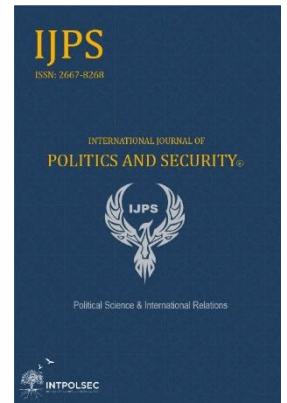


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A Review of Neo-Classical Realism and its Assessment of Independent and Intervening Variables in Foreign Policy Analysis

Md Mahmudur RAHMAN*

Abstract

How do states assess international threats? Who decides the foreign policy alternatives? To what extent can domestic actors bargain with state leaders and influence foreign policies? These are the common questions that are faced by foreign policy administrators in any country. Neoclassical Realism (NCR) answers these common questions by filtering international imperatives through state structure. NCR helps top officials to assess probable threats, identify feasible strategies in response to those threats, and extract and mobilize the societal resources necessary to implement and sustain those strategies. That's why the advocates of NCR claim it as the theory of foreign policy. This paper identified this theory to distinguish it as a logical extension and necessary part of advancing neo-realism as well as a theory of international relations that is more prone to analyzing states' foreign policy. The focus has been to discuss what NCR incorporates by saying independent and intervening variables to be considering issues in foreign policy analysis. The paper has been based on extensive literature reviews especially the review articles of Gideon Rose and Brian Rathbun and the scholars who contributed to the area of foreign policy.

Keywords: Neorealism, Neoclassical Realism, foreign policy, and FP analysis.

Neo-Klasik Realizm Üzerine Bir İnceleme ve Dış Politika Analizinde Bağımsız ve Araya Giren Değişkenlerin Değerlendirilmesi

Özet

Devletler uluslararası tehditleri nasıl değerlendiriyor? Dış politika alternatiflerine kim karar veriyor? Yerel aktörler devlet liderleriyle ne ölçüde pazarlık edebiliyor ve dış politikaları etkileyebiliyor? Bunlar, herhangi bir ülkedeki dış politika yöneticilerinin karşılaştığı yaygın sorulardır. Neoklasik Realizm (NKR), uluslararası zorunlulukları devlet yapısı aracılığıyla filtreleyerek bu yaygın soruları yanıtlar. NKR, üst düzey yetkililerin olası tehditleri değerlendirmesine, bu tehditlere yanıt olarak uygulanabilir stratejileri belirlemesine ve bu stratejileri uygulamak ve sürdürmek için gerekli toplumsal kaynakları çıkarmasına ve harekete geçirmesine yardımcı olur. Bu nedenle NKR savunucuları bunu dış politika teorisi olarak iddia ediyorlar. Bu makale, bu teoriyi mantıksal bir uzantı ve ilerleyen neo-realizmin gerekli bir parçası ve devletlerin dış politikasını analiz etmeye daha yatkın bir uluslararası ilişkiler teorisi olarak ayırt etmek için tanımladı. Odak noktası, dış politika analizindeki konuları dikkate alan bağımsız ve araya giren değişkenleri söyleyerek NKR'in neler içerdiğini tartışmak olmuştur. Makale, özellikle Gideon Rose ve Brian Rathbun'un derleme makaleleri ve dış politika alanına katkıda bulunan akademisyenlerin kapsamlı literatür taramalarına dayanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Neorealizm, Neoklasik Realizm, Dış politika, Dış politika analizi.

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1. Introduction

How do states, their decision-makers, and institutions assess international threats and opportunities? Who ultimately decides the foreign policy alternatives whether acceptable or unacceptable? What occurs when any controversy arises to define which exactly a foreign threat is? What kind of authority can domestic actors exercise in dealing with the state leaders to influence security and foreign policy options? In what manner do states extract and mobilize required elements for executing security and foreign policies? The above questions are almost identical and, according to Taliaferro et al., are difficult to answer in context with the prominent neo-realist and liberal theories of international politics.¹ To extend their argument they have given two examples. *First*, immediately after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s when there was no competition for manifesting power globally and was a heavy domestic burden to secure the benefits of peace, it was seen that the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Clinton aimed at preserving and expanding US influence in Europe and East Asia. And the reason behind these movements thus cannot be explained by just a systemic, i.e., neo-realist theory or even an innenpolitik, i.e., liberal or democratic peace theory.² *Second*, the illegitimate decision of George W. Bush doctrine to invade Iraq in March 2003 and the following extrajudicial actions of the administration to capture and punish the so-called Islamist terrorists and modernizing the Middle East through the facilitation of liberal democracy indicated that there is a combination of “systemic” and “domestic-level” factors behind this movement. Putting it in another way, US military response is not only dependent on the spectrum of availability of external threats and its prevailing capacity of weapons, but it also depends on such other distinct variables, i.e., the predominance of the executive branch related to homeland security, the influence of neoconservatives and other think tank communities in policy entrepreneurship, and the supremacy of liberal principles in the discourse of US foreign policy among others.³ Both the examples presented how the constraints imposed by the international system are refined by state structure combined with the key personnel’s assessment of probable dangers, identification of feasible and appropriate responses far combating the dangers, and finally extraction as well as mobilization of

¹ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism, The State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

² John Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 5.

