of international system), a cohesive theory can be produced, since this level includes the correlation of capabilities representing a profoundly measurable variable (population, defence budget, GDP, military units, etc.). In a complex world, a complex and multifactorial theory is needed, and this is the theoretical proposal given by systemic geopolitical analysis with a relevant methodology and all the necessary epistemological prerequisites. The need for complexity and pragmatology (i.e. the search for achievable and specific conclusions) is also understood via Kenneth Waltz’s writings:

“Neorealism contends that international politics can be understood only if the effects of structure are added to the unit-level explanations of traditional realism. By emphasizing how structures affect actions and outcomes, neorealism rejects the assumption that man’s innate lust for power constitutes a sufficient cause of war in the absence of any other. It reconceives the causal link between interacting units and international outcomes. According to the logic of international politics, one must believe that some causes of international outcomes are the result of interactions at the unit level, and, since variations in presumed causes do not correspond very closely to variations in observed outcomes, one must also assume that others are located at the structural level. Causes at the level of units interact with those at the level of structure, and, because they do so, explanation at the unit level alone is bound to be misleading. If an approach allows the consideration of both unit-level and structural-level causes, then it can cope with both the changes and the continuities that occur in a system”.¹⁸

Structure is analysed as far as measurement matters and specific results are searched for. For this reason, realism evolves into that level focusing on terms such as “internal and external balancing”, “self-help”, “security dilemma”, “antagonism”, “state-centric analysis” and “international anarchy”. Referring to the latter, it can be considered the paradigmatic approbation by both sides, in the sense that Lowes Dickinson puts it: *“While this anarchy continues the struggle between States will tend to assume a certain stereotyped form. One*

¹⁴ Waltz, K. (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. Reading: MA: Addison-Wesley.

¹⁵ Waltz, K. (1986) Reflections on theory of international politics: A response to my critics. In: Keohane, R. (ed.) *Neorealism and its critics*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 322–45. Pp. 343–44.

¹⁶ Waltz, K. (1979) op. cit., p. 117.

¹⁷ See: Waltz, K. (2001) *Man, the state, and war: A theoretical analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁸ Waltz, K. (1989) The origins of war in neorealist theory. In: Rotberg, R. I. and Rabb, T. K. (eds.) *The origin and prevention of major wars*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 39–52. P. 40.

will endeavour to acquire supremacy over the other for motives at once of security and of domination, the others will combine to defeat it, and history will turn upon the two poles of empire and the balance of power”.¹⁹

International anarchy is the main reason behind the lack of trust in the international system, a fact provoking a continuous search for power and relevant antagonisms up to security dilemmas and the actors’ need for balancing. This reality described by structural realism is fully accepted by systemic geopolitical analysis which just furthers the argument into aspects neglected to be measured. It is characteristic that systemic geopolitical methodology analyses leadership, international organizations, non–state actors and of course states as determining factors of balance of power.²⁰ In practice, it is a difficult procedure and thus, choosing geopolitical indicators – i.e. the variables to be measured – represents the crux of the matter. However, it is absolutely necessary for the best and fullest description of the actual world.

The common basis of thought and further contributions

Geopolitics represents the common theoretical ground referring to “*territory, natural environment and people who live in this context*”.²¹ Apart from that point of the field of human geography, systemic level analysis is the profound common basis of thought of systemic geopolitical analysis and structural realism. Emphasis on structure contributes towards objectivity, since only the measurable variables are included into the analysis resulting to the desiderata of specification and accuracy. Besides, when referring to international politics, it is an undisputed fact that “*actions are always conditioned upon (a response to / caused by) a certain context, and those actions can only be fully understood in relation to that context*”.²² There is always a cause–and–effect gamble, which condemns the schools of thought to focus on the principle of phenomenism and descriptive Thucydidean analysis in order to broaden their explanatory value.

Systemic geopolitical analysis and structural realism adopt this logic and stand aside in the opposite of dogmatism and deontology. As Edward H. Carr criticized the inter–war liberalism, similarly the two theoretical conceptualizations are opposed to the present–day internationalism and the neglect of power as the upmost criterion of international politics formation. It is important to be reminded that “*Carr’s critique of inter–war liberalism shows that the concerns for peace and justice articulated by Wilson, Eden and Briand were articulations of the national interest of the victorious allies and that the enlightenment ideals of cosmopolitanism and humanitarianism, upon which their liberalism was based, were, when they were developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, themselves plans to perpetuate an international status quo favourable to the French monarchy*”.²³ In this sense and on the occasion of the post–Cold War “optimism”, systemic geopolitical analysis and structural realism reflected the need for a return to basics. So, why are they considered different schools? As Barry Buzan has noted:

“*It is clear that realism as a whole does not privilege any one level of analysis. Classical realists, most notably Morgenthau, emphasise the roots of power politics in human nature. Neo–realists focus on structure at the system level, but even Waltz freely acknowledges that this mode of analysis has to be accompanied by a unit level theory in order to get a complete explanation of events. At the unit level, realists of all sorts give primacy to the state as opposed to other units, but it is not a characteristic of realism to treat the unit level itself as prime. Realism operates on all three levels – system, unit and individual (and on the sub–levels between them – sub–systemic/regional, bureaucratic), though it does favour the top and bottom ones. It should not be forgotten that the arch neo–realist Waltz is the author of a study in comparative foreign policy making (1967). One of the bitterest arguments within the discipline of International Relations has been between those stressing the importance of the system level as the key generator of behaviour (mostly neo–realists, but also varieties of liberals and Marxists), and those arguing in favour of the unit level (mostly foreign policy analysts)*”.²⁴

