

Thinking about Power in a Complex System

Dylan Kissane
School of International Studies
University of South Australia

Paper presented at the 2nd Global International Studies Conference, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 23-26 July 2008.

Please do not cite without permission.

It is what Leo Tolstoy called history's most essential question: what is power? The question, however, is no less essential to the discipline of international relations where debates over who is powerful, how power is attained, how power can be projected and the very nature of power itself are common. While liberalists, constructivists and critical theorists have all opined on power in international politics it is in the realist tradition that power has emerged as a truly central theme. Realist scholars – from Thucydides and his depiction of the Peloponnesian War, through Machiavelli, Hobbes, Carr and Morgenthau, to Waltz and Mearsheimer writing in the post-Cold War period – all concede a significant place in their theoretical and analytical approaches to the concept of power and largely agree on what power in international politics is. However, all realists also assume that international relations take place in an anarchic system; if the system is not anarchic and is instead imagined to be complex, the notion of power in international politics will also need to be re-imagined. Power under complexity is not the same thing as power under anarchy.

This paper will explore the notion of power in a complex system in three parts. The first part of this paper will consider the various realist approaches to power by considering early, mid-century and current realists from across the paradigm. Turning to Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Carr, Morgenthau, Waltz and Mearsheimer in turn, this first section will outline and explain the nature of power in realist anarchy. The second part of this paper will offer the outline of a theory of international politics based upon the assumption of a complex international system. Incorporating a broader range of actors, a new motivation for action and a unique variety of properties attached to the nature of the system, this new approach offers not only a unique approach for analysing and explaining international relations but also a methodology for assessing international politics in the observable, real international system. The third part of this paper explores the notion of power in such a system. Specifically it considers the idea of 'what is powerful' in a system where even the smallest and weakest actor can affect the international politic to the extent that wars, treaties and re-makings of the international order can result. In concluding the argument, this paper will suggest that re-imagining the international system on a base of complexity requires not only a reassessment of actors, motivations and systemic properties but also a re-assessment of some of the most basic notions of international relations, including the notion of power.

Power in Realism, Power under Anarchy

The notion of power is central in realist approaches to analysing and explaining international politics. In this part of the paper the definition and role of power in the work of a series of prominent realist scholars will be described. The authors selected for this review are broadly representative of the realist paradigm as a whole: the historian Thucydides, in particular his account known as the Melian Dialogue; Machiavelli, in particular his book *The Prince*; Thomas Hobbes, in particular his canonical *Leviathan*; EH Carr, with a focus on *The Twenty Years' Crisis*; Hans Morgenthau, the classical realist whose *Politics among Nations* remains a staple of the discipline; Kenneth Waltz, whose *Man, the State, and War* and *Theory of International Politics* revolutionised international relations theory and is described even by critics as "one of the most important contributions to the theory of international relations"; and John Mearsheimer, in particular his offensive realist contributions during the post-Cold War period.¹ Having outlined how each of these realists have

¹ Thucydides. 1998. *The History of the Peloponnesian Wars*. New York: Prometheus Books; Niccoló Machiavelli. 2005. *The Prince*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Thomas Hobbes. 2002. *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* [1 November 2006] <http://tinyurl.com/yz47c6>; EH Carr. 2001. *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939: An*

defined and employed the notion of power in their respective work, the common elements of power in realism will be described. In concluding this part of the paper, however, it will be noted that each of these realists also imagine and assume an international system that is anarchic and their commonalities on what power is correlate with their common assumption about the nature of the system. The notion of power in realism, it will be argued, is actually the notion of power under anarchy; if the nature of the system changes, the notion of power might also change.

