# An Inter-Subsystemic Approach in International Relations

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**Abstract**

*The main point of departure for this article is the incapacity of current international relations theorizing to explain both change and continuity without shifting between levels of analysis. The previous research agenda on system studies was renounced before it realized its potential. The concept of a subsystem has great potential for resolving this challenge. This article argues that the properties of the international system, including anarchy, are not constant, and show variation. To factor in this variation, first we need to identify subsystems (e.g. geographical or functional) that diverge across issue areas and functions. Then we need to look at the interactions between subsystems, which is a neglected aspect of the literature on subsystems. This article contributes to the debate by setting out a new research agenda to study the interactions between subsystems and their effects on the general system; that is, to identify when the system is stable and when it changes. This agenda suggests a particular focus on the inconsistencies, contradictions, and challenges that lie at the intersections of different subsystems.*

**Keywords:** System, strategic culture, subsystem, crisis, change

## 1. Introduction

Concepts and theories are born out of specific social contexts. Waltz tells us that constructing a theory requires creative thinking. Nonetheless, thoughts, theories, and perspectives are shaped by life experiences. To postulate a theory of power politics, a person might need to have experiences with the uses or abuses of political power, as Morgenthau did; to be able to talk about dependency, one might need to observe its economic consequences, as the Latin American theorists did. Similarly, constructing a feminist theory requires an engagement with the problems of gender inequality; and developing theories about identity supposes some experience with identity issues or witnessing radical identity shifts, as happened in Europe.

The approach proposed here is also born out of a specific experience. This experience is mainly shaped by a vision of international relations (IR) observed from a unique country, where different systems, cultures, and geographies meet. Turkey is a country where no general categories are valid, and it is always in the grey areas of passages between such categories. It is betwixt and between, neither Europe nor the Middle East, neither East nor West; it is a borderland between post-modern and pre-modern worlds, between Christianity

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and Islam, between the dynamics of integration and disintegration, and so on. It always falls between categories, and in that sense it has an "inter-" perspective. It is not a typical Muslim country; neither is it a typical democracy nor a typical nation-state. As it does not fit into conceptual categories, it can be viewed as a hard-to-understand conceptual rebel.

All theories present categories of issues, actors, and interactions to help us create a better understanding of the world. However, since these theories tend to omit certain categories as negligible exceptions, their images of world events are achieved through the creation of conceptual blind spots. Nevertheless, such areas of exceptions or borderlands have unique experiences, which might have systemic consequences. These conceptual blind spots, despite their rebellious and neglected nature, are still at the heart of intense and significant international political, economic, and cultural transactions. In other words, they are not real blind spots. Therefore, they constantly make us feel their discomfiting presence and relentlessly demand explanation. Such outliers, exceptions, or disturbances are left out of our conceptual world, not because they are insignificant or escape our attention, but because they do not fit most of the constructed theoretical categories. This paper argues that such disturbances might carry great and undiscovered potential for understanding significant dynamics.

Within this context, one of the main challenges in IR studies is to keep an eye on such disturbances and anomalies while still working with generalizations. This is an important challenge, because the dynamics of change arises from such anomalies. This paper argues that a focus on subsystems and their interactions with each other hold great possibilities for overcoming that challenge. This focus, however, requires a new concept of the international system, which accounts for qualitative variations, namely the variability in its anarchic structure. It is well known that there are different subsystems and regional orders, showing different qualities of an anarchic nature, and there is no single international system, but an international system of subsystems. For instance, the international system in Europe and the one in the Middle East exhibit different characteristics. This paper takes this finding as a foundation for its conception, and argues that the inconsistencies across subsystems hold great potential for explaining change in the international system, especially in such places where those discordant subsystems border each other.

Current IR theorizing analyzes the dynamics of change at the actor level, such as state, organization, or individual. My approach establishes an intermediary level below the general system and above the traditional actor level, which is a subsystem. There have been a considerable number of studies conducted on subsystems, but they are largely neglected afterwards. Utilizing those studies and based on certain assumptions, the suggested research approach hereby describes preliminary variables and a level of analysis and proposes some hypotheses.

The main hypothesis of this paper is that a closer look at such crossroads and borderlands holds the key to understanding the dynamics of change and continuity in world politics. On the other hand, neglecting such significant categories reduces our understanding of such dynamics. More creative thinking about international relations requires us to take a closer look at such oddities and omissions in our conceptual map rather than leaving them as blind spots.

This article starts by indicating two specific disciplinary problems of IR to point out that the proposed approach can also be a solution for them. The first one is about losing the discipline's conceptual center of gravity, and the second one concerns the unfruitful

debates about explaining change and continuity in IR. Here, system-level studies are especially emphasized as a possible remedy. However, system studies carry the risk of over-generalization and negligence. After a brief overview of the shortcomings of the systemic studies and a general evaluation of the literature on systems and subsystems, I present the main arguments of and the rationale behind the proposed inter-subsystemic approach.

## 2. International Relations as a Scattered Discipline

International relations studies have lost their focus since the end of the Cold War, though for some schools of thought, this might not be necessarily a bad thing.[1] However, as a result, we face a discipline with neither identifying features nor clear or aggregate research goals. The interdisciplinary nature of the discipline, despite its advantages, exacerbates this problem. In a world where everything is international or global, the discipline needs more focus. However, as a result of the rising post-modern school, any effort to define disciplinary borders or clear research goals is discredited for being positivistic. The issue we are facing today is more about disciplinary identity than the nature of the discipline.

In the beginning, two apparently opposing schools of IR had defined two clear research agendas for IR scholars. For idealists, the main goal was to prevent further human suffering resulting from wars through changing the nature of international politics. Their remedies were institutionalization at the international level, democratization, and free trade. The realists were not so much about changing world politics, but about understanding its nature and providing guidance for policy makers.

Idealists set change as their goal while realists identified a problem of the lack of peaceful change in international politics. Carr and subsequent realists argued that since there was no peaceful mechanism of change, wars erupt between states, and that this is the nature of international politics. As the balance of power between states changes, war is the only mechanism to adjust to the new balance. Despite their differences, realists and idealists alike were concerned with the issue of change and/or survival in international politics, and viewed power struggles as the core issue.

The following great debates have caused IR to lose its focus: methodological and philosophical discussions have started to take over the discipline. Today, the main focus of IR is no longer international politics, and the discipline looks more like philosophy, sociology, and history. Even though the discipline has been benefiting from these discussions, today there is an urgent need to refocus in the IR discipline and to reconnect its theoretical realm to the real-world issues.

