

The Theory of Regional Security Complexes: Exploring the Options

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Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT): the argument since the caesura of the field after the demise of the "bipolar" international system, international relations scholars have attempted to move away from the holist perception that the aggregate (global) level of state interaction determines international politics in toto.¹ The move to focus on the political and security dimension of regional interaction that is at stake here has been spearheaded by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever who are the most forthcoming in their theoretical claim and empirical outreach.² Whereas the Deutschian idea of "security communities," reconceptualised by Adler and Barnett, remains limited to the pacified regions of Western Europe and North America (at least in its empirical

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grounding), neglecting the non-existence of security communities in most of the areas of the non-Western world, the “Regional Security Complex Theory” (RSCT) put forward by Buzan and Waever sets out to devise the modified patterns of international behaviour into a new security theory, claiming to evaluate the relative power and mutual relationship between regionalising trends on the hand side and globalising trends on the other.³

The central argument of RSCT, that the international system is constituted by different systems and that the regional level of analysis is operative at any given time, challenges the notion, that there is one, all encompassing system ‘on and around the planet Earth’.⁴ According to Buzan and Waever, regional security complexes constitute a fourth tier of structure next to the domestic, inter-regional and global levels of analysis. Focusing solely on the global-systemic level is considered an unnecessary abstraction from what is happening on the immediate, regional level. RSCT hence contradicts both with the global-systemic holism of neo-realism on the one hand side and the globalist notion of de-territorialisation on the other. For most states in the international system, the authors argue, it is the power of the region that is immediately pertinent to national security:

Security complexes are about the relative intensities of security relations that lead to distinctive regional patterns shaped by both the distribution of power and relations of amity and enmity. A security complex is defined as a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be

analysed or resolved apart from another. The formative dynamics and structure of a security complex are normally generated by the units within it-by their security perceptions of, and interactions with, each other.⁵

Incorporating “social” elements into the RSCT equation, Buzan and Waever further contend that

National Security ... is not in itself a meaningful level of analysis. No nation’s security is self-contained: it is about other states and thus inherently relational. Global security on the other hand refers at best to an aspiration, not a reality ... The region, in contrast, refers to the constellation where states or other units link together sufficiently closely that their securities cannot be considered separately from each other.⁶

The focus of Buzan and Waever on regional security complexes is an indicator of the increasing unease of IR scholarship with the orthodoxy of categories associated with political realism and especially the neo-realist version, without however, substantially moving away from its basic inclinations and legacies.⁷ Whilst Buzan and Waever’s innovation is conducive for showing that structure oscillates between local, inter-state, regional and global levels (the “security constellation” in Buzan and Waever’s terminology), RSCT fails to detach itself from the (neo)-realist culture of thought: with its level-of-analysis methodology, its positivistic claim ‘to generate predictive scenarios’⁸ and its holist contention that the theory ‘enables one to understand [the] new [post-Cold War] structure and to evaluate the relative balance of power of, and mutual relationship within it between, regionalising and globalising

trends',⁹ RSCT fails to move away from the most central tenets of realist thought.

"Via media" or realist variation?

Despite the incentive to portray RSCT as a linkage theory, sometimes loyal to "constructivism", sometimes deemed to be in the neo-realist tradition, and in this effort reflecting a contemporary trend within IR theory to explore a "via media" between the two philosophies, a second look at Buzan and Waever's work suggests that their model has not distanced itself from realist Weltanschauung.¹⁰ At least three realist propositions that are central to the theory and methodology of RSCT permeate the argument. The first of these is an evasive conceptualisation of properties of state interaction processes. Here, Buzan has reverted to his earlier "structural realist" notion about interaction processes in anarchic systems. In *Logic of Anarchy*, focusing upon interaction process between states (or units) was essentially a move to soften the rigidity of the neo-realist claim about an all-encompassing, ahistoric, "Hobbesian" international self-help system.¹¹ That argument has not been modified to fit "social" (or constructivist) standards as Buzan and Waver suggest, however. RSCT reverts to the conceptualisation of interaction as process formations occurring at the unit-(domestic) level, undervaluing the structure of interaction itself. But does it suffice to treat interaction as a unit-level capacity defined as 'absolute capability that transcend the unit level, but which are not structural in the sense of having to do with the positional arrangement of the units',¹² or is it legitimate to attribute structural qualities to regional-systemic processes

of interaction themselves, a move followed by Alexander Wendt in relation to global-systemic structures?¹³