Thucydides' history of the wars in ancient Greece remains a key text in the study of twenty-first century international relations. In particular, the Grecian's account of the negotiations between the people of Melos and Athenian envoys, usually referred to as the Melian Dialogue, has emerged as a prototypical account of realist principles in action. As argued elsewhere, the Melian Dialogue presents the scholar with an historical exchange wherein "the realities of power in a world without an international mediator are made brutally clear to the citizens of Melos".² Power, for Thucydides, is expressed through military means and measured through military capabilities. As Thucydides records, the Athenian envoys refer to their mastery of the seas, their ability to defeat any resistance from the islanders and their allies and the natural law of the powerful: "the powerful exact what they can, and the weak grant what they must".³ In Thucydides' account, power is measured in terms of a military capability which, it is implied, is supported by a certain economic capability. Power, for Thucydides, has a specific and significant financial element as Lisa Kallet-Marx reports:

...Thucydides meticulously presents arguments about the necessity of financial resources in order to attain and exercise power, especially naval power. Since he chose to elucidate the importance of money (*chremata*) and its relationship to the fleet (*nautikon*) and naval empire (*arche*) immediately in the beginning of his *History*, it would seem patent that they are vital to his perception of the historical development of power...⁴

If Thucydides' notion of power was defined by the ability to subdue an enemy by military means it also included a financial element, too. Power – even in the ancient world – is seen to be multifaceted in the realist mind.

Niccoló Machiavelli's *The Prince* has been described in the discipline as "a treatise on power and how a prince could gain or maintain it".⁵ Machiavelli first engages with the notion of power in his third chapter where he offers both "cunning and force" as capabilities of a powerful Prince.⁶ He would later clarify that 'force', as for Thucydides, relates to military capabilities – though significantly Machiavelli's focus is on land forces in contrast to Thucydides' naval forces.⁷ He is

Introduction to the Study of International Relations. New York: Palgrave; Hans Morgenthau. 1993. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf; Kenneth Waltz. 1959. *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press; Kenneth Waltz. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading: Addison-Wesley; Robert Keohane. 1986. 'Realism, Neorealism and the Study of World Politics.' In *Neorealism and its Critics*, edited by Robert Keohane. New York: Columbia University Press, pp.1-26, p.17; John Mearsheimer. 1990a. 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War.' *International Security* 15(1): 5-56; John Mearsheimer. 1990b. 'Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War.' *The Atlantic Monthly* 266(2): 35-50; John Mearsheimer. 1994. 'The False Promise of International Institutions.' *International Security* 19(3): 5-49.

² Dylan Kissane. 2008. *On the Problems in and the Possibilities for Mapping International Chaos*. Paper presented at the 3rd Annual Graduate Conference in Political Science in Memory of Yitzhak Rabin, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel, 17 January 2008, p.2.

³ Thucydides. 1998, p.169.

⁴ Lisa Kallet-Marx. 1993. *Money, Expense, and Naval Power in Thucydides' History 1-5.24*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p.3.

⁵ Travis Murray. 2007. *The Unreliable Ally: Offensive Structural Realism and Rollback in Nicaragua*. MA Thesis, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada, p.4.

⁶ Machiavelli. 2005, p.15.

⁷ Machiavelli. 2005, p.28.

specific in defining the manner in which capabilities should be measured in order to establish how powerful an actor is. Machiavelli equates power with self-sufficiency, writing:

...I judge those princes self-sufficient who, either through abundance of troops or of money, are capable of gathering together a suitable army and of fighting a battle against whoever might attack them.⁸

He goes on to note specific features of powerful princedoms: fortifications, a “high regard” for the military arts, a strong, war-proof economy, quality leadership and sufficient food to survive a siege.⁹ As with his Greek predecessor, then, Machiavelli places significant import on the military capabilities of an international actor in determining its power while simultaneously highlighting other elements of power such as economic resources and the capability to deter attack. The realist Machiavellian Prince must have an army but he should also be aware that power is something more than arms alone.

Thomas Hobbes is clear in stating where differences in power between international actors can be found. He writes in *Leviathan*, “in the condition of meer Nature, the inequality of Power is not discerned, but by the event of Battell” – essentially that, under anarchy, the inequalities in terms of power between actors will be discovered through military battle.¹⁰ Like his realist antecedents, the military capability of a commonwealth is central to its power in international politics. Further, though, power is centralised in *Leviathan* in the form of the commonwealth or state: through the binding together of the people the state takes on the power to protect. This trading in sovereignty from the individual living in fear to a commonwealth able to protect the people and deter rivals is the key to understanding both Hobbes’ ‘state of nature’ and his argument for the evolution and necessity of the commonwealth – and, thus, the context of international politics itself. Power for Hobbes, though, shares similarities with both Thucydides and Machiavelli in that the highlighted elements in the state of nature are related to manifestations of violence. Consider the following explanation from *Leviathan*:

