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## Do international systems matter?

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world these issues cannot be treated separately – there is a strong correlation between national military security and energy security and raw material policy.

The image of contemporary China that emerges from the analysis of its internal and external aims, allows, on the one hand, to state that “There is no doubt that the 21<sup>st</sup> century belongs to China. The transformation it has undergone over the past few decades results in interdependence of China and other countries of the globe: when the Middle Kingdom changes, the whole world changes. China dynamically influences the global system. If the Chinese Dragon is successful, not only America will thrive as well. Other countries also hugely depend on the well-being of China” (p. 150).

However, it seems that the author of the monograph omitted a few issues vital to functioning and the image of China on the international arena. One of them is the problem of adherence to human rights by Chinese authorities and another is the issue of Tibet. Of course, it is possible to say that these matters do not significantly affect the overall functioning of the Chinese state; however, they are noticed and discussed by the international community.

The book is based on numerous sources in Polish, English and Chinese. It contains also fragments of Chinese politicians’ official speeches translated into English. Undoubtedly, they can prove valuable for other researchers interested in China. At the end of the book there are tables with data on such subjects as the list of agreements on exemption from visa requirements or a list of trade relations of the People’s Republic of China with other states.

In the light of the above observations and remarks, it is undisputable that Joanna Marszałek-Kawa’s book has great academic and cognitive value. This publication may be of interest both to academics dealing with international relations (who are interested in the theoretical dimension), as well to diplomats (who value the practical dimension). It is very likely that the issue of changes in China and on the Asian continent as well shall be very topical in the next several dozen of years. At present, China’s world power status on the international arena is a vital research problem.

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## **DO INTERNATIONAL SYSTEMS MATTER?**

**Barry Buzan, Richard Little, *Systemy międzynarodowe w historii świata*  
[International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations], PWN Publishing House, Warszawa 2011, pp. 565**

The first edition of Barry Buzan and Richard Little’s influential work *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* was originally published in English in 2000. The Polish translation was published in 2011 under an arrangement with Oxford University Press. Barry Buzan is a professor at the London

School of Economics and Political Science while Richard Little is a professor emeritus at the University of Bristol. Both men have been important theorists in the field of international studies, focused on international systems and security issues research, for several decades.

The reviewed book explores the issue of building international structures throughout history from the perspective of international theories. The first section develops a theoretical framework for an analysis of the international system, containing various conceptions describing relationships between notions, factors, and determinants. The following sections investigate the most significant features of international systems in history (prehistoric and ancient periods) while the fourth section examines the development of the current global international system of international relations. The last part of this monograph proposes an interesting conclusion on the development of the historical perspective in international relations methodology.

This is a book about international systems in world history rather than about the theory of international relations itself. Buzan and Little wish to break out of the boundaries of existing disciplines, writing about geography, history, geopolitics, and sociology. It can be described as an innovative approach due to the lack of popular synthesis of theoretical framework in our discipline.<sup>1</sup> Their work may enrich the intense Polish discussion on the methodology and range of international theory.<sup>2</sup>

Firstly, Buzan and Little give themselves the primary task of a close reading of “classic” texts concerning system theories in international relations, offering an inspiring foray into the social sciences rather than a close study of empirical problems (see chapters 1 and 2) that are presented in the subsequent parts of their monograph. The authors discuss different notions of the system after making some general remarks about their general approach to the study of international relations. They identify international systems in terms of the assumption that we can never know all the features of world politics independent of economic or cultural issues (see chapters 4 and 5). Their account of the multidisciplinary roots of different schools of thought is competent and illuminating.

While showing some awareness of the problem, the authors declare that even a cursory search of current literature shows that international systems theory is directionless. There is no mainstream theory, as the notion of “system” remains unclear. Buzan’s and Little’s way to the vital theoretical construction arrives via the historical

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<sup>1</sup> See: J. Czuputowicz, *Theory or Practice? The State of International Relations in Poland*, “European Political Science” 2012, No. 1, pp. 1–17.

<sup>2</sup> See: T. Łoś-Nowak, *Wyjaśnić czy interpretować: dylematy i wyzwania czwartej debaty interparadygmatycznej* [Explain or Interpret: Dilemmas and Challenges for the Fourth Interparadigmatic Debate], “Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations” 2009, No. 1, Vol. 39, pp. 29–46; R. Skarzyński, *Stosunki międzynarodowe, system międzynarodowy i poliarchia* [International Relations, the International System and Polyarchy], “Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations” 2010, No. 1–2, Vol. 41, pp. 9–29.

context of human political behavior throughout dozens of centuries, starting with the history of human hunting groups and the first primitive tribes.

