

## Neoclassical Realism: Its Promises and Limits as a Theory of Foreign Policy

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### Abstract:

*The paper constitutes a theoretical analysis of the development of 'neoclassical realism' as a distinct body of theories of foreign policy. Neoclassical realism is assessed in comparison to its predecessor – neorealism- in accordance with the criteria established by Imre Lakatos about scientific development. Lakatos argues that theories cannot be assessed individually rather as 'series of theories'. These series labelled as Scientific Research Programs are composed of two parts: the hard core of the program and the positive heuristic. The hard core remains unchanged while the positive heuristic which consists of auxiliary hypotheses is always under improvement. According to Lakatos, a series of theories is theoretically progressive if each new theory has some excess empirical content over its predecessor, that is, if it predicts some novel unexpected fact. Neoclassical realism is a branch of realist tradition which integrates neorealist system's theory with the more unit based variables of classical realism in an attempt to construct a coherent theory of foreign policy. It seems that this 'series of theories' bring some new facts on theoretical and empirical level. This paper argues that when neoclassical realist contributions are scrutinised; the difference with its predecessor – neorealism – vanishes because it is difficult to identify 'some novel unexpected fact'. Although neoclassical realism constitutes a progressive development of realism as a framework of foreign policy analysis, it is unsustainable to pretend that it constitutes a new theory of foreign policy.*

**Key words:** Neoclassical realism, neorealism, foreign policy theory, international system.

## INTRODUCTION

The central problem in the philosophy of science has been the question of how to determine the criteria that demonstrate which theory is true or untrue. Several criteria have been proposed which vary from *verificationism* of hard core Vienna Circle positivism, Popper's *falsificationism* or critical rationalism to more metaphysical criteria of Thomas Kuhn. Imre Lakatos concluded that scientific theories taken individually "are not only equally unprovable, and equally improbable, but they are also equally undisprovable" (Lakatos and Musgrave 1970, 103). He also urges that we renounce from the obsession with the truthfulness of a theory. Theories are neither true nor untrue. We assess them according to their explanatory power. Consequently, neither verification nor falsification could tell us which theory constitutes a progressive development. He proposed that the appraisal of theories should be shifted from individual theories to sequences of theories which he labeled *scientific research program*. SRP comprises a series of theories linked by a set of fundamental constitutive assumptions.

SRP in itself is comprised of two parts: (i) the negative heuristic or the *hard core* of the program and (ii) the positive heuristic. "The negative heuristic of the programme forbids us to direct the modus tollens at this 'hard core'. Instead, we must use our ingenuity to articulate or even invent 'auxiliary hypotheses', which form a protective belt around this core, and we must redirect the modus tollens to these" (Lakatos and Musgrave 1970, 133). This protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses – according to Lakatos – "has to bear the brunt of tests and get adjusted and re-adjusted, or even completely replaced, to defend the thus-hardened core" (Lakatos and Musgrave 1970, 133). Changes in this protective belt of the hard core constitute problemshifts which might be progressive or degenerative. A SRP constitutes progressive problemshift

when it states a new fact. “A series of theories is *theoretically progressive* ... if each new theory has some excess empirical content over its predecessor, that is, if it predicts some novel, hitherto unexpected fact”.

SRP to be considered progressive must also determine how this theoretically stated new fact is corroborated in actual scientific research. “A theoretically progressive series of theories is also *empirically progressive*... if some of this excess empirical content is also corroborated, that is, if each new theory leads us to the actual discovery of some *new fact*”. A SRP is actually progressive if it meets both criteria and is degenerating if not (Lakatos and Musgrave 1970, 118). International Relations theorists have tried to assess the progress of IR discipline according to Lakatos criteria. The result of such endeavour is controversial, but the general finding is that meeting this criteria is difficult if not impossible. However Lakatos SRP helps us to as an normative ideal to assess the state and progress of IR theories. We will examine the state of Neoclassical Realism (NcR) comparing it with classical realism and neorealism to assess if it constitutes a new theory of foreign policy or an extension of neorealist analysis in the field of foreign policy. To determine if NcR constitutes a progressive step from its predecessors we have to specify theoretical and empirical novelty of this approach.

### **Realism: From a theory of international politics to a theory of foreign policy**

Realism is a philosophical and theoretical tradition which is “profoundly pessimistic about the human condition, moral progress, and the capacity of human reason to create a world of peace and harmony”. Consequently, realist first principles assert that: (1) humankind cannot transcend conflict through the progressive power of reason to discover a science of peace; (2) politics are not a function of ethics—morality is instead the

product of power and material interests; and (3) necessity and reason of state trump morality and ethics when these values conflict” (Schweller 2003, 323).