Out Of Civil States, There Is Alwayes Warre Of Every One Against Every One Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man...Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man...worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.¹¹

War against all, “every man against every man”, living in continual fear of attack and death – all of this compounds the realist notion that power has a significant violent and, in the context of states, inherently military element. Hobbes’ commonwealth offers a novel explanation of and solution to this violent state of nature but his notion of power is very much in line with his realist predecessors.

⁸ Machiavelli. 2005, p.38.

⁹ Machiavelli. 2005, p.39.

¹⁰ Hobbes. 2002, p.63.

¹¹ Hobbes. 2002, p.57.

Edward Hallett (EH) Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis* stands as the first example of modern realist thought. Carr admits from the outset that his book is not the panacea for the discipline stating that "the science of international politics is in its infancy".¹² Yet if the discipline was then young the notion of power in international politics drew on an ancient tradition. Carr submits that power has three key elements: the military component, the economic component and the "power over opinion".¹³ These three categories of political power are, argues Carr, "closely interdependent" and, further, is difficult to imagine any state possessing one but not another for any length of time.¹⁴ Mirroring his realist antecedents, Carr places great emphasis on the military elements of power in international politics for, as he argues, "the *ultima ratio* of power in international relations is war".¹⁵ The foreign policy of a state is limited by its military strength; put simply, a militarily weak state lacks the options and therefore the power to influence international politics and achieve their strategic aims.¹⁶ Carr notes links between the economic and military elements of power but argues that it is separable: economic power is specifically used in two ways – autarky (self-sufficiency) and in the search for control of foreign markets.¹⁷ The first of these allows a state to survive and the second to prosper at the expense of foreign states. Finally Carr offers the "power of opinion" where state-funded propaganda offers an avenue for states to advance their interests in the international sphere. Through the use of targeted national and international propaganda efforts a state can advance their interests and exert their power over rivals.¹⁸ Thus, Carr both acknowledges the realist tradition of 'power as military capacity' while extending the notion to include both an explicit economic and novel 'power of opinion' element. Multifaceted and more complex, the first of the modern realists laid a foundation for the realists to follow.

Hans Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* remains a part of the disciplinary canon sixty years after its first publishing.¹⁹ In his classical realist treatise Morgenthau is clear in defining power, stating "when we speak of power, we mean man's control over the minds and actions of other men".²⁰ Power for Morgenthau is not force or violence and it is not influence; indeed, Morgenthau is clear in distinguishing between power and force, influence, useable and unusable power, and legitimate and illegitimate power.²¹ While admitting that "in international politics...armed strength as a threat of a potentiality is the most important material factor making for the political power of a nation", he refuses to conclude that military strength is synonymous with political power.²² Power, for Morgenthau, is broader than a military capability; power means having a psychological effect on a rival in order to pursue foreign policy ends. While the threat of military action – and in particular the threat of a nuclear strike – are useful mechanisms to effect this psychological change, there are other mechanisms that are also useful including economic, financial and territorial policies.²³ Thus, like Hobbes and Carr, Morgenthau declares that power is multifaceted. Unlike his predecessors, though, Morgenthau

¹² Carr. 2001, p.3.

¹³ Carr. 2001, p.102.

¹⁴ Carr. 2001, p.102.

¹⁵ Carr. 2001, p.102.

¹⁶ Carr. 2001, p.103.

¹⁷ Carr. 2001, pp.110-111.

¹⁸ Carr. 2001, pp.120-134.

¹⁹ Morgenthau. 1993.

²⁰ Morgenthau. 1993, p.30.

²¹ Morgenthau. 1993, p.31.

²² Morgenthau. 1993, p.31.

²³ Morgenthau. 1993, pp.30-34.

submits that power is an end in itself and that the search for power defines international politics. It would be a position that the structural realists would find subtle fault with, led by the path-breaking work of Kenneth Waltz.