This last point means that systemic geopolitical analysis comes to cover the gap that Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer themselves have recognized, but they avoided to deal with it. Ioannis Th. Mazis’s²⁵ remarks that a well–organized analysis has to include all the variables determining the cause–and–effect procedure are met with what systemic geopolitical analysis comes to cover. On this line of thought, the question about foreign policy theory is also answered, since prominent figures of structural realism – such as Elman and

¹⁹ Dickinson, L. (2008) *The European anarchy*. London: Dodo press. P. 1.

²⁰ See: Stogiannos, A. (2019) *The genesis of geopolitics and Friedrich Ratzel: Dismissing the myth of the Ratzelian geodeterminism*. Cham: Springer.

²¹ Mazis, I. Th. (2002) op. cit., p. 15.

²² Elias, J. and Sutch, P. (2007) *International relations: The basics*. London: Routledge. P. 50.

²³ Elias, J. and Sutch, P. (2007) op. cit., p. 42.

²⁴ Buzan, B. (1996) The timeless wisdom of realism? In: Smith, S., Booth, K. and Zalewski, M. (eds.) *International theory: Positivism and beyond*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 47–65. Pp. 51–2.

²⁵ Ioannis Th. Mazis, one of the two writers of the present paper, has introduced systemic geopolitical analysis into the scientific debate over international politics.

Mearsheimer²⁶ – have accepted this possibility, but some others have denied it – such as Waltz. In any case, the methodological tools provided towards that aim could not be considered adequate and this is where systemic geopolitics intrudes. As it has been underlined by Thomas J. Schoenbaum:

*“International relations deal with transactions and relationships among the international actors of the world. States are the focal points of these relationships, but non–state actors also play important roles. The chief categories of non–state actors involved in international relations are (1) intergovernmental organizations, such as the United Nations; (2) multinational corporations, some of which exceed many states in yearly financial turnover; and (3) international NGOs. Foreign policy is uniquely the province of states and consists of the sets of attitudes, transactions, and relations adopted with respect to external problems, situations, and conditions. Domestic actors and influences typically influence foreign policy, to a greater or lesser degree”.*²⁷

Afterwards, the philosophical and conceptual basis remains the same; correlation of power represents the upmost parameter and possible regularities or formalities – such as the fundament of international law – are only resulted from balance of power and of course, balance of interests. Therefore, it is broadly accepted that *“the nature of the international system condemns international law to all the weaknesses and perversions that it is so easy to deride. International law is merely a magnifying mirror that reflects faithfully and cruelly the essence and the logic of international politics. In a fragmented world, there is no ‘global perspective’ that anyone can authoritatively assess, endorse or reject the separate national efforts at making international law serve international interests above all. Like the somber universe of Albert Camus Caligula, this is a judgeless world where no one is innocent”.*²⁸

Conclusive remarks

The current paper has aimed to describe the conceptual contribution of systemic geopolitical analysis to the debate on a theory of international politics. It has emphasized on its common bases with structural realism and the parallel routes of their tradition. However, it has been underlined that systemic geopolitical analysis offers a cohesive methodological framework giving answers to the difficulties described by prominent figures of structural realism, such as Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer. For this reason, the questions reflected the ontology of the international system as well as the fact that its description is – and should be – the sole and upmost aim in epistemological terms.

It is highlighted that the common acceptance of international anarchy and the conceptual predominance of “power”, in addition to the organization of humanity in collective terms, are accepted by both the approaches and best describe and analyse the causes and the effects of antagonism, cooperation, war and peace. This is exactly the crux of the matter and it is not self–evident in the world bibliography. Many publications and researches of any kind present theories which devaluate the ontological aspects of international order, neglecting at the same time that the essence of the international system remains the same from the time of Thucydides until nowadays. The causes of war of uneven growth and hegemonism still represent core pathogenies of the international system. The philosophical background is the same and the only changing aspect refers to the scientific capability to decode, analyse and even predict at least in terms of generalised trends; systemic geopolitical analysis answers to this challenge which has been imposed – as it has been mentioned already – by the structural realists themselves.

Besides, geography gives a precisely described basis of reference and, in accordance with the analysis of collective human behaviour, offers the determinant factors behind collective action and the reasons of the significance of power. This explains why real – without blinkers – study of the ontology urges towards the complementary – and not the disjunctive – use of systemic geopolitical analysis and structural realism. The eclectic use of these approaches is possible as far as they are both systemic theories with a common theoretical, philosophical and ontology–oriented tradition as well as common challenges beyond.

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²⁶ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001) *The tragedy of Great Power politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
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²⁷ Schoenbaum, Th. J. (2006) *International relations, The path not taken: Using international law to promote world peace and security*. New York: Cambridge University Press. P. 41.

²⁸ Hoffman, S. (2007) The uses and limits of international law. In: Art, R. and Jervis, R. (eds.) *International politics: Enduring concepts and contemporary issues*. 8th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, pp. 114–26. P. 117.

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