Second, RSCT remains committed to a negative understanding of the meaning of security.¹⁴ Whilst Buzan and Waever suggest a relational approach, in which actors produce security through interaction with each other, the authors infer a negative meaning to security as threats to survival that require or mobilise radical counterstrategies, a semantic misrepresentation that suggests affinity to the realist (and traditional Strategic Studies) credo about perpetual security dilemmas.¹⁵ By extension of that negative understanding, RSCs are considered to be "securitised" zones of conflict and distinct from "desecuritised" regions. The term security, also referring to trust, partnership, community etc. is hence reserved for conflict, mistrust, confrontation and essentially insecurity. In other words, Buzan and Waever suggest that a "secure region" which we would conventionally understand to be a good thing is actually a "desecuritised" zone, defined as a community where 'actors stop treating each other as security problems and start behaving as friends.'¹⁶ According to Buzan and Waever, even that "desecuritised" stage is not a very relevant option however, implicitly suggesting that the reproductive logic of "securitisation" (i.e. seeing others as security threats) is perennial. That negative misrepresentation of the meaning of security links the RSCT model to the elements of threat and fear, two factors that are essential to its methodology. A look at Buzan's earlier writings exemplifies the point. According to him, '[t]he principal factor defining a complex is usually a high level of threat/fear which is felt mutually among two or more major states.'¹⁷ What is problematic,

however, is that if a regional security complex is defined by a “high level of threat and fear,” a region can never really be a security community in the Deutschian sense, where actors cannot imagine a war between each other.¹⁸ RSCT’s amity-enmity continuum is hence reduced to the realist axis, limiting the options to “a little bit of fear” and “a lot of fear.” It comes as no surprise then that in its empirical application, RSCT classifies regions as inherently conflict ridden and trapped in the “Hobbesian” world of self-help anarchy. Thus, even the European Union, characterised in earlier writings as a ‘resolved or matured security complex’¹⁹ and recently as a ‘security community’ remains haunted by its conflictual past,²⁰ integrating first and foremost to re-attain global power:

The integration scenario at first sounds like the classical idealist vision of “unify for peace” as it was professed by philosophers and irenists for centuries, but in contrast to their futile appeals, there is today a real power basis for taking integration and fragmentation as two equally realistic options: Europe is today as never before in its international history one region amongst many. In this situation, the main European powers are not global powers in their own right, and the vision of integration is therefore no longer an idealistic appeal to the globally leading powers for surrendering their power. It is a precondition for re-gaining global standing and - as the other side of this coin - for representing internal dynamics of power balancing, fear and rivalry.²¹

Propensity for conflict and aversion to movement towards communitarian systems is central to the methodology of RSCT.

By focusing upon polarity as the nucleus of regional structure, the reproductive, rather than transformative logic of conflictual anarchy is accentuated. Movement, and here especially change towards the amity end of the continuum, is dampened by the stratification of structure along the lines of polarity on the one hand side and a typology of different manifestations of security complexes on the other (standard, centred, great power, supercomplexes). The essential structure of regional security complexes hence remains material, firmly steeped into the neo-realist notion of relative power capabilities and self-help anarchy. As the third realist streak permeating RSCT, holding on to a materialist notion of structure renders impotent the option of amicable relations, because actors interact in an anarchic sub-structure of the international system. Moreover, that regional anarchy is reproduced by the deep structure of the global system itself which constitutes the 'condition for the nature of regional dynamics.'²² There are then three methodological presuppositions which prevent movement towards the amicable end of the RSCT continuum: First, variations of enmity and amity are confined to the level of threat and exclude any transcendence of "Self-Other" delineation. Second, stratification of regional structure along the lines of anarchy and polarity requires balance of power calculations, which are anathema to communitarian principles. And third, regional structure is reinforced by the deep structure of the global-systemic level, trapping actors into a perennial cycle of international "self-help" anarchy.