³ Robert Jervis, “Understanding the Bush Doctrine,” *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (2003): 365–388.



necessary resources from the society for implementation and sustaining those strategic responses. This very behavior is the essence of Neoclassical Realism (NCR) which is claimed by its advocates as the theory of foreign policy.⁴ Advocates of NCR developed their theoretical strength from the contributions of neo-realists or in other words structural realists such as Kenneth Waltz, Robert Gilpin, and others while not giving up the pragmatic thoughts of the classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger, Arnold Wolfers, and others. NCR believes that in a world of scarce resources and pervasive uncertainty, the domestic politics of the states play a great role in strengthening material power and ensuring security. As anarchy – a condition which reflects there is no dominant international sovereign authority – is said to be the reason for international conflict the states are automatically motivated by the “systemic” forces to endeavor for ensuring their security.⁵ Being an analytical strategy in studying foreign policies NCR, appeared firstly with a review article written by Gideon Rose titled “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy”. The article is concerned with the *independent* and *intervening* variables that are closely linked to the formulation and implementation of foreign policies of the states. Distinguishing it from other realist perspectives as well as incorporating *ideas* and *domestic political variables* the article attempts to focus the theory as an ideal-typical foreign policy analytical approach. However, the theory NCR faced strong challenges from the part of the liberalists and constructivists who claim the theory is a “degenerative research paradigm that has lost all distinctiveness” of realism and thereby it results in a paradigmatic incoherence and indistinctiveness.⁶ The proponents of NCR, in reply, succeed to establish the approach as “a logical extension and necessary part of advancing neo-realism”.⁷ This was reflected in Rathbun’s article titled, “A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism” which was published in *Security Studies* in 2008. This is a review article which is aimed to give a very concise and clear understanding of the NCR to identify the independent and intervening variables that the NCR values. It covers only the basics of neoclassical realism so that a foreign policymaker can easily get a clear picture of the internal and external factors that influence foreign policymaking. On the other

⁴ Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 146-7.

⁵ Lobell, et al. *Neoclassical Realism*, 4.

⁶ Brian Rathbun, “A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism,” *Security Studies* 17 (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 295.

⁷ Ibid.



hand, it will be clear to an analyst what factors have influenced a country's foreign policy and how much the state's internal interests have been preserved. To know the internal weaknesses of a state and to strengthen its position in the international arena, it is necessary to understand and analyze the variables of neoclassical realism and the present paper will help to get this idea shortly. After giving a brief idea about its predecessors, the current paper will proceed to respond to the challengers by differentiating the theory as a distinct analytical foreign policy approach. Efforts will also be made to understand what neoclassical realists mean by independent variables and intervening variables, and why foreign policymakers need to give importance to these variables.

2. A Brief Background

“Realism” is the predecessor of NCR which, from an international relations perspective, is famous for “classical realism” or “political realism”. It is an approach of investigation which emphasizes the states to be obliged in pursuance of power politics for the national interest.⁸ States' obligations are imposed by the selfishness of human behavior termed as “egoism” and the nonexistence of sovereign international authority termed as “anarchy”. This situation ultimately demands “the primacy in all political life of power and security in human motivation” as stated by Gilpin.⁹ Keohane emphasized *state-centrism*, *rationality*, and *power* as the three core premises of realism.¹⁰ Thomas Hobbes and Niccolo Machiavelli are accepted to be the founders of realism in Western political thought. The Hobbesian concept is identified as *classical realism* which emphasizes that all men are equal, human beings are engaged in a system of anarchy and thus they are uncompromising in competition, self-consciousness, and prestige.¹¹ Machiavelli emphasizes we should act in politics as if “all men are wicked and that they will always give vent to the malignity that is in their minds when opportunity offers”.¹²

⁸ Jack Donnelly, “Realism,” In *Theories of International Relations*, by Scott Burchill, Andrew Linklater, Richard Devetak, Jack Donnelly, Matthew Paterson, Christian Reus-Smit and Jacqui True (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 30.

⁹ R. G. Gilpin, “The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism,” In *Neorealism and Its Critics*, edited by R. O. Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 305.

¹⁰ Robert O. Keohane, “Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond,” in *NeoRealism and Its Critics*, edited by Robert O. Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 164-165.

¹¹ Donnelly, *Realism*, 32.

¹² N. Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, Book 1, Chapter 3, (Harmondsworth, 1970), quoted in Burchill et al., *Theories of International Relations*, 30.