In recent decades, the IR field has expanded from world politics to gender politics, to the environmental issues, social injustices and inequalities, and other problems to capture the complexity of international phenomena.[2] It is argued that simplistic explanations that serve certain actors or interests should be abandoned, and deconstructive, critical, and multidimensional perspectives are needed. This argument has also raised a group of questions about the discipline: Are social or international phenomena so complicated that a meaningful explanation cannot be achieved without serving the interests of the powerful? Is change so constant that efforts toward revealing the dynamics of continuity are a vain enterprise? Is it enough to explain the working principles and dynamics of international system?

[1] Meghana Nayak and Eric Selbin, *Decentering International Relations* (New York: Zed Books, 2010).
[2] Stephanie Lawson, ed., *The New Agenda for International Relations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

The new schools, such as critical or post-modern ones, view the realist distinctions between the domestic and international, as well as between political and non-political or even between public and private, as simplistic, misleading, and outdated. These schools have dismissed the theoretical knowledge produced by the old schools of the discipline, as 'old-fashioned science.' According to these approaches, there is no clear subject of study or aspect of political or social phenomena that is peculiar to the IR field.

Since the end of the Cold War, the search for the authenticity of IR subjects has apparently hit a dead-end. This inability to find a way out has split the IR discipline into different schools that do not communicate with each other; these schools of thought speak different languages that do not translate in any meaningful sense for other schools. Perhaps it is time to go back to basics, excavate some of the old concepts, and utilize the contributions of the new theories. After all, these theories are not competing ideologies, but different understandings of IR, and they are part of the same endeavor to produce knowledge about international phenomena.

Mainstream IR is lost at the moment. If we cannot find a disciplinary center of gravity, which might establish communication channels between the old and new schools of IR, the discipline will wander in different directions without producing meaningful knowledge, and we will be drifting in the complexities of international phenomena.

### 3. The Issue at Stake

Besides the loss of direction in the discipline, the main issue at stake is the problem of continuity and change. The reason behind the multiplication and proliferation of new and different schools of thought is the search for good explanations of change and continuity in IR. This search was accelerated with the unexpected ending of the Cold War and its bipolar politics. This unforeseen transformation of world politics highlighted the shortfalls of the current theorizing. However, the main issue, namely the interplays between continuity and change, continues to be salient.

Realists focused on the great powers to understand systemic changes. The shifting balance of power among the great powers was the main reason for change. However, not only great-power politics but the emergence of new international actors (such as multinational corporations), domestic developments (such as the Soviet reformation of glasnost and perestroika), and regional developments resulting from middle power interactions (such as the emergence of the EU) have all also caused systemic changes.

The other challenge for realist thinking at the end of the Cold War was about its distinction between international and domestic politics. Out of this challenge emerged new schools such as constructivism, which rejects such distinctions and suggests that looking only at the great powers, the balance of power, or even actors themselves are not enough; we need to factor in perceptions, relations, and norms as well. The weakness of constructivism is that it can only retrospectively identify the processes and perceptions that cause change. The main questions of when the dynamics of continuity are at play and how the system maintains itself, as well as when the dynamics of transformation take the stage and change occurs are still not answered.

Even though constructivism is an important breakthrough with its inspiring propositions, it still does not solve the puzzles of the timing or direction of change. The processes, relations, perceptions, and identities that constructivism emphasizes are at play everywhere and at every level. Considering that we cannot observe everything to help understand, explain, or

theorize international phenomena, we need to restrict our attention to a feasible scope. An inter-subsystemic approach would guide us in our research effort to focus our attention on empirical and analytical purposes. In our effort to explain change, instead of expanding our research agenda to cover every social relation at any level, we need to focus on critical spots and subjects. Within this context, one of the things that my inter-subsystemic approach aims to do is provide guidance for such focus.

In terms of change and continuity, the agent-structure debate seems to be heading towards a dead-end as well. This debate's promise is nothing more than a chicken-and-egg argument. To put the argument in its simplest terms, structure explains continuity better because it is deterministic in assuming that the system shapes the contours of a behavioral framework. As Waltz suggested, actors must behave according to the structure of the system to survive.[3] On the other hand, as the end of the Cold War has shown us, radical systemic changes can be brought about by actor behavior, or choices, as was the case with the Soviet Union and the collapse of the bipolar international system.

But, in explaining change and continuity, we need something more profound than what the agent-structure debate offers. Perhaps the structure better explains continuity and the agent better explains the change. However, IR theories now should be able to tell us when the dynamics of continuity are at work and when change is coming. The IR discipline and its studies must surpass foundational but preliminary debates and move beyond static explanations.

Explaining only change or focusing only on continuity is not enough for the scientific purpose of the field. Instead of restricting our options between two 'narrow' choices of either assuming constant change or stagnant continuity, the proposed approach has great potential to reveal the dynamics of both intermittent change and volatile continuity. We know some structures endure, and change is neither constant nor radical most of the time. We also know that the change is accumulative and not constant. More insights into the tipping points and triggering effects for change are needed.

In the beginning, IR research focused on explaining the underlying forces of continuity and the persistent dynamics of international politics. The realist school did a great job in identifying the forces of continuity in the system, and explained how and through which mechanisms the system maintained itself. This was natural in a sense because IR was a new field, and the early theoreticians needed to establish a basic knowledge of the dynamics of international politics. At this foundational stage, the main goal was trying to understand the working principles of the system. For that reason, the early scholars focused on terms like balance of power, security, alliances, peace, war, etc. However, the failure of mainstream IR studies to predict the end of the Cold War opened a new era of new research agendas for explaining change.

## 4. The International System and a Critique of the System Approaches

A solution for the above-mentioned disciplinary problems inevitably involves system-level studies. Systems studies have an undisclosed potential to explain both continuity and change on the one hand, and establish a center of gravity for the discipline on the other. However, the IR community dismissed system arguments before uncovering their potential.[4] The reason

[3] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), 73-7, 92.

[4] Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson, "Systemic Theories of Conflict," in *Guide to the Scientific Study of International*

for this quick dismissal was the failure of system studies to deliver expectations and answer criticisms.[5] Before discussing the dormant potential of these approaches, a brief overview of the concepts of system and subsystem is necessary. Since a very broad range of research has been conducted on international systems between the 1950s and 1980s, a complete review of the systems studies exceeds the scope of a regular article. Therefore, this will be a partial review of the literature, bounded by the specific purposes of my arguments.