Robert Gilpin (1986) argues that the basic common assumption is the conflictual nature of international affairs. “As Thomas Hobbes told ...‘it's a jungle out there’. Anarchy is the rule; order, justice, and morality are the exceptions”. The second assumption hold by realists is that the “ultimate units of social and political life are not the individuals of liberal thought nor the classes of Marxism” but what “Ralf Dahrendorf has called ‘conflict groups’”. Gilpin says that humans are “tribal species” whose loyalty is dedicated to groups. “In the modern world, we have given the name ‘nation-state’ to these competing tribes and the name ‘nationalism’ to this form of loyalty”. The third common unifying assumption for realist thinking is “the primacy in all political life of power and security in human motivation”. This does not mean that there are no other higher values pursued by humans but that “all these more noble goals will be lost unless one makes provision for one's security in the power struggle among social groups” (Gilpin, 1986, 304-305).

The most important traditions within realism are classical realism and structural realism. For the distinguished classical realist, Hans Morgenthau, politics is guided by objective laws rooted in *human nature*. International system is populated by states which are egoistic and pursue their interest defined in terms of power. International politics – says Morgenthau – as all politics, is struggle for power, with the difference being at the forms of organisation. Domestic politics is hierarchical and institutionalised while international politics is anarchical (Morgenthau, 2005, 4-15).

Keneth N. Waltz (1954; 1979) find Morgenthau’s reliance on human nature not satisfactory and unscientific. In Waltz’s structural realism, the most important feature of international life is not state’s interest defined in terms of power, but the very nature of international politics. He reverses

the direction of causality from ‘objective laws rooted in human nature’ to the anarchic nature of international system which imposes limits on the choices of the composing units of the system, states who try to survive within this self-help system. International system – according to Waltz – is composed by two elements: structure and its units. The structure of international system is the product of the interaction between units but not the aggregate of the units. Waltz offers a three layer definition of the structure: first, “the principle by which the system is ordered” which in our case is the anarchic order; second “by specification of functions of differentiated units”, which means that states are ‘like units’ because they demonstrate similar functions; third is “the distribution of capabilities across units” (Waltz, 1979, 100-101).

In Waltz’s definition, the first two components are constants while the third is the most important variable to explain international politics. *Theory of International Politics* assumes that states are unitary actors concerned about their survival. Their primary motivation is not power maximisation as in Morgenthau’s theory but security. The balance of power is the outcome at system’s level which is created through competition and socialisation of the units. Waltz’s theory is primarily a theory about international outcomes, a system’s theory.

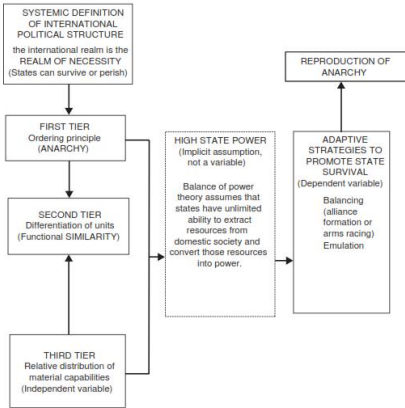


Figure 1.1 Waltz’s basic neorealist model (Taliaferro 2009, 208).

Structural realism's theoretical novelty – in Lakatos's terms – is that it identifies international structure as the independent variable which forces states to act as self-regarding units seeking survival; any change at structural level is accompanied by changes in the behaviour of the units. The result of such behaviour at the level of international system brings about the balance of power; this is not to say that countries act to create balance of power, this is the unintended consequence of the units interaction. Waltz theory has very limited use when it comes to explain specific foreign policies. Waltz has clearly stated that his theory is not a theory of foreign policy. "Neorealist theory of international politics explains how external forces shape states' behavior, but says nothing about the effects of internal forces. Under most circumstances, a theory of international politics is not sufficient, and cannot be made sufficient, for the making of unambiguous foreign-policy predictions. An international-political theory can explain states' behavior only when external pressures dominate the internal disposition of states, which seldom happens. When they do not, a theory of international politics needs help" (Waltz 1996, 57).

This is the reason why several scholars have been trying to formulate a neorealist inspired foreign policy which explains state's foreign policy. "Recognizing this limitation, a new breed of realist scholars has embraced the richer formulations of traditional, pre-Waltzian realists, who focused more on foreign policy than systemic-level phenomena" (Schweller 2003, 317). This group of scholars (called neoclassical realist) have added first and second image variables (e.g., domestic politics, internal extraction capacity and processes, state power and intentions, and leaders' perceptions of the relative distribution of capabilities and of the offense-defense balance) to explain foreign policy decision making and important historical cases.