Another realist Morgenthau states, “Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states”.¹³

While classical or political realism does emphasize egoism and anarchy, its next stage Neo-realism arrived with relatively moderate consideration of the international anarchical system with a less human-centric stance. In his *Man, The State, and War* book Kenneth Waltz (1924-2013) pointed out on three levels that he termed as images in describing the causes of war. For the first image of international relations, the causes of war lie mainly in human nature and behavior. According to him, “Wars result from selfishness, from misdirected aggressive impulses, from stupidity”.¹⁴ He mentioned all other causes as secondary that should be interpreted based on the above human factors. Waltz’s second image in the theories of international relations is the domestic arrangements of the states. This image argues that the internal organization of states is the key to understanding war and peace. Waltz said, “the internal structure of states determines not only the form and use of military force but external behavior generally”.¹⁵ Waltz continued his book by explaining the third image which assumes that the cause of war is found at the systemic level, i.e., the anarchic structure of the international system is the root cause of war. This third image argues, “...there is a constant possibility of war in a world in which there are two or more states each seeking to promote a set of interests and having no agency above them upon which they can rely for protection”.¹⁶ This is the very idea through which he became renowned as the pioneer of neo-realism that was later written elaborately in his 1979 book *Theory of International Politics*. This piece focused to explain the reasons for the repetitious style of state behavior and their interactions in the international system.¹⁷ Gideon Rose argued, this theory of international politics covers some common postulates on how individual states are motivated to act in the international arena; however, does not claim to explain the states’ behavior meticulously or on every occasion.¹⁸ Waltz claimed that the scope of probable consequences of the actions and interactions of the states within a given system is expressed by neo-realism. It also illustrates

¹³ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th. (New York: Knopf, distributed by Random House, 1972), quoted in Burchill et al., *Theories of International Relations*, 30.

¹⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 16.

¹⁵ Ibid, 125.

¹⁶ Ibid, 227.

¹⁷ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 66.

¹⁸ Rose, “Neoclassical Realism”, 145.



that in case of changes in the system the scope of outcomes differs. It also informs about the exercised forces by the systems and thereby pretended possibilities in different structures.¹⁹ The existing literature of International Relations has been sorted newly with the concept of “systemic determinacy” through the contribution of neo-realism.²⁰ In the words of Waltz, “International structure emerges from the interaction of states and then constrains them from taking certain actions while propelling them toward others”.²¹ The above discussions make it clear that the literature of neo-realism in the arena of international relations has underestimated the domestic-level variables or downgraded it to a relatively inconsiderable position.

NCR is claimed to be the extension of neo-realism and thereby of realism. Several scholars like Wohlforth,²² Zakaria,²³ Schweller,²⁴ have emphasized the significance of a combination of “systemic” and “unit-level” variables though not rejected the systemic explanations. Fareed Zakaria stated in this regard, “a good account of a nation’s foreign policy should include systemic, domestic, and other influences, specifying what aspects of the policy can be explained by what factors”. In his 1998 review article “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy” Gideon Rose combined the contributions of those scholars and termed “neoclassical realism” and claimed it has a cognitive link with classical realism. NCR stresses the *relative material power* of the states as well as added with the structural realism the “ideas” and “domestic politics” and thus protects it from the allegation that this theory is “theoretically degenerative”.²⁵ Taking the arguments of neoclassical realists the paper is arranged with firstly, distinguishing the approach from other international theoretical approaches like *liberalism* and *constructivism*, and secondly, the elements, both internal and external, the theory requires the foreign policy analysts.

¹⁹ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 71-72.

²⁰ Folker J. Sterling, “Realist Environment, Liberal Process, and Domestic-Level Variables,” *International Security* 41, no. 1 (1997): 1.

²¹ Donnelly, *Realism*, 35.

²² M. W. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (New York: Cornell University Press), 1993.

²³ Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America’s World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1998.

²⁴ Randall L. Schweller, “Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing,” *International Security* 29, no. 2 (2004): 159-201.

²⁵ Rathbun, “A Rose by Any Other Name”, 297.



3. Neoclassical Realism

I would like to start the discussion with the critics' idea of labeling NCR as a degenerative research paradigm. The realists respond to this charge by arguing that the paradigms in social sciences are not thought at the same pace as natural sciences.²⁶ Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik have brought the strongest criticism of neoclassical realism by arguing that this theory incorporates “domestic” and “ideational” variables. For the shape of a research paradigm, they have identified two key criteria: *distinctiveness* and *coherence*. According to them, if realists can make use of differences in the relations of state and its society as the main interpretive factors, they are not realists anymore but can be termed as liberals. On the other hand if realists, in describing the interests of the states, can demonstrate divergence that arises based on the differences in ideology they can be said, constructivists. They further claim that there is no right to the realists theoretically for including such causal factors in their analysis.²⁷