Buzan and Little make an analytical distinction between mechanically and socially constructed types of systems.[6] Mechanical systems work in accordance with physical laws, and understanding such mechanic and almost automatic relations is enough to understand the system. However, the international system is socially constructed, which means there is little or no structural determinism in it, and it is formed interactively through perceptions and reactions. This is the main dilemma that system-level IR studies have not been able to resolve, because any effort at factoring in the perception variables involves actor-level parameters. For that reason, IR theories until recently adopted a mechanistic approach in explaining the international system; based on the assumption of a universal rationality, systemic studies assumed that the conditions of anarchy and dynamics of balance of power were conditioning actor behavior. Here, the main challenge is to incorporate perceptions and interactions into our analysis and still work at the system level. Clearly, the study of socially constructed systems is a challenging, but also an achievable task.

A brief overview of the literature suggests that the theoretical discussions about international systems are generally descriptive rather than analytical. Any definition of a system, in general, involves actors, rules that relate those actors to each other, and the processes through which the rules are implemented. The general approach to systems in IR focused on the actors, that is, the components of the system. Kaplan defines the international political system as "the system of action"[7] where there are describable behavioral regularities, and a system can be identified as a separate entity from others by these regularities and patterned behavior. However, despite this early definition, the main focus of IR theories centered on the international system as the "system of things," such as the system of nation-states, rather than actions, relations, and processes.

Kaplan suggested five variables for defining a system: (1) essential rules, which define the general relationship between actors; (2) transformation rules, which determine how the essential rules are applied to certain parameters or situations, and are thus the source of change depending on conditional reactions and variance in behavior; (3) actor classificatory variables, which represent the structural characteristics of the actors, such as nation-states, alliances, or international organizations, and also have significant bearing on actor behavior; (4) capability variables, which refer to the competency of actors to act; and (5) information variables, which denote the actors' knowledge about what they want to and can do.[8] In that general scheme, change in the system would occur if the system's essential rules could not be maintained.

*Processes*, ed. Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, Paul F. Diehl and James D. Morrow (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 103.

[5] Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History. Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 18-22.

[6] Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, 103-107.

[7] Morton A. Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1957), 4.

[8] Kaplan, *System and Process,* 9-12.

Despite this multidimensional definition, subsequent research focused more on anarchy (1), nation-states (3), and the balance of power (4) to analyze the international system, while neglecting its other aspects (2 and 5). Change and perceptions, the neglected aspects of the system, were brought back to the research agenda by constructivists. But this brings us down to actor-level analyses. The main issue here is to insert these neglected variables into our analyses without falling into reductionism, which is indeed the main problem we face in the literature. Like Waltz, Kaplan (despite his own definition) also describes different systems through actor capabilities (power), such as the balance of power, bipolar, tight bipolar, loose bipolar, universal, hierarchical, and a unit veto.

Kaplan's arguments imply the existence of various systems as opposed to a single global international system. He admits that there are different systems, and when one system's output is the input for another system, they are "coupled."[9] Despite these rich observations, Kaplan's theory has not been fully advanced. System coupling in particular carries great potential in explaining continuity and change in the international system.

System approaches can be criticized from several aspects, such as their neglect of actor-level variables, their insufficient account for change in the system, or their sweeping generalizations. Despite these deficiencies, *system*, as a concept and an approach, cannot be disregarded and is essential for IR studies. Waltz argued that system is the main research topic and the phenomenon that separates IR from non-IR disciplines.[10]

The first criticism about system approaches is their *simplistic assumption about homogeneity*. Systemic approaches focus on the actors, processes, and structure in the system. Initial studies assumed a relatively homogenous system, which shows the same global characteristics. The most common attributes of that system are its anarchic nature based on sovereign-equal nation states, and the obligation for self-help and self-security. Waltz further identified that there was no functional differentiation between actors, and variation could only be in the distribution of capabilities, better known as the balance of power.[11] In other words, the system shows largely the same characteristics globally, and systems can differ from each other only temporally through their polar structures.

However, the differences across the international system can be more profound than mere variances in polar structures. Even a brief and superficial observation reveals that neither actors, nor processes, nor the structure is the same throughout the system. Until recently, IR theories assumed that the European sovereign-state system established in Westphalia was valid for the whole international system. Since the main principles of that system were accepted globally, this was a reasonable assumption at first glance. However, we know that the European sovereign-state model is not valid everywhere, and further, it works differently in different parts of the world. We have 'failed states,' and states existing with no 'actual' sovereignty. Actors vary not only in their power contingencies, but also in their nature. The differences between the US and Somalia or Afghanistan are more profound than their distributions of power. Relational processes in Europe are not the same as those in the Middle East or Africa. Therefore, it is misleading to speak of a whole international system.

Here, the main problem with system theories is "*a high degree of abstraction*," which

[9] Kaplan, *System and Process,* 5.
[10] Kenneth Waltz, "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory," *Journal of International Affairs* 44, no. 1 (1990): 24-30.
[11] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics,* 97-98.

overlooks the differentiation across a system among actors, perceptions, and structures.[12] This thinking is the main reason why system approaches fail in their accounts of different behavior under similar structures. Some argue that the system-level explanations are too parsimonious, but this is a needed quality for theories as long as it does not oversimplify the complexity of international reality. This oversimplification and overabstraction can cause detachment of explanations from real-world events. As a result, we get explanations that are coherent within their own premises, but contradictory when compared to their alternatives. A concrete illustration of this can be found in comparing the arguments of Waltz and of Deutsch and Singer about which bipolar or multipolar system is more stable. Within their consistent premises, Waltz argues that bipolar systems are more stable while Deutsch and Singer think multipolar systems are more stable.[13]

A totalistic and global approach to system theories neglects differences, not only between actors, but between regions and even issue areas. The general hypothesis of anarchy also assumes that anarchy is the same and homogenously distributed across the system. But we know that anarchy does not create the same conditions everywhere, and even the same conditions can cause completely different behavior. Therefore, anarchy is nothing more than the absence of a higher ruling authority, and the condition does not say much about neither actor behavior nor how the system works.[14]

Donnely levels a more fundamental criticism at the term, and argues that unlike the assumption of anarchy, the international system is stratified, and the things that seem to be the result of anarchy are not actually "the effects of anarchy."[15] Singer and Small embrace a similar hierarchical (as opposed to anarchical) approach when they argue that there are different groups of interacting states. They call groups of states that take "a vigorous part in global diplomacy" "the central system" or "the central subsystem." The subsystem formed by such states "generally coincide[d] with the European state system" until the end of World War I. The other states formed "the peripheral subsystem" and were placed below the central subsystem because of their lesser influence over the general system.[16]

Despite its superficiality, anarchy is still an important aspect of the international system. Donnely thinks that the systemic description of anarchy is overly simplistic. Nevertheless, a more sophisticated explanation of the term that accounts for variations also makes the term lose its simplicity and perceptibility. Therefore, we need a better concept of anarchy that considers variations at the system level. In other words, we need to see differences and still not miss the global picture. I suggest that the strategic culture can account for variation in anarchy without losing the analytical benefits of the anarchy concept.