Randall Schweller argues that neoclassical realism represents progress within the realist research tradition emphasizing a problem-focused research in several dimensions.

Neoclassical realist (1) seeks to clarify and extend the logic of basic (classical and structural) realist propositions, (2) employs the case-study method to test general theories, explain cases, and generate hypotheses, (3) incorporates first, second, and third image variables, (4) addresses important questions about foreign policy and national behavior, and (5) has produced a body of cumulative knowledge (Schweller 2003, 317).

Gideon Rose in a review essay (1998) argues that theories of foreign policy could be classified in two groups. In one group are *innenpolitik* theories which locate the causes of state behavior at the domestic politics (human nature, psychological and cognitive characteristic of the leadership, the ideology, decision-making processes, the nature of domestic regime, etc.) In the other group are structural theories which locate the causes of state's behavior at the nature of international structure. Each theory falling in the first group privileges a domestic independent variable as responsible for the state's behavior, but all of them share a common understanding that foreign policy could be best understood as a domestic dynamic of the country.

The main problem with theories which explain state's behavior by reference only to the unit level is that they "have difficulty accounting for why states with similar domestic systems often act differently in the foreign policy sphere and why dissimilar states in similar situations often act alike" (Rose, 1998, 148). The chief problem with structural theories is the reverse because most of them concentrate on the "nature of the international system and ignore what goes on behind state doors" (Zakaria, 1992, 178). So these theories are unable to explain why states with different domestic regimes within the same structural conditions choose different paths of their foreign policy.

The reason why one category of theories abstract from systemic factors and the other category from domestic factors is described eloquently by Kenneth Waltz who speaks about the

‘autonomy of domains’. International politics and domestic politics are two autonomous domains organized by their own principles which require different theoretical tools to account for them. Foreign policy falls in the middle ground between International politics and domestic politics making its theoretical autonomy impossible and therefore a grand unified theory of foreign policy impossible (Waltz, 1996, 54). Theory of International Politics, says Waltz, shows us why states having the same international power position act alike, but structure does not tell us everything, “they tell us a small number of big and important things” (Waltz, 1986, 329).

A theory of foreign policy must explain what structure does not tell: Why states with similar relative power position act differently? As Waltz says “a neorealist theory of international politics explains how external forces shape states' behavior, but says nothing about the effects of internal forces. Under most circumstances, a theory of international politics is not sufficient, and cannot be made sufficient, for the making of unambiguous foreign-policy predictions” (Waltz 1996, 57). As such a theory of foreign policy must trace differences in behavior on “internal composition” of the state (ibid 54). Neoclassical realism steps up in this difficult position to claim that they have found one way to offer coherent theoretical explanations of foreign policy.

Neoclassical realism formulates different analytical approaches attempting to regulate the imbalance between “the general and the unique” (Wohlforth 2012, 73). It keeps the structural premises of neorealism privileging international structure and examines ‘the intervening role of the state’ in an attempt to integrate domestic factors in the analysis of foreign policy (Lobell, Ripsman, & Taliaferro, 2009, 4). Rose claims that neoclassical realism links clearly “specified independent, intervening and dependent variables in a direct causal chain” (Rose 1998, 167). Neoclassical realists make relative power position their chief independent variable and as such they are



forced to choose side on how to understand the concept of 'power'. They follow the definition of Robert Dahl who conceptualizes power in relational terms as "A's ability to get B to do something it would otherwise not do"(Dahl 1957).

Neoclassical realists do not assume that states seek power maximization or security maximization as classical realists or neorealists assume; they instead assume that "states respond to the uncertainties of international anarchy by seeking to control and shape their external environment" (Rose, 1998, 152). State's interest in neoclassical realist approach is not understood as 'given', but as the goals and preferences which guide state's external behavior.

One of the most important departures from neorealism is the fact that they hold that in order to understand "the way states interpret and respond to their external environment, one must analyze how systemic pressures are translated through unit level intervening variables such as decision-maker's perceptions and domestic state structure" (ibid, 152). Neoclassical realists remain agnostic on the issue of which theory could be best used as an auxiliary theory and use the theories which they think are best suited to the case explanation (Wohlforth, 2012, 73). This does not mean that they do not follow some theoretical proposition, but that they are elastic in combining theories which respond to the complexity of the reality of foreign policy.

The basic premise from which one has to start the analysis of foreign policy is that the goal and ambition of the foreign policy is guided primarily by the power position which the state occupies in international system. "The scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy [are] driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are realist" – argues Rose – "... however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated

through intervening variables at the unit level. This is why they are neoclassical". But to understand how the power position and structural pressures and incentives are translated in concrete policies "a close examination of the context within which foreign policies are formulated and implemented" is required (Rose 1998, 146-147).