In opposition to Morgenthau, Waltz argues that power is not the end that international actors seek. Rather, it is survival in an international system dominated by anarchy that is the goal of states and power is but a means to achieving that end. In his groundbreaking texts *Man, the States, and War* and *Theory of International Politics* Waltz outlined a realist theory where the frailties and weaknesses, the jealousies and base motivations of the individual were not the driver of political action but, instead, the nature of the system under which politics took place defined the shape of international relations. For Waltz, power was important and it was related, ultimately, to the military potential of the actor. Military capability, and, again, the nuclear capacity of the actor, is essential to determining the power of the actor and other elements of power (economic, financial, and territorial) are only significant in that they support the broader military capacity of the actor. Waltz's neorealist position is not entirely dismissive of non-military components of power, however; indeed, the structural realist is clear in describing the role that economic power plays in establishing who is and who is not a powerful international actor in an anarchic system. Yet it remains the overwhelming position of the structuralists that – in a self-help, anarchic international system – the actor that is militarily powerful is also powerful in the general sense. The scientific approach championed by Waltz simplifies the international environment and reduces the notion of power to that of the earliest, Thucydidean realists: might may not be right, but it is power.

The offensive realism of John Mearsheimer engages with power in an explicit way though, like Waltz, he rejects the classical realist notion of power as an ends in itself. Like the structural realists, Mearsheimer holds that the base aim of states under anarchy is survival; power for states is the means through which this aim can be achieved. Mearsheimer places great emphasis on military capabilities and, in particular, the nuclear weapons capabilities of states. A strong military and a developed nuclear deterrent is key to a state establishing itself as a great power and the lack of either relegates the state to the level of lesser, secondary or minor power. Mearsheimer focuses on military power as the obvious foundation for state power, as Peter Toft describes:

First, great powers aim to build the most formidable military in their region. Especially, they drive to dominate the balance of land forces as land power is the most important means of coercion because it is the main military instrument of conquering and controlling land, which is the supreme political objective in a world of territorial states.²⁴

Mirroring other realists – classical and structural alike – Mearsheimer emphasises the military aspect of power and, as Toft continues, the principal strategy for gaining power in general is via war.²⁵ Mearsheimer does not discount the significance of other aspects of power, including economic wealth, for, as Toft notes, “economic might is an important prerequisite of military might”.²⁶ Power in the gloomy, offensive realist and even neo-Hobbesian world of John Mearsheimer reflects the insecurities of the actors under anarchy: when the stakes are survival the elements of power that are of most concern are those that can best guarantee this for the state.

²⁴ Peter Toft. 2003. *John J. Mearsheimer: An Offensive Realist Between Geopolitics & Power*. Institut for Statskundskab Arbejdsrapport 2003/01, Kobenhavns Universitet, Denmark, p.7.

²⁵ Toft. 2003, p.8.

²⁶ Toft. 2003, p.7.

Realists, then, find some common ground whether describing ancient Grecian warfare or twenty-first century nuclear strategies. Key to all is the military element of an international actor's power. All realists place great emphasis on the military capabilities of actors (whether city-states, Princes, states or superpowers), some even placing all their emphasis on this sole element of power. Some realists, though, expand the notion of what constitutes power in international relations by recognizing a multifaceted notion of power. Economic potential, the power of propaganda over national and international opinion and the capacity to lead are all mentioned as elements of power alongside basic military potential. Realists, too, focus on the power of the most significant actors in the system. For Thucydides and Machiavelli, for example, these are relatively smaller actor such as city-states and Princes that may exist alongside dozens of others in a small geographical region. Alternatively, for Carr, Morgenthau and Waltz the focus is on nation-states, with Mearsheimer narrowing his focus even further to what he refers to as 'great powers'. While not in all cases explicitly denying that power can be held by an actor other than these, they are secondary to how realists imagine their world of conflicting powers.