Another point of criticism is the *continuity bias and determinism* of system approaches. System theories have generally focused on properties of the system such as the distribution of power, international organizations, alliances, norms, rules, etc. They explain how the system shapes actor behaviors and maintains itself. However, the inability of current system theories

[12] Thomas J. Christensen, "Conclusion: System Stability and the Security of the Most Vulnerable Significant Actor," in *Coping with Complexity in International System*, ed. Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis Boulder (Colorado: Westview Press, 1993), 331.

[13] Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," *Daedalus* 93 (Summer 1964): 881-909; Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics* 16 (April 1964): 390-405.

[14] Jack Donnely, "The Elements of the Structures of International Systems," *International Organization* 66, no. 4 (October 2012): 620-21.

[15] Donnely, "The Elements of the Structures," 623.

[16] J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *The Wages of War, 1816-1965. A Statistical Handbook* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1972), 22, 381.

to produce satisfactory explanations about transformation dynamics is criticized, citing their "static bias."[17]

At the root of continuity or static bias lies the assumption of an all-encompassing single international system. This assumption suggests that there are no outlining borders of the international system, because it includes everything. In the absence of alien civilizations, the world system is all-encompassing. According to Kaplan, system equilibrium is not changed until the system is "disturbed."[18] This argument implies a necessary existence of exogenous forces that disturb the operational dynamics of the system in order for a change to happen. Similar to Kaplan's argument, Organski suggested that change is exogenous to the system, meaning that change happens not because of the variables that define the system but for other reasons.[19]

If the international system includes everything, where would this disturbance come from? As an answer to this question, this paper suggests that rather than assuming an all-inclusive single international system, we need to develop a new system approach that takes different subsystems and the interactions among them into consideration. An account of these interactions and interconnections is needed for a better understanding of change at the system level. Modelski argues that systems change through evolutionary learning and innovation.[20] But he leaves the questions of "What is learned?", "How is it learned?", and "In which direction might the system change?" unanswered.

These questions bring us to another deficiency of systemic theories, which can be called the *reductionist trap*. System analyses, as long as they neglect actor perceptions and reactions, are doomed to superficial explanations and 'made-up stories' about international politics. On the other hand, actor-level studies of the system fall into the category of what Waltz called *reductionism*.[21] We need systemic approaches that explain international relations beyond abstract assumptions of rational actor behavior. For example, the balance of power means nothing unless we know the actors' identities and their perceptions of each other and of a specific power distribution.[22]

The theories focus on the descriptive aspects of the system and its operational principles. Nevertheless, we also need to study how systems are transformed and when systemic changes are more likely, in addition to exploring the issues of systemic maintenance. Waltz and neorealists have looked at power struggles between actors and concluded that systemic changes result from the balance of power. However, balance of power dynamics, despite their systemic consequences, work at the actor level. This means that change in the system is explained, even by system theorists, through actor-level transactions. In that sense Waltzian theory also falls, in Waltz's terms, into the reductionist trap, because the variations across systems are measured through actor capabilities.

The international system is significant in shaping actor behavior. Changes in actor behavior are not important unless the change has systemic consequences or even causes. However,

[17] Stephen J. Genco, "Integration Theory and System Change in Western Europe: The Neglected Role of Systems Transformation Episodes," in *Change in the International System*, ed. Ole R. Holsti, Randolph M. Siverson, and Alexander L. George (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980), 55.

[18] Kaplan, *System and Process,* 8.

[19] A. F. K. Organski, "The Power Transition," in *International Politics and Foreign Policy. A Reader in Research and Theory,* ed. James Rosenau (New York: The Free Press, 1961), 367-75.

[20] George Modelski, "Is World Politics Evolutionary Learning?," *International Organization* 44, no. 1 (Winter, 1990): 1-24.

[21] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics,* 60-79.

[22] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca&London:Cornell University Press, 1987).

any endeavor to explain international change involves actor perceptions or behaviors. This fact compels us to move from system-level to actor-level analyses, and fall again into the reductionist trap. Thus, change or transformation of the system is still an unresolved issue that system analyses need to overcome.[23] In order to avoid the reductionist trap, we need to find the dynamics of both persistence and change at the system level. Then, the main question becomes, "How can we explain the multidimensional forces of change at the systemic level without falling into the reductionist trap?" If the system has variance across actors, processes, and structure, are we left with actor-level studies?

Here, I argue that despite all this variance, it is still possible to conduct a systemic study of international relations. According to this argument, the international system consists of units larger than actors, and the relational processes among those units shape the general system and its structure. These units are identified as subsystems or regional systems. Subsystems have both systemic qualities and actor-like capabilities, which enable them to both maintain the current structure and trigger the dynamics of change.

## 5. Defining System(s) and Subsystems

Kenneth Boulding defines a system, in its simplest form, as "anything that is not chaos." Therefore, a system is a structure with order and patterned behavior.[24] Other definitions of a system involve the elements of actors, structure, processes, and the system boundaries.[25] Structure refers to actor positions in comparison to each other. In that sense, the international system is anarchic, where no actor is located hierarchically higher or lower than others, and positional differences are determined by the possession of power. The emphasis on structure inevitably focuses on the continuity and maintenance of the system.

Process, on the other hand, is about patterns of behavior, transaction flows,[26] and interactions between actors. Process involves both adaptation and maintenance of the system;[27] therefore, to understand both continuity and change, a focus on processes is needed. Kaplan identifies three processes in the system: regulatory, integrative (cooperative learning), and disintegrative (conflictual).[28] While regulatory processes are about system maintenance and continuity, the other processes represent the dynamics of change. Kaplan and Boulding add the element of values into their definition of systems, because values are both shaped by the system and also affect the system through their impact on actor behavior.[29]

States, international organizations, and other non-state actors are considered to be the actors in the international system. However, this definition is not sufficient to understand the international system, not only because the actors in that system have diversified in recent decades, but also because a system consists of parts that are larger than particular actors. Parts of a general system, namely subsystems, can also be considered behavior-shaping components.