There two problems unanswered here. Firstly, Rose doesn't show how systemic pressures are translated into foreign policy. It is clear enough that foreign policy is a product of domestic institutions and leadership, but to say that we have a different theory we have to state in advance how 'systemic forces' are translated in state's action. Waltz has rightly pointed out that theory is not a mechanical merging of different variables in different levels of analysis. A theory has to show how changes in one domain cause changes in another domain. The process of threat assessment and incentive's evaluation is mediated by leader's dispositions and knowledge. In neoclassical realist approach there is no evidence how changes in international structure, or in the variable of distribution of capabilities informs leader's perceptions. If such perceptions about changes in international system are affected by other variables, such as cognitive, ideological or cultural variables, which are exogenous to theory, than we are dealing with the complementation of neorealist theory with some ad hoc auxiliary theories. This is not how we construct a new theory. "The problem here is the same as with all attempts at modifying "aspects" of a theory such as substituting "influence" for power, balance of threat for balance of power, misperception of power for real power. The modification is fine if one is merely accounting for exceptions rather than the norm" (Telhami 2002, 108).

Although decision-maker's perceptions of the structural forces is the chief intervening variable for most neoclassical realists, this approach is very plural. For Fareed Zakaria (1999) the chief intervening variable is state's power extracting

capacity. “State power is that portion of national power the government can extract for its purposes and reflects the ease with which central decision-makers can achieve their ends... state-centered realism, maintains the logic that capabilities shape intentions, but it recognizes that state structure limits the availability of national power” (Zakaria, 1999, 9). But it is still the relative material power the most important factor. Zakaria is not pretending that relative distribution of material power at system’s level is not the key variable, but that sometimes domestic structure conditions states response to external pressures. This is hardly in opposition with neorealist expectations. Other scholars have used different intervening variables to elucidate different phenomena of foreign policy. But auxiliary theories are used only when structural theories fail to give satisfactory explanations of the phenomena. When the results deviate from theoretical expectations, the unit variables related with neoclassical realism must be integrated to understand why (Schweller, 2003, 346).

Schweller in his study of the origins of the WWII argues that misperception about the distribution of power led Stalin to bandwagon with Hitler instead of balancing. Somewhere else Schweller argues that states often fail to assess the threats and more often bandwagon than balance (Schweller 1998; Schweller 1994; Schweller 2004). Joseph M. Parent and Sebastian Rosato found this argument in deep error. The state that the offers strong support for the claim that effective military balance prevail most of the time among great powers. They studied internal military balancing among great powers from 1816 to 1990 and found that an effective balance was evident in 84 percent of the ratios examined. “Most of the anomalies involve liminal great powers, that is, states with resources that put them on the great power/minor power borderline. If we exclude Prussia from 1816 to 1870 and Italy from 1861 to 1918, when they were the weakest of the powers, neorealism’s success rate increases to 92 percent” (Pareto and Rosato 2015, 62-63).

If states misperceive power some of the time – as Schweller argues – this doesn't demonstrate any problem for neorealism. "If perceived "threat" sometimes does not correspond to real material power, it is hardly surprising, but it would still be helpful to differentiate threat from power" (Telhami 2002, 108). Neoclassical realists in presenting theoretically informed case analysis are doing what a neorealist would expect from an investigation of foreign policy: explore the domestic basis of foreign policy while taking account of external factors. "And they do a fine job of it" (Telhami 2002, 108). But to pretend that this collection of different investigation of case studies constitutes a new theory within neorealist tradition is not justifiable.

## CONCLUSIONS

Neoclassical realism is a progressive development as an extension of neorealist logic of foreign policy analysis. It has demonstrated theoretical and empirical strength comparing to its immediate competitors such as constructivist and liberal analysis of foreign policy (Foulon 2015). Although these different realist approaches to foreign policy analysis do not constitute a coherent theory of foreign policy, they integrate systemic and domestic variables in a coherent way. They do a fine job of integrating the impact of domestic factors - such as state's structure, state's regime, leader's personality, perception's role, ideology - with the system's level of analysis. These scholarly valid attempts to elucidate specific case studies do to constitute a theory of foreign policy as several authors have claimed (Rose 1998; Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009; Schweller 2003; Foulon 2015). The assessment of these body of literature according to the criteria established by Imre Lakatos about scientific developments shows that neoclassical realism fails to bring about new theoretical and empirical 'facts' which

differ from its predecessors such as classical realism and neorealism.

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