Central to all the realist approaches, however, is the commitment to the notion of an anarchical international system. Every realist imagines an international political environment where there is no overarching authority, where other actors can never be trusted and where power, as a result, is hoarded by the largest international actors. Realists like Hobbes even argue that the lack of overarching authority is the reason that large international actors emerge and seek power at all. Under anarchy realists opine that power exists only at the highest levels and maintain a focus on those levels to the exclusion of all other levels of political interaction. In short, if it is not happening between states – or in state-backed bodies such as international institutions, for example – then it falls outside of the realm of international politics and discussions of international power are out of place, too. Yet if the international system is assumed to be something other than anarchic, if the base nature and constraints on interactions between international actors is held to be something other than anarchic, it is likely that our understanding of what constitutes power must also change. While realism offers a developed prism by which to comprehend international politics in an anarchic system, a new conception of the international system demands that we seek a new prism by which to imagine, describe, explain and predict it. In the section that follows the basic elements of this alternative understanding of international politics will be outlined, explained and explored and the reasons why such a system demands a new conception of power in international politics posited.

A Non-Anarchic System: The Assumption of Complexity

The assumption that the international system is something other than anarchic in nature is not common in the international relations literature. While it is clear from the review above that realists have and do endorse the notion of an anarchical system, this assumption of systemic anarchy exists across the paradigmatic divide. Liberalists, constructivists and critical theorists all endorse this foundational assumption, though there are significant dissimilarities in how these alternative theories conceive of the impact and effect of anarchy. Yet despite this disciplinary tradition, alternative conceptions of international relations do exist. In this section of the paper the major features of one of these alternative approaches – an approach being developed in the author's doctoral dissertation – will be outlined and the necessity of re-thinking what power is and which actors maintain international power will be revealed. There are three

key components to this approach: first, the number, nature and types of actors in the international political system; second, the goals and motivations of these actors in the international system; and, third, the nature of the system including its properties and the effect that this has on the actors and their choices. Having explained all three of these key components, this section of the paper will conclude by pointing to the obvious reasons that such a system demands a change to the conception of power in international politics.

The International Actors: Alpha, Beta and Gamma Actors

Where realists limit the scope of their theories to the largest actors in the international system – previously city-states and kingdoms but, more recently, nation-states and alliances of the same – this new approach seeks to include all actors that have the potential to influence international politics. Obviously this includes the nation-states prioritised by the realists but it also means engaging in a real way with international institutions, corporations, non-governmental organisations, financial institutions, lobby groups, terrorist groups and individuals. This obviously introduces – potentially – billions of individual actors that interact within the political system, a significant increase on the approximately 200 nation-states that are the preserve of the realists. To make theorising the actions of these disparate actors more parsimonious, this approach separates the actors into three categories: alpha actors, being those actors that have a significant, consistent and ongoing role in the international environment; beta actors, being those that are active in international politics – and deliberately so – but lack the power, capabilities and consistency of impact that alpha actors maintain; and gamma actors, being actors that have influence in the international system but whose influence is not necessarily deliberate. Examples of alpha actors include many states, regional organisation and international institutions; beta actors include small states, international terrorist groups and many corporations; finally, gamma actors include individual persons, from elected officials to ‘the man in the street’. While the capabilities, consistency of international action and capability to be involved in broad facets of international politics vary across the three categories, all three categories of international actors maintain a common motivation for action: survival.

The Goal and Motivation of International Actors: Survival

All actors in the international system share the common goal of survival. This goal, though, is interpreted differently by the three categories of actors. Survival for alpha actors means viability in a multi-generational sense; indeed, alpha actors pursue a survival that they hope and imagine will be permanent. While any rational assessment of alpha actors in history would suggest that even the most powerful actors survive as independent, alpha entities for no more than a few centuries, alpha actors seek to be the exception to this historical rule and to, thus, survive. For beta actors their survival is largely in the hands of others. For an international NGO with an interest based agenda, the disappearance or resolution of its *raison d'être* may see the NGO fold or be dismantled. Survival for such beta actors is measured on a time scale that is commensurate with the ongoing issue of interest and survival means not much more than continued relevance. For corporations survival can be understood in terms of market share: below a certain market share in a certain industry survival becomes unlikely while above a certain level it is almost assured. Gamma actors in the international system are a different case altogether. They do not generally fear conquer or nuclear attack as alpha actors might or understand that they are limited by the popularity of their favourite issue like beta actors. While individual humans may be intellectually or emotionally concerned with the same issues as alpha actors there are more pressing concerns that impact on the possibility for survival, the practicality of which override the ‘softer’ issues that

many individuals would proclaim to find important to their wellbeing. Put simply, while an alpha actor like the Soviet Union can collapse in a matter of months and a beta actor in the corporate world can vanish in a takeover in a matter of weeks, an individual human can cease to survive in a matter of seconds.