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[23] Dina A. Zinnes, "Prerequisites for the Study of System Transformation," in *Change in the International System*, ed. Ole R. Holsti, Randolph M. Siverson, and Alexander L. George (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980), 3-21.

[24] Kenneth E. Boulding, *World as a Total System* (London: Sage Publications, 1985), 9.

[25] Kaplan, *System and Process*; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence* (New York: Longman, 2001).

[26] Steven J. Brams, "Transaction Flows in the International System," *The American Political Science Review* 60 (December 1966): 880-98.

[27] Kaplan, *System and Process,* 89.

[28] Kaplan, *System and Process*, 89-112.

[29] Kaplan, *System and Process,* Part 3; and Boulding, *World as a Total System,* 157-75.

It is possible to identify three varying definitions of systems: functional (issue), spatial (geographical), and temporal (chronological). The first two refer to subsystems because they represent different parts of a general system.[30] On the other hand, the chronological definition of a system implies that there have been different systems in different periods in history. Subsystems can also be identified horizontally (symmetrically) through mapping groups of states that share a strategic culture, or vertically (asymmetrically) through classifying different kinds of actors, such as state, non-state, or private actors, depending on the research purpose. In vertically or asymmetrically grouped subsystems, actors do not have a common strategic culture but are grouped according to their qualities or nature, such as the state subsystem, the multinational corporation subsystem, or the non-governmental organization subsystem. (There is no hierarchy implied here.) According to Buzan and Little, subsystems are

> groups of units within an international system that can be distinguished from the whole system by the particular nature or intensity of their interactions/interdependence with each other. Subsystems may be either territorially coherent, in which case they are regional (ASEAN, the OAU), or not (OECD, OPEC), in which case they are not regions, but simply subsystems.[31]

Because of this multi-perspective on subsystems, there is no conceptual agreement in the literature about how to name them. Some examples include subordinate state system,[32] regional subsystem,[33] partial international system,[34] central and peripheral subsystem,[35] and others.[36]

Despite the general acknowledgement of the existence of subsystems, the multi-dimensional nature of systemic differentiation has prevented a debate across theories, and has led to different meanings of the term. For example, Singer used it to imply the components of the system and anything below the systemic level of analysis, especially referring to actors.[37] Kaplan adopted a similar approach when he referred to the anarchic nature of the international system by describing it as "a subsystem dominant system."[38] However, Kaplan uses subsystem differently in different contexts. He refers to the functional characteristics of the system, such as political or economic, while he also mentions geographical subsystems.[39] When he argues that there can be national or supranational subsystems of international system, he actually refers to the levels of analyses.[40]

System analyses, while neglecting the reality of differentiation, also accept it as an implicit assumption. The fact that Morgenthau and Waltz strictly talk about a political system implies the existence of other functional systems at the international level.[41] Therefore, Buzan and

[30] For geographical definitions of subsystems see Leonard Binder, "The Middle East as Subordinate International System," *World Politics* 10 (April 1958): 408-29; Michael Brecher, "International Relations and Asian Studies: The Subordinate State System of Southern Asia," *World Politics* 15 (January 1963): 213-35.

[31] Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, 69.

[32] Brecher, "International Relations and Asian Studies."

[33] George Modelski, "International Relations and Area Studies: The Case of Southeast Asia," *International Relations* 2 (April 1961): 143-55.

[34] Stanley Hoffmann, "Discord in Community," *International Organization* 17 (Summer 1963): 521-49.

[35] Singer and Small, *The Wages of War,* 22, 381.

[36] William R. Thompson, "The Regional Subsystem: A Conceptual Explication and a Propositional Inventory," *International Studies Quarterly* 17 (March 1973), 92.

[37] David Singer, "The Global System and its Subsystems: A Developmental View," in *Linkage Politics. Essays on the Convergence of National and International Systems*, ed. James N. Rosenau (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 21-43.

[38] Kaplan, *System and Process*, 16-17.

[39] Kaplan, *System and Process,* 146.

[40] Kaplan, *System and Process,* 12.

[41] Barry Buzan and Matthias Albert, "Differentiation: A Sociological Approach to International Relations Theory," *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 3 (September 2010): 328.

Albert, contrary to Waltz, argue that the international system has an aspect of functional differentiation, meaning that it in fact has functional subsystems. However, this functional differentiation representing different subsystems suggests a functional differentiation of the system, not of the actors.[42]

An analytical system approach, needed for a better understanding of change and continuity, must identify subsystems and define interactions among them through their distinct modes of operation. The difficulty of defining a new world order in the post-Cold War era is closely connected with our inability to define current subsystems. For example, the only defining components of the Cold War international system were not the US, the Soviet Union, or the varying sizes of other states but the different subsystems formed by these states. Without identifying what kinds of subsystems exist in a given system, we cannot understand or interpret the interactions taking place within its boundaries. This is the main difficulty we have faced since the end of the Cold War: we still cannot define a clear new world order, not because we live in a chaotic environment, but because we are not able to clearly identify the emerging new subsystems.

Definitions of subsystems can be developed in different ways depending on the research goal. Different theories define systems differently, and incorporate divergent understandings of them. Therefore, the definition of any system must be contextual and purpose specific. Depending on our research goal, different definitions of a system can be based on different actors and emphasize different processes. In that sense, my approach is substantially different from Waltz's efforts to separate the international system from the non-political realm. In my approach, there can also be non-political subsystems shaping the international system. The concept of strategic culture appears to be a useful conceptual tool in defining political subsystems.

According to Buzan and Albert, system approaches have overlooked the fact that the international system contains different systems, and in that sense it is "the system of systems."[43] To understand the whole system, we need to account for its parts and the interactions among them; therefore, its internal differentiation. Buzan and Albert identify three types of differentiation: segmentary, stratificatory (hierarchical), and functional.[44] Segmentary differentiation refers to geographical variance and is similar to my definition of subsystem. Here, the different parts of the system are separated not hierarchically, but geographically, and have relatively equal positions. Functional differentiation refers to the systems of varying topics. For example, there might be a political system, as well as economic, social, or cultural ones.

Buzan embraces the functional approach and calls subsystems "sectors" of the international system. He talks about five sectors: military, political, economic, environmental, and societal or socio-cultural.[45] Buzan and Little's analysis of the temporal and functional dimensions of a system stands out in the literature because of its multidimensional approach. In that study, the authors look at different functional subsystems at different times in history.[46]

[42] Donnely, "The Elements of the Structures," 623.
[43] Buzan and Albert, "Differentiation," 317.
[44] Buzan and Albert, "Differentiation," 318.
[45] Barry Buzan, "The English School as a New Systems Theory of World Politics," in *New Systems Theories of World Politics,* ed. Mathias Albert, Lars-Eric Cederman, and Alexander Wendt (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 200-201. Also see Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, 73-77.
[46] Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*.