In answering the above allegation the neoclassical realists and even the neo-realists said it has not been claimed in their literature that they ignore the elements of *domestic politics* and *ideas* in playing a role in international politics.²⁸ From the epistemological perspective, the *appropriation strategy* as claimed by liberalists and constructivists is highly irregular. Any paradigm of international relations possesses the right to use “domestic politics” and “ideas” that are not exclusive to any specific one. To express the logic of its approach each paradigm could utilize these factors. However, the fundamental distinction of using a paradigm here is to think “how” not “what”.²⁹

This absorption is also claimed in discussing the natural development of neo-realism in its dual functioning.³⁰ *First*, ideas and domestic politics are the key criteria for a state's ability to connect to its underlying material power. NCR simply added to Waltz's meaning of power linked with nationalism and state-society relations. *Second*, besides power, structural realism is also concerned with the idea and domestic politics in a way that the systemic

²⁶ Stephen M. Walt, “The Progressive Power of Realism,” *The American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997), quoted in Rathbun, “A Rose by Any Other Name”, 245.

²⁷ Jeffrey W. Legro+ and Andrew Moravcsik, “Is Anybody Still a Realist?” *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): 5-55.

²⁸ Rathbun, “A Rose by Any Other Name”, 296.

²⁹ Rathbun, “A Rose by Any Other Name”, 300.

³⁰ Rathbun, “A Rose by Any Other Name”, 296.



factors may not always be adaptable directly which may negatively affect the foreign policy of any state. NCR, through its explanation, clarifies the conditions in which systemic restrictions sometimes are not adhered to accordingly by the states.

Constructivism emphasizes the social structure of international relations and thus uses ideas.³¹ Social construction is a process in which general ideas of the members of groups are comprehended collectively where groups create realities. Ideas used by constructivism are the particular types of social ideas created by their intersubjective and shared norms, values, and cultural expressions and are used in a particular way. Kaarbo makes it clear that the concepts of the constructivists like culture, identity, notions, discourse, and performances have been used to justify why the foreign policies of some states oppose realist and liberal expectations.³² From this viewpoint, the approaches that emphasized ideas in a minor social sense are different from the real perspective of constructivism.³³ One such approach is cognitivism where ideas are the instruments of decision-makers that are used to reduce the complexity of decision making. To rationalism, the idea means confidential information that rational actors use in interdependent perspectives.³⁴ On the other hand, the ideational elements focused on by NCR at the domestic level are *nationalism* and *ideology*. Referring to Dueck,³⁵ Kaarbo gave this example that the leaders may need to inspire the public for war and to attain that purpose they may call upon a nationalist sentiment.³⁶ This notion is the same as the case of *domestic politics* where it can be argued that it is not owned by liberalists. Despite giving supremacy to the international system and relative material powers by the NCR scholars, they consider these factors as refined through the state. And, indeed, an extensive variety of *domestic political and decision-making factors* including perceptions, states' motives, political traditions and identities, domestic institutions and coalition building, and perceived

³¹Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997); Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992).

³² Juliet Kaarbo, "A Foreign Policy Analysis Perspective on the Domestic Politics Turn in IR Theory," *International Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2015): 11.

³³ Rathbun, "A Rose by Any Other Name", 300.

³⁴ Brian C. Rathbun, "Uncertain About Uncertainty: Understanding the Multiple Meanings of a Crucial Concept in International Relations Theory," *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2007).

³⁵ Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

³⁶ Kaarbo, "A Foreign Policy Analysis Perspective", 11.



lessons of the past are responsible for influencing the state responses.³⁷ Constructivists argue that in making their foreign policies the nation-states are often guided by the political and military cultures that are constructed socially.³⁸ Moreover, the domestic actors who struggle to establish their ideological values can become the creators of systemic norms for serving a particular national interest. NCR also considers domestic actors as active participants. Rose identified them as the “flesh and blood officials”³⁹ and according to Sterling-Folker,⁴⁰ they are the “human-constructed institutions”. They can keep up perceptions of future geopolitical compositions and influence internal social groups for making foreign and economic policies. Foulon, in his article, gives an example of the policies of De Gaulle and his associates who perceived threats from the USSR and made pressure on the French government to formulate a new security strategy. On this basis, the French government joined the military alliance of NATO in 1949.⁴¹ Rathbun’s statement is very significant in this regard that the ideas are not only owned by the constructivists as well as domestic politics is not the only dealing matter of liberalists.⁴² The next part of this article gives a detailed account of the above arguments.

4. The Rationale Behind The Argument

Realists’ claim of using domestic politics and ideas is surrounded by their terminology of power, and neoclassical realists have taken up these two terms to expand the notion of power which the scholars valued as the fundamental variable in neo-realism. Most obviously, NCR demonstrates the procedure of playing the fundamental role of domestic politics and ideas in the technique of self-help essential in an anarchic system. In neo-realism, the states concentrate power following the enduring rationale of anarchy. However, the power of a state cannot be understood properly without locating its internal politico-administrative processes,

³⁷ Ibid, 15.