By drifting away from global-systemic holism, Buzan and Waever have elevated discourse about regional politics to a higher ontological, theoretical and methodological status. Yet, by reverting to a negative

interpretation of security, a materialist conceptualisation of structure and the attribution of process to the unit-level, the study of the exogenous regional structure and its impact on the internal constitution of states has continued to be excluded. By necessity of its realist nucleus then, RSCT has an overt propensity for conflict. That realist demeanour is not only central to the methodology of the approach, it is also exemplified in the empirical operationalisation of the theory. As we have seen, even the European Union is not considered to constitute a security community in the Deutschian sense and remains haunted by its conflictual past to the extent that the return to barbarism postulated by John J. Mearsheimer is not ruled out.²³ It does not come as a surprise then that Buzan and Waever confirm the often repeated representation of the “Middle-Eastern” regional complex (and the Persian Gulf as its sub-complex) as the archetypal “perennial conflict formation”.²⁴ That ultimately hermetic conclusion follows-by necessity-RSCT’s pessimistic demeanour and lends “theoretical legitimisation” to the unwarranted, dismal fatalism intrinsic to most scholarship on West Asia.²⁵

An alternative ontology: the cultural content of regional structures

The representation of world politics in materialist terms exaggerates the obduracy of self-help anarchy, whilst undervaluing the effects of process. Accentuating process would warrant attributing structural qualities to interaction. Buzan and Waever, however, stick to the notion that process is separable from structure, since the methodology of RSCT requires a justifiable distinction between levels of analysis and adheres to a reproductive rather than transformative logic

of anarchy.²⁶ A critical-cultural approach towards regions would draw an alternative picture. If we attribute structural qualities to interaction process, the social system under focus develops emergent properties which may have causal impact on its constituent units. In other words, to say that social systems have emergent properties is to say that they shape and are being shaped by their members.²⁷ Interaction is hence not merely a unit level capability without structural qualities. Rather the contrary: by interacting in (international) society, units construct a system of relationships and patterns with reflexive causal powers which transcends and shapes its constituent components. In (international) society that relational structure is analogous to a "cultural system," constituted by norms, institutions, values, rules, in short ideational propositions, shared among two or more units. Sociologist Margaret Archer suggests in this context:

As an emergent entity the Cultural System has an objective existence and autonomous relations amongst its components ... At any moment the CS [Cultural System] is the product of historical Socio-Cultural interaction, but having emerged (emergence being a continuous process) then qua product, it has properties of its own. Like structure, culture is man-made but escapes its makers to act back upon them.²⁸

Archer refers to an objectively existing cultural system which is the product of interaction and which acts upon its constituent parts. This systemic property of culture is close to what Clifford Geertz called 'extrinsic sources of information' – the structural formation of intersubjectively shared knowledge.²⁹ But that cultural system is

not overwhelmingly deterministic. Unit and cultural system interact continuously. They are mutually constitutive and codetermined.³⁰ Culture conceived of in this sense is 'not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly-described.'³¹

In their focus on international society, IR scholars are not primarily interested in the relationship between individual and society but the interaction between political actors (or units, primarily the state) and the international system. The cultural produce of this interaction is what Mlada Bukovansky termed "international political culture."³² Political culture has a long and some would say troublesome history in the social sciences and reconstructing its utility for the purpose of regional interaction would not be without perils. Reviewing "traditional" literature on the subject, John Duffield defines political culture as 'the subjective orientations toward and assumptions about the political world that characterise the members of a particular society and that guide and inform their political behaviour'.³³ In his analysis of "cultures of antimilitarism" in Germany and Japan, Thomas Berger differentiates between two other approaches of political culture: The "anthropological" bottom-up approach, relating to the deep structure of a particular society and defined in terms of its personality, religion, language, and primary socialisation. And the "historical-cultural" approach, referring to processes of socialisation which shape the perception of decision-makers and influences state behaviour.³⁴