This analysis enables us to identify political as well as economic, military, ideological, and cultural subsystems.

Rosenau also points to the importance of identifying subsystems to understand the functioning of a general system. He mainly focuses on a functional understanding of subsystems, and emphasizes the significance of interactions between them, that is, between different actors in different issue areas (subsystems):

> Persuasive evidence is available to show that lesser political systems – that is, local and national ones – function differently in different issue areas, that each area elicits a different set of motives on the part of different actors, that different system members are thus activated on different issues, and that therefore the different interaction patterns which result from these variations produce different degrees of stability and coherence for each of the issue areas in which systemic processes are operative.[47]

Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* is an example of subsystemic definitions. In that study, Huntington identified different civilizational subsystems and analyzed the relations among them.[48] But since this was not a conscious methodological path taken by Huntington, his analyses lost track and focused on civilizational blocs rather than the relations and borderlands between and/or among them. As a result, he treated countries like Ukraine, Russia, and Turkey as outliers. Conversely, my methodology focuses on the countries that lie between different subsystems instead of treating them as outliers.

Another example that emphasizes subsystemic formations is Cooper's classification of premodern, modern, and postmodern international systems.[49] However, like Huntington's civilizations, that study also lacks a focus on relational effects.

### 6. Strategic Culture

Identifying subsystems is essential for a systemic political analysis. Subsystems are separated from each other through their issue areas or standards of behavior. Any generalization neglecting diverse subsystems appears to be oversimplification, and falls into the categories that were criticized in the previous section. The shortfalls of realist generalizations about the balance of power are a good example of this pattern. The balance of power, not as a situation but as a policy behavior, is not sufficient to explain overall systemic operation, and it can explain only intra-systemic dynamics. Since the balance of power does not assume subsystemic differences and is based on universal rationality it does not take the differing behavioral features throughout a system into consideration. Since in each subsystem the qualities of actors, their rationale for behavior, and their concerns and motives are mostly incongruent, the balance of power is not sufficient to explain subsystemic interactions. Since the impact of balance of power on actor behavior depends on perceptions, actors from different subsystems can have varying considerations and perceptions of an already immeasurable power balance.

Defining subsystems on different grounds is possible, and one such ground, which is suggested here, is strategic culture. This concept, in general, refers to a country's foreign policy approach. In that sense, countries have their own strategic cultures that shape foreign

[47] James Rosenau, "The Functioning of International Systems," *Background* 7, no. 3 (November 1963): 115.
[48] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).
[49] Robert Cooper, "Post-Modern State and the New World Order," Demos (2000).

policy behavior. However, this paper defines strategic culture more as a systemic, rather than an actor's property. In that sense, strategic culture is a common understanding, or interactively shaped standards of, behavior. Strategic culture determines possible, acceptable, and legitimate modes of behavior. In that sense, strategic culture is the context[50] that shapes the structure of relations. According to Johnston, strategic culture "is an ideational milieu which limits behavioral choices…."[51] It is the general framework of thought concerning strategic behavior.

Variations in strategic culture across issue areas (functions) or geography establish different subsystems. For example, European and Middle Eastern subsystems differ from each other substantially in their behavioral standards and in the way policies are evaluated against their alternatives, perceptions, and considerations. The approach proposed here focuses on these simultaneously coexisting systems and their interactions, especially those that contradict each other. In this approach, regions or issues located between subsystems, and that experience the contradictions of the different subsystems, are the interesting research topics we need to focus on.[52] The dynamics of systemic change or clues to issues concerning such change are highly likely to emerge from these places. Such contact points carry a significant potential for disturbances that can trigger systemic change. We can gather information from such places about the possible direction and timing of systemic change.

**7. The Inter-Subsystemic Approach: An Overview**

It is possible to explain change in international relations at systemic levels without falling into the reductionist trap. It is true that change actually happens somewhere below the general system level, but these dynamics are not restricted to the actor level. There are certain dynamics of change operating at the systemic level, and these might be more significant than the interactions between actors. These dynamics might also be shaping the relations among actors. For that reason, the inter-subsystemic approach tries to solve the puzzle of change at the system level.

The main methodological problem that provoked this approach is a major deficiency in current IR theorizing; that is, its incapacity to explain both change and continuity without shifting between levels of analysis. To solve this problem, the proposed model is grounded on three general assumptions:

- Assumption 1: The international system is comprised of several divergent subsystems, and the notion of one whole international system is misleading.
- Assumption 2: There is a common belief that the systemic qualities are associated with continuity in general, but not with change. However, there are dynamics of change operating at the system level as well.
- Assumption 3: We can define different subsystems based on the concept of strategic culture, and these subsystems essentially differ from both the general system and each other.

[50] Colin Gray, "Strategic Culture as Context: the First Generation of Theory Strikes Back," *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 1 (January 1999): 49-69.

[51] Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (Spring 1995): 46.

[52] Haluk Özdemir, "Türkiye'nin 'Sınır-Ülke' Niteliği: Farklı Stratejik Kültürler Arasında Türk Dış Politikası," *Avrasya Etüdleri* 33, no. 1 (2008): 7-46.

Based on these assumptions, five main hypotheses can be formulated:

- **Hypothesis 1:** The system's general contours are shaped by interactions among different subsystems more so than by relations among actors.
- **Hypothesis 2:** Strategic cultures determine the nature of relations among different subsystems.
- **Hypothesis 3:** Change results from inconsistencies and disturbances to the system. Therefore, the greatest potential for change lies in the crises between the subsystems, and is visible through their impact on the general system.
- **Hypothesis 4:** Not every crisis causes systemic change. Extraordinary crises, which entail strategic, behavioral, and perceptional fluctuations at universal and/or subsystemic levels, are the ones that carry the potential for a systemic change.
- **Hypothesis 5:** The areas of contact or borderlands between conflicting subsystems are the best places to observe both the potential for change and its direction and timing.