³⁸ Thomas U. Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan*, (Baltimore, London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998); Peter J. Katzenstein, “The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics,” In *New Directions in World Politics*, edited by Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

³⁹ Rose, “Neoclassical Realism”, 158.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Sterling-Folker, “Forward Is as Forward Does: Assessing Neoclassical Realism from a Traditions Perspective,” in *Rethinking Realism in International Relations: Between Tradition and Innovation*, edited by Ewan Harrison, and Patrick James Annette Freyberg-Inan (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009), 210.

⁴¹ Michiel Foulon, “Neoclassical Realism: Challengers and Bridging Identities,” *International Studies Review* 17 (2015): 646.

⁴² Rathbun, “A Rose by Any Other Name”, 301.



and the thinking and believing of its citizens.⁴³ The scholars divided in their views of understanding of power.

According to a group of scholars power is a concept that is highly related to the material strength of anybody or any state. Waltz's contributions played a great role in establishing this view. Walt and Stephen Van Evera see power as not only a collection of military and economic strengths of any state but also a manifestation of some other factors like a balance between defense and offense.⁴⁴ Glaser argued here that an opponent is not perceived as powerful if his strengths are not utilized properly to cause harm to the other party's military equipment.⁴⁵ Power is said to become powerful at the moment it is used. On the other hand, the neoclassical realists argued that *domestic politics* and *ideas* are the important factors that can cause an increase or decrease of power of any state. However, to them, this very argument is not a novel idea of power; rather these components are to be added to the earlier research and read as a natural progression of the conceptual expression of power. They revealed two very important variables to capture the capacity and strength of any state to mobilize its power. These are the *extractive ability* and *inspirational capacity* of any state.⁴⁶

States should possess the *extractive ability* to reallocate or spend societal resources on security and war-making functions. The states become strengthened when they concentrate on power concerning society. Through this process, the states become mentally powerful even the aggregate level of their resources remains constant. Such a condition having true social support changes the relative power of a state which ultimately affects its foreign policy behavior. Fareed Zakaria gives the example from America, who said; during the isolationist period of American foreign policy its reluctance to widen the scope and goals of foreign policy was a real political behavior of a country that feels relatively weak for not having enough power yet to do so. However, America's foreign policy has been changed later on as

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

⁴⁵ Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994).

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Taliaferro, "State Building for Future Wars: Neoclassical Realism and the Resource-Extractive State," *Security Studies* 15, no. 3 (2006).



the country perceived it has enough strength to intervene in the affairs of others.⁴⁷ The country has strengthened its ability day-by-day to extract necessary wealth for a more extensive schema.

It should also be mentioned here that the powerful states in spending the resources keep all the rights to force society. However, it is wise for those states which apply persuasion. On the other hand, with *inspirational capacity*, a state has the confidence that it can encourage the nation when needed for its purpose. These states always endeavor to form collective identity and try to mobilize the society by establishing something negatively as an existential threat and prospective enemy. From this perspective, the neoclassical realists are very much fond of *nationalism*, which has a fundamental appeal in all classical thoughts.⁴⁸ Traditionally, nationalism ideology has been used by the states as a tool for taking advantage of the power of the military. Nationalism is proved to have great importance to convince citizens so that they agree to bear the costs which are necessary for the states.⁴⁹

Neoclassical realism is itself a distinct and cohesive approach to international relations that is very much applied in foreign policy analysis. It is, therefore, emphasized that NCR, which explains certain behavioral patterns of states in the anarchic international system with the factors at the state and statesman level, is not a systemic theory of international relations but a general foreign policy theory. In the coming chapter, I will try to show to what extent it differs from its predecessor neo-realism.

5. The Distinction Between Neo-Realism and Neoclassical Realism

It has been clear from the above discussion that it is not inappropriate for the realist and neorealist analysis to include both *domestic politics* and *ideas*. However, it is pertinent to have a clear theoretical discussion of how these could be used without going beyond the jurisdictions of the paradigm. For this purpose, we have to look at the *logic of neo-realism*, which is defined by Kenneth Waltz, the precise and powerful voice of neo-realism or structural realism. According to Rathbun, the misunderstanding between neo-realism and

⁴⁷ Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁴⁸ Hans Mongenthau, *Politics Among nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th. (New York: Knopf, distributed by Random House, 1972), chaps. 8, 9.