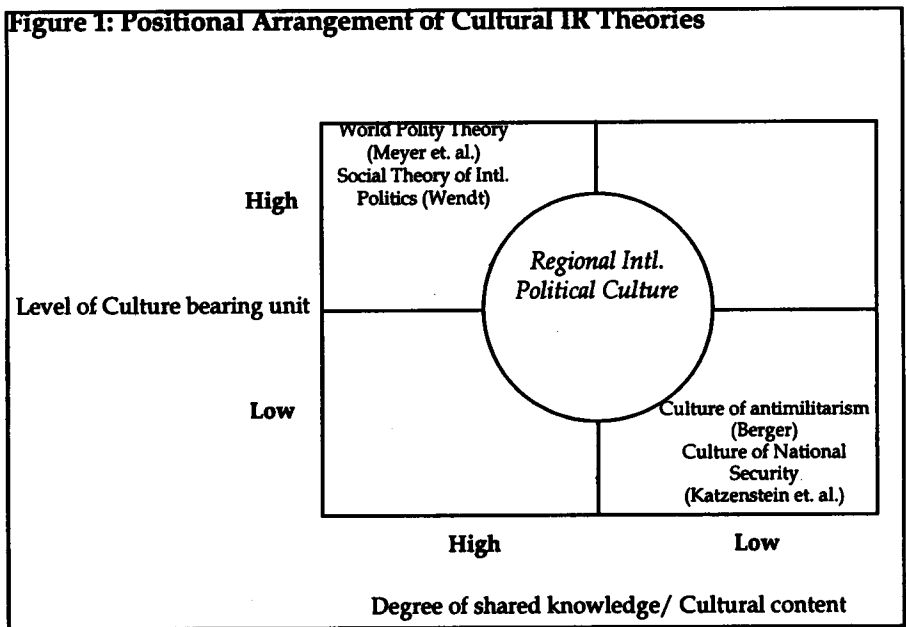
Both Berger and Duffield and indeed the majority of

contemporary cultural IR approaches follow the lead of traditional analysis on political culture as a unit-level phenomenon. In its manifold manifestations, political culture appears as “cultures of national security,” “cultural realism,” or “political-military culture” in recent IR scholarship, accentuating the unit level of analysis as the appropriate one for exploration.³⁵ Apart from treating political culture as a domestic property, however, cultural systems can also be discerned at higher structural levels— global as Meyer and colleagues would argue and regional if we would revert to Buzan and Waever’s argument.³⁶ In abstract terms that international political culture can be defined as the ‘most fundamental fact about the structure of an international system, giving meaning to power and content to interest’.³⁷ More specifically it has been referred to

as that set of implicit or explicit propositions, shared by the major actors in the system, about the nature of legitimate political authority, state identity, and political power, and the rules and norms derived from these propositions that pertain to interstate relations within the system.³⁸

Focusing on the cultural structure of regional systems privileges process over statism or action over “defensive-positionalism”³⁹ A critical cultural alternative to Buzan and Waever’s model would be interested in the outcomes of the relationship between the constituent parts of the regional society.⁴⁰ Employing political culture as an analytic device to conceptualise regional systems yields an alternative model of process on Buzan and Waever’s “fourth tier of international structure.” Figure 1 illustrates the spectrum of culture bearing units and the degree of

cultural content or shared knowledge. In the upper left quadrant, we have holist theories which are concerned with the culture of (global) international society, where the degree of shared knowledge or cultural content is relatively low. In the lower right quadrant, we have concepts dealing with cultures expressed on the national level, where the cultural content inhibiting the unit is relatively high. Both variations have gained inspiration from the style of thought pertinent to discourse produced by US American IR scholars and its two most notable traditions: National Security Studies and neo-realism. A regional-cultural approach may be positioned in between and would operate on the same level of analysis as Buzan and Waever's Regional Security Complex Theory.