Most of the literature on subsystems has focused on their attributes and features; however, a new research agenda is needed for studying the interactive aspects of subsystems and the transformative effects of such interactions on the general system, both of which are largely neglected in the literature. For that reason, the proposed approach mainly focuses on the interactions and inconsistencies that can best be observed at inter-subsystemic intersections. The concepts concerning the main assumptions and the proposed hypotheses can be reiterated as follows:

*Multi-layered Systems:* The proposed approach posits a multi-layered and multi-dimensional international system. This is the main assumption concerning the international system. Instead of trying to analyze a single international system, I suggest here that the system is structured in multiple layers. Depending on our research purpose, we need to identify those layers as subsystems, either geographically, functionally, or even temporally. Temporal layering of the system refers to the transformation of the system over time and every layer refers to its structure at any given time in history, such as multipolar in the nineteenth century, bipolar during the Cold War, and unipolar now. In any case, we need to first identify these layers of the system so that analyzing the dynamics of continuity and change will be possible at the systemic level. Without this identification, the system as a a single entity only provides us with deterministic explanations of international relations.

*Incongruent Interaction:* I hypothesize that *the international system is shaped and defined by interactions between/among subsystems, not between/among actors as in the traditional sense*. Therefore, in our search for the dynamics of change, focusing only on the actors is as misleading as focusing only on the general system. For a better understanding of the international system, studies of the *interactions* between subsystems are needed. Subsystem studies can utilize the previous studies made at the actor and sub-actor levels. Inter-subsystemic research can also make use of this information about subsystemic premises; however, such knowledge, despite its usefulness and instrumental value, is not our main focus.

Studies of general system or subsystemic properties are important, but such research tends to emphasize coherent and consistent rules and norms. To explain dynamic nature of any given system (change and continuity), we need to discover contradictory aspects, disturbances, discrepancies, and/or 'outside' influences. For this case, world systems theory

and its division of the world into subsystems of core, periphery, and semi-periphery can be a good example. Despite these three different subsystems, world system theory views all of them as part of one coherent system, namely the global capitalist system. From this perspective, the subsystems are just parts of the larger system that work in accordance with its operational principles. The inter-subsystemic approach, on the other hand, suggests that *what is interesting about the international system is not its general consistency, but the discrepancies and incongruent modes of behavior stemming from different subsystems*. This approach looks at the inconsistencies rather than how it all comes together.

*Strategic Culture:* Another basic assumption is that *what separates a subsystem from others is its strategic culture*, which determines the behavioral standards of legitimate or illegitimate, expected and unexpected, right and wrong. To put it differently, strategic culture is proposed here as a useful conceptual tool to identify subsystems. Strategic culture sets the standards of what is possible, therefore it draws the range of possibilities for change and actor initiative. Actors can take initiative within the allowed limits of a subsystem. In other words, anarchy does not have the same meaning across regions, and its implications also vary depending on the subsystem's strategic culture. Anarchy in the European subsystem and in the Middle East has different consequences. Similarly, from a functional perspective, anarchy, creates different concerns in political, economic, social, or cultural realms. Therefore, subsystems and their strategic cultures have more impact on actor behavior than the supposedly constant conditions of anarchy.

*Subsystems as Actors:* In inter-subsystemic analyses, subsystems can be treated as actors, despite their differences from traditional actors, because *subsystems can shape relationships and actor (state, organization, or other non-state) behavior more than the general international system can.* For that reason, the main subject of focus in explaining systemic dynamics should be subsystems, not actors per se. The previous research viewed subsystems as mere parts of a larger system, not as elements that shape and transform the system.

Subsystems are not simple groups of states, but living and interacting organisms that form, re-form, and shape the system. Because they and their strategic culture draws the boundaries of what is possible, legitimate, or acceptable behavior, or what chance of success a specific action has, they have a better grasp on state behavior than the actors' own preferences. Subsystems shape behaviors through creating a framework of action based on a strategic culture. In that sense, system and its structure put limitations on actor behavior, and profoundly shape it, if not determine it. In that sense, systemic parameters are more crucial than actor preferences, no matter how powerful the actor is, because even superpowers act according to certain systemic or subsystemic constraints.

*Crises and Change:* One of the significant hypotheses proposed here concerns the impact of crises. *The greatest potential for systemic change lies in the crises between/among subsystems, and is visible through their impact(s) on the general system*. The idea that the potential for change in a system stems from crises and inconsistencies is nothing new. It is possible to find arguments about crises as the main causes of change in the literature,[53] but

[53] Michael Brecher and Patrick James, *Crisis and Change in World Politics* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1986); P. Terrence Hopmann and Timothy D. King, "From Cold War to Détente: The Role of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty," 163-88, and Charles F. Hermann and Robert E. Mason, "Identifying Behavioral Attributes of Events That Trigger International Crises," 189-210, both articles are in *Change In the International System*, ed. Ole R. Holsti, Randolph M. Svenson, and Alexander L. George (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980). There are also integration theories viewing crises as opportunities

these arguments clearly focus on crises between actors, such as nation-states. Our approach suggests that international crises between actors are necessary, but not sufficient for change. If a crisis is between at least two subsystems and concerns their operational premises, then we can probably start looking for systemic change.

In other words, ordinary international crises between countries might remain regional or even local. When they start affecting other subsystems, however, then we can talk about an inter-subsystemic crisis and the potential for systemic change. How and where can we observe such potent dynamics of change? Such potential lies in the inconsistencies of systemic premises, which can be found at the contact points and conflicts between/among different subsystems. Focusing on these contradictions between behavioral standards, or between the strategic cultures of different subsystems, rather than converging on how the system maintains itself, can elevate systems studies to the next level.

This argument suggests that there are qualitative differences between interstate and systemic crises, despite frequent junctures and overlaps between the two. This distinction can also be found in the literature.

> A unit-level crisis derives from perceptions, whereas a systemic crisis is objective. Stated differently, the focus of the former is image and action, while that of the other is reality and interaction. There is no one-to-one relationship between unit and systemic crises: the former occurs for a single state; the latter is predicated upon the existence of distortion in the pattern of interaction between two or more adversaries in a system.[54]

Subsystems interact, and since they are different in nature, such interactions create tensions and reveal discrepancies. Systemic transformation emerges out of these inter-subsystemic contacts. The clues for both the potential and direction of change in the international system lie at the fault lines of the subsystems. Inter-subsystemic contradictions and the crises emerge out of them are the main dynamics of change.

International relations studies are concerned with processes and changes mainly at the systemic level. What makes a change systemic is its general impact on actors, processes, values, and behavior. Change in the international system happens through wars or crises. Actor-level changes most probably would not have such impact on a system. Therefore, the potential for systemic dynamics of change can be found in inter-subsystemic discrepancies and crises. There are frequent and constant changes and crises at the actor level, but most of these have no systemic consequence, and might remain local or regional.