In comparison to alpha and beta actors, the international system's gamma actors are incredibly frail. The frailty of individual humans who can die within days of losing access to water and within weeks of losing access to food, who are easy prey for bacteria and viruses and who have little natural defence against extreme weather – let alone against other violent political actors – means that survival is interpreted by most in purely physiological terms. In temporal times, survival for gamma actors is imagined on a timescale of between days and, at the very most, decades. Thus, while alpha, beta and gamma actors share a common goal and are motivated to take action by the notion of their own survival, each category of actor also understands the notion in slightly different ways. Significantly, the idea of survival varies by timescale and intimacy: alpha actors think on century long scales and often in terms of national or institutional survival; beta actors think on timescales measured in decades or longer and in terms of national, institutional and corporate survival; gamma actors imagine timescales of survival of a day-to-day term and in terms of a single human actor. No matter the differences in calculus and timescale, however, survival remains the key to understanding the motivations of actors in the international system.

The Nature of the System: Complexity and its Properties

In this alternative approach, the reality of international relations is assumed to be complex. To say that the international system is complex, though, is to be just as broad and overly parsimonious as realists who assume anarchy; thus, while this alternative approach is founded on a system that is 'complex', the definition of what exactly a complex political system is remains of critical importance. Thus, a complex system is held to be:

...a system for which it is difficult, if not impossible, to restrict its description to a limited number of parameters or characterising variables without losing its essential, global functional properties.²⁷

A system with the structure thus described has four major properties that impact upon the system and the actors existing and emerging within it. As outlined by Pavard and Dugdale, the four major properties of a complex system are (a) non-determinism and non-tractability, (b) limited functional decomposability, (c) distributed nature of information and representation and (d) emergence and self-organisation.²⁸ Each of these properties impacts upon the actors in the system and has implications for the theorising of the system, also. While the implications of complexity are many, the most significant include the impossibility of long-term prediction, the impossibility of drawing conclusions about the system by extrapolating from its constituent parts, the inability of actors to develop complete information about the system and other actors, and the ability of the analyst to identify patterns of emergent behaviour. Complexity, then, presents a very different international reality than the anarchy of the realists and thus demands a rethinking of the notion of power.

²⁷ Definition extracted from the draft of the author's doctoral thesis (unpublished).

²⁸ Bernard Pavard and Julie Dugdale. 2003. *An Introduction to Complexity in Social Science*. [26 May 2008] <http://tinyurl.com/6x77hj>.

Power in a Complex System

An approach to imagining and theorising international politics as described above demands that new assumptions are made about international actors, their motivations for action and the nature of the international system itself. These new assumptions in turn demand that other common notions in international relations are re-assessed, too. In the case of power, this common conception of what makes an actor powerful under anarchy and how power can be measured need to be re-assessed. In this section of the paper the notion of power in a complex system will be explored in four parts: first, the power maintained by all actors in a complex international system; second, the power of individuals and gamma actors to influence international politics; three, the relation between power in a complex system and the nature and properties of that system; and fourth, considering all of these, define what power is in a complex international system and contrast this with the realist notion of power already outlined. As will be made clear, who is powerful and what it takes to be powerful in a complex system differs a great deal from those who are powerful under realist anarchy.