Cultural IR scholarship is neutral regarding the appropriate level of analysis in world politics. The focus on regional cultural systems would not predetermine causal superiority, neither would it suggest a fixed essentialisation of culture which would exclude alternative narratives. Yet, it appears, that the regional level of international politics yields a higher degree of shared knowledge in terms of political-strategic interaction (and not necessarily so much in economic relations) than the global level. For most states, the region is the environment of primary socialisation, inhibited by a thick layer of shared knowledge, constituted by a higher degree of interaction than on the global level. "Constructivists" highlighting the impact of norms on state behaviour support that notion, observing that '[n]orms may be regional ... but not global'.⁴¹ To give an example: shared knowledge about the norm of "pan-Islamism" between Iraq and Iran is "thicker" than shared knowledge about the same phenomenon between lets say Iraq and Germany. The same could be said about norm relations between Brazil and Argentina or India and Pakistan, suggesting that the ideational structure of the region is ontologically superior to the global level. In other words, as analysts we can "see" the impact of cultural systems easier if we explore the immediate environment political actors are embedded in. This requires elevating regional interaction to a higher analytical status – a trend that has been audaciously pioneered by Buzan and Waever and that could benefit from a critical-cultural alternative. □

NOTES:

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1. The "state-systemic project" has been pioneered by Kenneth N. Waltz. See his seminal *Theory of International Politics*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1979. His structural perspective of international politics has been recently re-conceptualised by Alexander Wendt in a rather more "constructivist" fashion. See his *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

2. See Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wild, *Security. A new Framework for Analysis*, London, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998; Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

3. See Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds, *Security Communities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

4. David J. Singer, 'The Global System and Its Subsystems: A Developmental View', in James N. Rosenau, ed., *Linkage Politics: Essays on the Convergence of National and International Systems*, New York, Free Press, 1969, p. 30.

5. Buzan et. al., *Security. A new Framework for Analysis*, p. 201, emphasis in original.

6. Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, 'An Inter-Regional Analysis: NATO's New Strategic Concept and the Theory of Security Complexes', in Sven Behrendt and Christian-Peter Hanelt, eds, *Bound to Cooperate - Europe and the Middle East*, second edition, Gütersloh, Bertelsmann Foundation, 2001, p. 58, emphasis in original.

7. The "complex interdependence" model developed by Keohane and Nye which softens realist propositions without leaving its inclination towards conflict and military force, would be another example. See Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, third edition, London, Longman, 2001.

8. Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, p. 65.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

10. Wendt and other "mainstream" constructivists write with a similar spirit. See also Emanuel Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 3, no. 3, September 1997, pp. 319-363.

11. See Barry Buzan, Charles Jones & Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1993.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

13. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, especially chapters 4, 6 and 7.

14. On this point see also Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests. A Sociology of International Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 37-44 and Helga Haftendorn, 'The Security Puzzle: Theory-Building and Discipline Building in