In other words, not every crisis causes systemic change. But if those crises involve and impact different subsystems, their strategic culture, their modes of behavior, and the balance of power between them, we can talk about a systemic crisis or systemic change. Others are just ordinary crises that do not challenge the main premises of the system. Since systemic change occurs through relational processes, we can proclaim that subsystems are the main components of transformation. It is possible to explain change and find clues about its timing and direction by looking at the system's inconsistencies.

A contestation between different subsystemic issues, ideals, or principles carries the potential for new rules and norms for a changing international system. Aspirations of

for intentional systemic change. For these arguments, see Leon Lindberg and Stuart Scheingold, *Europe's Would-be Polity: Patterns of Change in the European Community* (Prentice Hall, 1970); and Haluk Özdemir, *Avrupa Mantığı. Avrupa Bütüleşmesinin Teori ve Dinamikleri* (İstanbul: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2012).

[54] Michael Brecher and Hemda Ben Yehuda, "System and Crisis in International Politics," *Review of International Studies* 11 (January 1985): 30.

inclusion, justice, or struggle between strong ideologies can shape a new international system. For example, the dependency concept has been shaped out of regional/subsystemic issues. The clash of civilizations and the rise of religious extremism are all about inclusion and exclusion issues in the system. Ideologies or cultures of excluded subsystems radicalize, which can shape the agenda of the general international system. System and subsystems by themselves have relatively stable structures. They have their routine conducts of relationships, principles, perceptions, norms, and rules. The potential for change lies not within the system but in its discrepancies with other systems. Such inconsistencies can best be observed in the borderlands. Systemic change, after all, is about changing rules, norms, principles, and perceptions.

*Borderlands:* The best places to observe the potential for crises and systemic change are at subsystemic intersections. Because of the absence of clear-cut boundaries between subsystems, such areas can be called *borderlands*. For analytical purposes, it is possible to identify certain borderlands, where the conflicting and disturbing effects of different subsystems are felt more strongly than in other places. Those are the areas where we need to investigate the forces of change and the dynamics of continuity. The most interesting effects of and the clues to transformative dynamics are hidden in these borderlands because they reveal the contradictions within each subsystem and challenge their stable existence. Potential dynamics for change lie within these contradictions and challenges, which is we need to focus on such areas to better understand system behavior. This is what most researchers do unconsciously anyway. For example, during the Cold War, Berlin was a much more interesting place than Washington or Moscow because that was where different subsystems contacted and challenged each other. The Balkans is a center of attention in world politics because throughout history it has been a subsystemic borderland and displays the inconsistencies of the bordering subsystems. But to reveal more clues about transformative dynamics, we need more deliberate studies concerning these areas.

Turkey is a typical example of such areas, and for several reasons, it has been an inspiration for this approach. The world looks quite different when it is viewed from the borderlands. Turkey's political experiences, in addition to its geopolitical location, have also been a source of inspiration. For example, its political crises were rarely the crises of domestic politics, but were reflections of systemic contradictions. Experiences ranging from the War of Independence to the crises of democratic transition all resulted from and were shaped by the subsystemic inconsistencies surrounding Turkey. Cultural clashes in the 1970s and the 1980s were reflections of the ideological subsystems shaping the Cold War environment. Turkey and similar countries are like laboratories of subsystemic rivalries, and thus contain clues about systemic dynamics.

These dynamics also include clues to the future of systemic changes. The ideological discrepancies of two different subsystems materialized in Turkey during the Cold War, in the form of cultural clashes between modernism, traditionalism, Westernism, and Islamic movements. Immediately after the Cold War, we saw the first signs of the coming ethno-religious politics in the Balkans, which, like Turkey, are a point of contact for different international subsystems. Interestingly, global conflicts in the 1990s and 2000s were similar to the struggles that had occurred in Turkey before 1991.

## 8. Conclusion

This article is a preliminary outline of my proposed inter-subsystemic approach. I identified certain assumptions and hypotheses, some variables, and a level of analysis that sketch out a research model. Above, I introduced and discussed certain assumptions and hypotheses. In that presentation, the main level of analysis appears to be the subsystem. The most prominent variables that can be derived from these discussions are strategic culture, crisis, and change. Further research can refine these variables and is expected to produce new ones on the basis of the proposed approach.

This model undoubtedly needs improvement and requires extensive field research to see its applications. In that context, the anticipated next step is to look into inter-subsystemic issues and areas to find interesting clues about systemic dynamics, and focus on the contradictions and interactions between such subsystems, then try to see if those inconsistencies contain any potential for systemic change. Therefore, the short-term research is expected to focus on tensions and inconsistencies between/among the defined subsystems, and to try to discover both the interplays between/among them and their potential impacts on the general system. From these discussions, it is possible to identify several questions to guide future research that might tackle the issues presented here.

- Does strategic culture matter? Which parameters do we need to focus on to define a strategic culture? In what ways do different strategic cultures affect inter-subsystemic relations during both ordinary and crisis times?
- What are the sources of change in international relations that can be identified at the system level?
- What kinds of subsystems can be diagnosed in current world affairs? Which areas or issues are their points of contact?
- What sorts of potential for, or dynamics of, change can be identified in such areas of contact or in the borderlands?
- Can we obtain clues about the dynamics of change in general, and its content and timing in particular, from our observations of borderlands?
- Are there such dynamics currently in progress, and how can we observe and classify them?
- How do we know a crisis can have a systemic effect? What are the empirical indicators of such ‘significant’ crises implying a systemic change? How can we distinguish them from ‘ordinary’ crises? Can we construct a crisis typology specifically for this purpose?
- At what level(s) do such crises imply that change is imminent? Can we identify certain characteristics of the coming change by looking at dynamics in the borderlands, and predict the nature of that change?

A great number of research already exists on subsystems. Therefore, our main objective here should be not to replicate them but to focus on the interactions between and among them. This is an overlooked aspect of system research. Geographically, the most interesting starting points would be countries like Turkey, Ukraine, and Russia, or regions like the Balkans or the Middle East, depending on the identification of the subsystems. Having gathered short-term findings, the long-term research goal would be to compare our conclusions with later

developments to determine correlations between our expectations and future systemic transformations.

The initial steps might involve retrospective analyses of certain historical examples to determine the potential of this approach. Then, based on such analyses, future projections could be made and the resilience and validity of the model could be tested. I anticipate that such a research program would reveal more interesting dynamics and produce more fruitful findings about the international system than current research programs do.

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