⁴⁹ Rathbun, "A Rose by Any Other Name", 303.



neoclassical realism is surrounded by the issue of “how determinate the former is meant to be” and “what determinacy means”.⁵⁰

The basic concept of structural realism or neorealism is that the anarchic circumstance of world politics places all states under certain constraints.⁵¹ States are bound to take every measure for protecting themselves in the anarchic world in which no one can be trusted as their potential protectors. As we assume that the states have the desire to survive, the existing system provides certain conditions to the states. *Firstly*, states should mount up their power to achieve the set goals. This process is termed to be *self-help*. *Secondly*, domestic politics, with the apprehension that it could be the stakes, should not be permitted to interfere in decision making. This concept seems to be different from the neoclassical perspective. However, neo-realism contains if domestic politics act as something more than only a *transmission belt* for transforming the systemic pressures into policy decisions, domestic politics can be thought to be a source of deviation in foreign policy. There raised a functional dissimilarity and a contesting element over its goals. In this circumstance, states must defend the well-being of society against the force of insignificant, narrow interests. *Thirdly*, to avoid mistakes and negative consequences, states should be very concerned objectively about their environment. The system should not be perceived negatively; rather it encourages rational thinking. Anarchy should be understood comprehensively and objectively so that the right decisions can be made without a false impression.⁵²

Neo-realism further argues that the state’s action is not determined by the system; rather the system provides opportunities to the states. Like the other areas of politics, self-help is also implemented through a policy process. States observe international circumstances meticulously and get the proper inspirations to do what is right for their causes. For this reason, states have the right and responsibility to mobilize resources to meet the challenges. As the systemic forces do not determine but rather constrain, structural realism is only a prescriptive paradigm. Of neo-realism, Aaron Friedberg writes, “it aims to demonstrate how power should be evaluated by detached, rational observers rather than to determine how it has

⁵⁰ Ibid, 304.

⁵¹ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, chaps. 5, 6, quoted in Rathbun, “A Rose by Any Other Name”, 304.

⁵² Rathbun, “A Rose by Any Other Name”, 305.



been or is being weighed by residents of the real political world”⁵³ According to Waltz, states do not always act with “perfect knowledge and wisdom” and can or cannot identify the international structure in which they act.⁵⁴ States have an opportunity to control systemic pressures and observe their environment objectively; however, this does not always happen.⁵⁵

On the other hand, the neoclassical realists distinguish themselves from many structural realists due to their emphasis on relative power. However, they believe that the influence of such powers on policy-making is indirect. This is the *first intervening variable* which is, to the realists, the *perceptions of the decision-makers* through which the systemic pressures should be refined.

As a neoclassical realist Fareed Zakaria⁵⁶ thinks that statespersons are the main actors and for this, their views have a significant impact on state foreign policy. This view can be traced back to classical realism. Wohlforth cites the example of the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War, highlighting the importance of the *perception* of heads of state. He thinks that these great powers have interpreted their true abilities in different ways which have caused the two powers to respond to each other in different ways.⁵⁷ This view again clashes with neo-realists who think that the equivalent units in the system react in the same way due to the systemic pressure.⁵⁸ Neo-classical realists, on the other hand, argue that the notion of this smooth systemic control of transmission belts is erroneous and misleading. According to them, the distribution of international power controls the behavior of states on the basis that it influences the decision-making process of their foreign policy officials and experts. So there is no alternative but to explore in detail how the policymakers of each country can understand their situation in the context of the real world.⁵⁹ Contrary to the neo-realists notion that instantaneous actions of states as a result of the system’s obligations, neo-classical realists offer a clearer and more connected chain between the relative strengths of a country in the anarchic system and the variables at the internal level. Schweller argued this is

⁵³ Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 12.

⁵⁴ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 92.

⁵⁵ Rathbun, “A Rose by Any Other Name”, 306.

⁵⁶ Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 42.

⁵⁷ W.C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁵⁸ Kenneth Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* 5, no. 1 (2000): 5-41.

⁵⁹ W.C. Wohlforth, “The Perception of Power: Russia in the Pre-1914 Balance,” *World Politics* 39 (1987): 353-381.



the process of channeling, meditating, and redirecting the pressure from the systems which results in foreign policy.⁶⁰

The *second intervening variable* that neoclassical realists like Zakaria and Christensen have discussed is the “*power of a country’s state apparatus and its relationship to the surrounding society.*”⁶¹ They believe that it is not possible to properly assess the global distribution of power because national leaders may not have a clear idea of a state’s material power resources. In this circumstance, the ability of states to extract and manage resources from their societies is crucial in the analysis of global power. This task can be done very smoothly using the variables of the theory of international relations.⁶² It has been said earlier that the *extractive ability* and the *inspirational capacity* of a state are two very important factors that indicate the extent to which the state concerned has an impact on its surrounding society.