- International Security', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 35, no.1, 1991, pp. 3-17.
15. See also McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests*, p. 52 ff.
16. Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, p. 56.
17. Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, second edition, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 193 ff.
18. See Adler and Barnett, *Security Communities*, especially part 1.
19. Buzan, *People, States and Fear*, p. 218.
20. Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, pp. 375-376.
21. Buzan and Waever, 'An Inter-Regional Analysis', in Behrendt and Hanelt, eds, *Bound to Cooperate*, pp. 68-69, emphasis in original.
22. Buzan, *People, States and Fear*, p. 62.
23. See John J. Mearsheimer, 'Back to the Future. Instability in Europe After the Cold War', *International Security*, vol. 15, no.1, 1999, pp. 5-56. On the prospect of conflict in Europe see Buzan et. al., *Security. A new Framework for Analysis*, pp. 179-189 and Buzan and Waever, 'An Inter-Regional Analysis', in Behrendt and Hanelt, eds, *Bound to Cooperate - Europe and the Middle East*, pp. 68-72.
24. See Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, part three.
25. The necessarily imperfect term is intended to supplement the problematic phrase "Middle East," denoting the Western area of the Asian continent excluding the Maghrib (North Africa) and encompassing Israel, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Iran and the other Persian Gulf littoral states. On the invented delineation of the Middle East see Pinar Bilgin, 'Inventing Middle East: The making of regions through security discourses', in Bjørn Olav Utvik and Knut S. Vikør, eds, *The Middle East in a Globalised World. Papers from the Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies*, Oslo 1998, London, C. Hurst & Co., 2000, pp. 10-37; Roderic H. Davison, 'Where is the Middle East?', in Richard Nolte, ed., *The Modern Middle East*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1963, pp. 13-29; Ghassan Salamé, 'The Middle East: Elusive Security, Indefinable Region', *Security Dialogue*, vol. 25, no.1, 1994, pp. 17-35; Bassam Tibi, *Conflict and War in the Middle East. From Interstate War to New Security*, second edition, London, Macmillan, 1998, pp. 43-60.
26. For the level of analysis problematic see David J. Singer, 'The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,' in Klaus Knorr and Sydney Verba, eds, *The International System: Theoretical Essays*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961, pp. 77-92 and Barry Buzan, 'The Level of Analysis Problem in International Relations Reconsidered', in Ken Booth and Steve Smith, eds, *International Political Theory Today*, London, Polity Press, 1995, pp.198-216.
27. Most sociological and "constructivist" analysis subscribes to that viewpoint. See Mlada Bukovansky, *Legitimacy and Power Politics. The American and French Revolutions in International Political Culture*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, especially chapter 4; Nicholas Onuf, *The Republican Legacy in International Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998; Margaret S Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory*, revised edition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
28. Archer, *Culture and Agency*, p. 107.
29. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, p. 92.
30. It is important to remember that cultural systems, however monolithic and

deterministic they may appear, are essentially human fabrications. Their objective status does not divorce them from human action. The relationship between the individual, the producer, and the cultural world, the product, is and remains a dialectical one. Both are in constant interaction with each other. I have argued elsewhere that these aspects receive their proper recognition once cultural systems are understood in terms of an ongoing dialectical process composed of the four moments of externalisation, objectification, internalisation, and introjection. See Arshin Adib-Moghaddam 'Islamic utopian romanticism and the foreign policy culture of Iran', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2005, pp. 265-292 and Arshin Adib-Moghaddam *International Politics in the Persian Gulf: A Cultural Genealogy*, London/New York, Routledge, 2006.

31. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 14.

32. See Bukovansky, *Legitimacy and Power Politics*.

33. John S. Duffield, 'Political Culture and State Behaviour: Why Germany Confounds Neorealism', *International Organization*, vol. 53, no. 4, 1999, p. 774.

34. See Thomas U. Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism. National Security in Germany and Japan*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, pp. 9-10.

35. The phrases were employed by following authors respectively: Peter Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York, Columbia University Press; Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China', in Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security*, pp. 216-268; Thomas U. Berger, 'Norms, Identity and National Security in Germany and Japan', in Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security*, pp. 317-356.

36. See John W. Meyer, John Boli, George M. Thomas & Francisco O. Ramirez, 'World Society and the Nation-State', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 103, no.1, 1997, pp. 144-181.

37. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 250.

38. Bukovansky, *Legitimacy and Power Politics*, p. 2.

39. For the term see Joseph M. Grieco, 'Realist International Theory and the Study of World Politics', in Michael W. Doyle & G. John Ikenberry, eds, *New Thinking in International Relations Theory*, Oxford, Westview, 1997, p. 167.

40. Wendt calls that perspective 'interaction-level micro-structural theorising'. See Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, especially pp. 147-150.

41. Martha Finnemore & Kathryn Sikkink, 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1997, p 892.