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## System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life

Peter Dombrowski

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# BOOK REVIEWS

## A Systems-Level Theory of Politics and International Relations

Jervis, Robert. *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997. 328pp. \$45

**C**OLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S ROBERT JERVIS has consistently been one of the most interesting and influential scholars of international relations for nearly thirty years. With such pathbreaking studies to his credit as *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1976) and *The Logic of Images in International Relations* (Columbia University Press, 1989), Jervis long ago solidified his place among the elite scholars studying international affairs. *System Effects* continues this tradition of first-rate scholarship and maintains Jervis's relevance to contemporary international relations debates.

This book explores the possibility of applying "a systems level theory of politics" to the study of international relations, although Jervis is careful to note that the general concepts he develops are applicable to a broader range of social phenomena. Systems-level theorizing holds that "the whole is different from, not greater than the sum of its parts"; in short, we should be able to identify the "emergent properties" of a system and trace "interconnections" among different units within the system at different points of time. Jervis does a terrific job explaining systems-level concepts like positive and negative feedback, path dependence, and nonlinearity, among others.

Paradoxically, *System Effects* represents an example of both the most modern and the most traditional in international relations research. It is modern in that it demonstrates a daunting familiarity with some of the best research currently under way at the boundaries where the natural and physical sciences meet the social sciences. For example, the author explains ideas developed by such evolutionary biologists as Stephen Jay Gould and suggests how such insights might be applied to political phenomena. He does so in a manner accessible to those unfamiliar with the conceptual and theoretical intricacies of chaos and complexity theories, among others.

A paradox emerges, because although Jervis operates at the cutting edge with his application of natural science concepts to the social sciences, the "meat and potatoes" of *System Effects* will be largely familiar to most international relations scholars and casual students alike. The specific cases, historical examples, and research used by

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Jervis to elucidate systems-level thinking are drawn from the international relations canon; in fact, Jervis's evidence comes largely from one subfield of international relations theory—national security studies. To explain the advantages of thinking about international affairs in system terms, Jervis relies on historical examples that many scholars know intimately. He often supports his analysis with discussions of alliance politics prior to World War I and of the bipolar machinations of the Cold War era.

Further, Jervis sometimes ignores or at least implicitly discounts large bodies of recent international relations scholarship. Two examples will help illustrate this criticism. First, Realist scholarship that reifies the role of the state in international affairs is passé in much of the discipline. Many scholars of international political economy and international organizations, for example, now recognize that states are not the sole actors relevant to understanding international affairs, and that state interests are varied and complex. Yet, in Jervis's understanding of international affairs, the system in question is a system of states. Moreover, these states operate in largely similar ways—they seek to balance the system and maintain their own national interests against other states, holding competing and often contradictory interests. Many scholars have now moved beyond such formulations to explore the role of nonstate actors and even of preference formation in understanding world politics. Second, Jervis pays only the briefest attention to the influence of domestic politics, institutions (domestic and international), and ideas on international outcomes. Perhaps the weakest section of the book is his brief effort to consider the importance of “perceptions and choice” for explaining state behavior.

Although international relations scholars will find *System Effects* to be a useful and evocative study despite its weaknesses, policy makers and other practitioners may find the book somewhat less inviting. Wading through the social science theorizing and permutations of various systems-level phenomena in international politics will be a tall order for many nonspecialists. Even history buffs may cringe at the examples drawn from coalitions and alliances formed over the past several hundred years. Yet those who devote the time to following Jervis's arguments will be amply rewarded. His detailed discussions of system effects provide correctives to simplistic arguments about how and why national policies might be altered to shape the international system as a whole.

Peter Dombrowski  
Naval War College