Much of authors' work is intended to test various thinkers, e.g., Kenneth N. Waltz or Immanuel Wallerstein, against their own theory of system in order to project the general model of international relations integration with a world history approach.<sup>3</sup> Buzan and Little appear to be more precise about matters that might be more pertinent to international relations theory, such as critical apparatus, concepts' reconstructions, or a range of theoretical promises. They do not stop at this point. Besides this, they create several levels of dialogue with satisfying theoretical elegance. It is possible to simultaneously discuss methods, levels of analysis in theory, as well as the relations with other disciplines. The wide range of the authors' promises is a real sensation on our publishing market.

However, it has only been in the past forty years that the field of international relations has placed any real emphasis on including system factors in explanations of international behavior<sup>4</sup>. The most influential discussion started in the 80s after Waltz' *Theory of International Politics*<sup>5</sup> was published. The system model may be powerful in that it provides a way to link activities at the international and domestic levels of analysis. Waltz' works inspired further research into the interaction between the two levels of analysis, which was aimed at further developing the model. Buzan and Little see Waltz as an ally who might contribute to their own view that the "system," as a concept, should be at the center of international relations study. They wrote as much in their *Logic of Anarchy*, as they do it in reviewed book.<sup>6</sup>

The book represents a valuable contribution to the topical discussion on Western international theories in Poland. In the past decade, for example, constructivists have advocated the importance of agents as well as structure in explaining politics, redirecting attention away from purely structural explanations of international politics and opening the door for the analysis of the interaction between the international system and substate actors.<sup>7</sup> The constructivist context of Buzan and Little's work

<sup>3</sup> See the introduction to the book, as well as the presentation of the popular system concepts in history and international relations theories (chapter 2 and 3).

<sup>4</sup> The first comprehensive study concerning the notion of "international system" was made by J. S. Goodman, *The Concept of "System" in International Relations Theory, "Background"* 1965, No. 4, Vol. 8, pp. 257–268.

<sup>5</sup> K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading 1979. (Polish translation, K.N. Waltz, *Struktura teorii stosunków międzynarodowych*, Warszawa 2009); See: *Neorealism and Its Critics*, R. Keohane (ed.), New York 1986.

<sup>6</sup> See: B. Buzan, Ch. Jones, R. Little, *The Logic of Anarchy. Neorealism to Structural Realism*, New York 1993.

<sup>7</sup> R. Kosłowski, F. Kratochwil, *Understanding Change in International Politics: The Soviet's Empire Demise and the International System*, "International Organization" 1994, No. 2, Vol. 48.

coincides with an interesting debate on the role of sociology in international issues, which was introduced by the assimilation of Alexander Wendt's key concepts, which was also published in Poland.<sup>8</sup>

By improving our understanding of the role of international systems in world history (linear and non-linear systems, divided into complementary sections: military, political, economic, social, and others), the book serves to make the two-level approach a more valuable tool for explaining international phenomena and political organizations (especially states) behavior. Moreover, because of the book's interest in linking the modern concept of domestic and international, it makes a contribution to a variety of literature, including those on international organizations, transnational relations, as well as foreign policy analysis and development. In short, strengthening our understanding of the interaction between different institutions in international relations provides a means for bettering and deepening the explanation of a range of international behavior in an ever more globalized world.

Buzan and Little use the aforementioned framework to generate a series of hypotheses that are addressed in the ensuing chapters. Those chapters, historical studies that form the heart of the book, essentially address the question of how political institutions build a system. Chapters vary in their theoretical perspectives (it may serve as an additional handbook), but the majority of them are informed by a rationalist approach (with constructivist elements included). The book also gains value by drawing on different research methods and by examining different substantive issue areas – international relations perspective, world history, as well as political anthropology, which suit the book perfectly.

It is a pleasant surprise to see a book that employs a variety of methods; the chapters that used qualitative analysis benefited from empirical support and extensive case studies. A final strength of the book, ironically, is that Buzan and Little are conscious of its limitations. They do not offer a universal international theory (see the book's *Introduction*), but provide an interesting organization of political system thinking in the discipline of international relations.

It is worth concluding by making some critical remarks, not to constitute wider theoretical polemics as there is no place for it in this review. There is strong intellectualism in Buzan and Little's work, but the reader is left to make his own connections in the vast material collected in the study. Also, the work is characterized by an essayistic style of writing, which is very comfortable to read, but may confuse Polish readers looking for direct statements and "continental" detail. Nevertheless, the book is worth reading and is highly recommended for university classes.

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<sup>8</sup> A. Wendt, *Spoleczna teoria stosunków międzynarodowych* [*Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge 1999], Warszawa 2008.