Zakaria studied various cases in the United States and finally concluded that the external behavior of a country depends on the capacity of the implementation of state decision-makers. He affirms the validity of the argument that capabilities shape desires but considers it necessary to introduce state power as an intervening variable between national competence and official conduct.⁶³ He said that foreign policy is not made by all of a nation or state but its responsibility goes to its government. As a result, it can be said that this issue is a matter of state power and not national power. State power is the part of national power where the government can extract state resources to make its decisions properly and decision-makers can achieve their goals.⁶⁴ His views have been reflected in his research on American foreign policy. One of his historical analyses thus covers: The decades following the Civil War marked the beginning of a long period of improvement in America’s material resources. But this national power was shrouded in a decentralized divided and scattered weak state. The presidents and their secretaries of state repeatedly tried to influence this rising power of the nation to the outside world. But they were administering such a federal state structure and a small central bureaucracy that failed to extract resources from the state government or society

⁶⁰ Randall L. Schweller, “Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing,” *International Security* 29, no. 2 (2004): 159-201.

⁶¹ Rose, “Neoclassical Realism”, 160.

⁶² Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 39-40.

⁶³ Rose, “Neoclassical Realism”, 162.

⁶⁴ Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 9.



at large. . . .The 1880s and 1890s were the emergences of the modern American state that was the result of the adaptation of internal pressures created by industrialization. This transformation of the state structure served as a complement to the ongoing improvement of national power, and by the mid-1890s the executive branch was able to ignore Congress or force to establish American interests abroad. America's uninterrupted victory in the Spanish-American War crystallized the idea of increasing American power. In the years that followed, America expanded dramatically.⁶⁵

Christensen, considering the same idea, introduced another notion of "national political power", he means this concept as "the ability of state leaders to mobilize their nation's human and material resources behind security policy initiatives".⁶⁶ Similar to Zakaria's "state power", this concept performs the role of "a key intervening variable between the international challenges facing the nation and the strategies adopted by the state to meet those challenges."⁶⁷ The distinction of neoclassical realism thus has become apparent from its predecessors that the theory is more applicable in the contemporary perspective in analyzing foreign policy of the countries.

6. Rose's Analysis of Realist Schools with Foreign Policy Perspective

Neoclassical realists aim to explain the foreign policy behavior of a particular state, not to formulate general theories about international politics. Baylis et al.⁶⁸ argued that, according to the central view of neo-classical realism, foreign policy is a complex relationship between international structure and domestic influence. Although national power and the position of the state in the international arena are considered important factors in the selection of the foreign policy of the respective state, domestic variables can also shape the foreign policy of a state. This is why Rose describes Neoclassical realism as a theory of foreign policy. He notes that neorealism is a theory of international politics that primarily relates to the results of interactions between different units and "much of the daily stuff of international relations is left to be accounted for by theories of foreign policy".⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 10-11.

⁶⁶ Rose, "Neoclassical Realism", 163.

⁶⁷ Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 11-13.

⁶⁸ John Baylis, Steve Smith, Patricia Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, Edited by Steve Smith, Patricia Owens, John Baylis, 4th. (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2008).

⁶⁹ Rose, "Neoclassical Realism", 145.



Rose argued, realists have ignored foreign policy theories. For this reason, neoclassical realists have presented a framework through which a clear portrait of a country's foreign policy can be understood. To make this point a little clearer, neoclassical realists say that a country's foreign policy is primarily determined by its position in the international arena and its relative strength. However, like traditional realists, they view the *system as a dependent variable*, contrary to the notion of neo-realists who regard the system as an independent variable.⁷⁰ In other words, units and states can never interact with the system. Rose said so briefly, "Its adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy are driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and especially by its material power capabilities. This is why they are realists. They argue further, however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening levels at the unit level. This is why they are neoclassical".⁷¹ Criticizing Waltz's concept of theories that he argued needs to be discussed with coherent reasoning of autonomous regions, Rose argues, Foreign policy does not comprise an autonomous region but is governed by both internal and external factors. Rose distinguished four broad schools to build a common theory of foreign policy.

The first consideration is the *Innenpolitik* theories which place great importance on the influence of internal factors in foreign policy behavior. Factors such as a country's political and economic thinking, national character, biased politics, or socioeconomic structure control its external behavior. Taking a liberal approach, they argue that the behavior of non-democratic countries is different from that of democracies. The notion of 'democratic peace' is the guiding principle of this theorizing.⁷²

The second consideration is "*Offensive realism*" or "*Aggressive realism*" Which emphasizes the systemic factors as influential. It has taken the notion that international anarchy is usually Hobbesian that holds the view that security, apart from the conditions of bipolarity or nuclear resistance, is inadequate and that states try to ensure this by maximizing

⁷⁰ W. J. Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2000): 128-161.

⁷¹ Rose, "Neoclassical Realism", 146.

⁷² Rose, "Neoclassical Realism", 148.



their relative advantages.⁷³ Rational states, inoffensive realism, start in a defensive mode; however, the structure of the international system later compels them to go for actions that ultimately cause conflict. To understand the behavior of states, one must study their relative capabilities and external environment because those are the factors that are relatively and smoothly transformed into foreign policy.