In a complex system all actors – alpha, beta and gamma – have the power to impact on the system as a whole. Alpha actors exert their power consistently in the system. Obvious examples include territorial acquisition through force or threat of force, colonisation, deterrent behaviour and attacks – diplomatic, economic and military – on other actors in the system. Alpha actors commonly subjugate gamma beta and gamma actors through the threat of the resort to force or punishment through a alpha actor enforced system of justice. Beta actors, too, exert power in the system. Non-governmental organisations lobby, pressure, educate and boycott alpha, beta and gamma actors in international politics in order to achieve their tactical ends. Corporate actors exert their power over employees (gamma actors) and, oftentimes, smaller and weaker nation-states (both alpha and beta actors). Extraordinarily influential individuals who fall into the beta level of international actors – financiers and market speculators – exert significant power through economic means over states and people, if lacking the military capacity to do so in the same manner as alpha actors may. These larger of the three levels of international actors, however, are not the only ones that exert power and influence in international politics; gamma actors, too, maintain power under complexity.

The smallest actors in the system have the capacity to begin system-changing conflicts as has been argued in the case of the beginning of World War One where:

...we see that some distinctly sub-system events conspired and interacted to place the Archduke in the firing line of Gavrilo Princip, the assassin who finally took the lives of the couple. A few small changes in the historical, cultural or social realities of the time would have seen either a completely different series of events lead up to the war or, perhaps and more interestingly, the war not occur at all.²⁹

In an international political system an actor that starts a war must be considered a powerful actor. Yet in a complex international system wars can be started by individuals and, as a result, we must admit that international power is maintained in a significant way at the sub-state or beta and gamma levels. Short of wars, though, small actors in international politics continue to play a significant role in the international system by exerting their power. Consider the role played by activist Jody Williams and her coalition of non-governmental organisations that formed the International

²⁹ Dylan Kissane. 2006. 'The Balkan Bullet with Butterfly Wings.' *CEU Political Science Journal* 1(4): 85-107, p.100.

Campaign to Ban Landmines.³⁰ A group of gamma and beta actors exercised their power in conjunction first with themselves and, second, with alpha actors to effect an almost-system wide change in alpha actor strategic policy. Certainly here we find, again, evidence of small actors maintaining power in a complex international system.

Realists dispute the significance of power maintained and exerted at the sub-state level. Under complexity, however, it is necessary to consider and account for the power of all actors in the system and the reason for this arises from the properties of a complex system itself. In a complex system small events and small actors have the potential to influence the entire system. Ignorance of such power renders assessments of the system impossible, as is long-term prediction of the system. Assessing the power of sub-state actors – and accepting that there *is* indeed power at the sub-state level – allows the analyst to better describe the observable international reality: the small events that feedback into the system, the wars that begin by accident, the alliances that rise and fall and the trends in international politics that emerge as a result of beta and gamma level influence. The significance of the sub-state actors in the international system and the obvious power that they maintain and exert means that the previous means by which we define power (under anarchy) and measure power (levels of military and economic strength) must change. Power in a complex international system means the ability to influence the system; obviously every actor can be powerful – as under anarchy – yet, unlike under anarchy, in a complex system the power of smaller actors to influence the system cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

Under realist anarchy the location of power is easily defined and readily measured: power is held by nation-states and is measured with reference to capabilities, most usually military and economic. Realists from Thucydides forward, from the classical, structural or offensive perspectives and dealing with political units ranging from city-states to principedoms to modern nation-states all maintained that power is maintained at the ‘top’ of the international political hierarchy. Yet all, too, assumed an international anarchy, a system in which all must seek power in order to guarantee survival; a ‘self-help’ system, as Waltz argues. If a different system structure is assumed, however, power and its location and measurement need to be redefined, too. Assuming a complex system means accepting that small actors – here labelled beta and gamma actors – maintain the power to effect the system, start system-wide wars and influence state actors, including superpowers. Power is thus located in all international actors and can only be measured by the potential impact that those actors can have on the international system. With evidence suggesting that individual persons have the power to start system wide conflicts, we must conclude that power should not be measured by military and economic capabilities but by the potential to influence the system. This, in turn, demands that international theorists recognise that the individual person is a powerful actor in international politics and, as well as considering alternative systemic realities, recognise that power is more broadly distributed than the realists whose scholarship continues to dominate the discipline would allow.

³⁰ For background see Julian Davis. ‘The Campaign to Ban Landmines: Public Diplomacy, Middle Power Leadership and an Unconventional Negotiating Process.’ *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (May 2004).