The third consideration is *defensive realism* which perpetuates the idea that international anarchy is sometimes too amiable as the concept of security is not inadequate but abundant and common states can understand it or learn it in the light of experience.⁷⁴ In this viewpoint, rational states prefer a peaceful attitude in pursuing security. These may take vigorous action only to respond to external threats. According to this view, foreign policy activity is a document of rational states that respond appropriately to the clearing of all systemic stimuli. These states engage in conflict only when the security dilemma is intense to an extreme level.⁷⁵

7. Challenges of NCR

Neoclassical realism has challenged the critical element of these three perspectives. The reasons for this are, *Innenpolitik* theories' concept of pure unit-level explanations is problematic. Because, it is not logical to analyze states only through domestic-level variables because it is observed that in the context of foreign policy, states with similar internal characteristics sometimes behave differently, and states with different internal characteristics sometimes behave similarly. Neoclassical realists believe that the independent variables preferred by the *Innenpolitikers* such as political and economic values, national character, party-based politics, or socioeconomic structure, must be brought down to the second level in foreign policy analysis. This is because the foreign policy of a state cannot go beyond the boundaries and opportunities set by the international environment for a long time. Zakaria pointed out, "A good theory of foreign policy should first ask what effect the international system has on national behavior because the most powerful generalizable characteristic of a

⁷³ John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 5-56.

⁷⁴ Rose, "Neoclassical Realism", 164.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 150.



state in international relations is its relative position in the international system”.⁷⁶ Furthermore, since structural elements such as the effects of relative power are not always clear to everyone, nor even to political actors, neoclassical realists suspect that analysts who do not carefully consider such effects may mistakenly attribute causality to other visible factors. But in the real sense, they are only epiphenomenal.⁷⁷

Neoclassical realists have also called *defensive realism problematic* for the same reason. This is because their policy of emphasizing the response of states to threats ignores the fact that the perception of one’s threat is created due to the increase in the relative material strength of the other.⁷⁸ This is further flawed because its emphasis on systemic reasoning does not represent the actual behavior of the state. Also, it forces its followers to agree with its explanatory work on carrying local-level variables.

The idea of *offensive realism* is also misguided according to the neoclassical realists. This is because confining a foreign policy theory to only systemic factors can in most cases lead to wrong decisions. To understand how states interpret and respond to the external environment, neoclassical realists say, one must analyze how systemic pressures are transformed into unit-based intervening variables such as decision-makers’ opinions and internal state structures.⁷⁹ In the formulation and implementation of foreign policy, *Innenpolitik* theory prefers internal independent variables, while *offensive realism* gives precedence to systemic variables. Both the ideologies face opposite inconsistencies from each other. Defensive realists, on the other hand, see the international system as a cause of natural behavior that includes the choice of aggression only when the obvious cause is first identified by military intervention or some other factors.

The *Neoclassical Realists* attempt firstly to define and operationalize their chief independent variable – the term ‘relative power’. They generally discuss this issue after explaining the causes of holding the term “power” for indicating “the capabilities or resources . . . with which states can influence each other”.⁸⁰ Neo-classical realists, while not agreeing

⁷⁶ Fareed Zakaria, “Realism and Domestic Politics.” in *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security*, edited by Brown et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), quoted in Rose, “Neoclassical Realism”, 151.

⁷⁷ Rose, “Neoclassical Realism”, 151.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 150.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 151.

⁸⁰ Rose, “Neoclassical Realism”, 151.



with the neorealists' claim that states always desire security, hold the view that states respond to the uncertainty of international anarchy by controlling and shaping their external environment.⁸¹ Therefore, in the light of central experience, it can be predicted about neoclassical realism that the relative amount of material power resources that states have held for a long time constitutes the scope and ambition of their foreign policy. As states' relative power resources increase, so will their influence in the outside world. On the other hand, if their relative strength decreases, their actions and ambitions will gradually decline.⁸² Friedberg cites the example of Britain in this context, saying that the relative decline of Britain's economic and military power occurred in the early twentieth century. He found that the reaction of British officials to this collapse was haphazard. They followed such policies that ignored serious inherent weaknesses in Britain's position at the time, or steps taken to solve the problem created new and more dangerous problems.⁸³ NCR, therefore, is at a middle ground between purely *structural theorists* and *constructivists*. The first doctrine supports a very clear and direct connection between systemic constraints and unit-level behavior, and its second doctrine denies the existence of any purposeful systemic constraints; rather it argues that international reality is socially constructed and believes "anarchy is what states make of it".⁸⁴ Michiel Foulon stated clearly in this respect "Neoclassical realists posit a state-level-mediating variable between system and foreign policy action and bridge the spatial divide: domestic politics affect how the government devises foreign policy in response to binding structural incentives".⁸⁵ He brought both Waltz and Wendt's arguments in his paper on the concept of structure and said both the scholars concentrated on the structure. Whereas Waltz argued on the existence of material structure and its pressures on states, Wendt criticized him by devising another approach based on Giddens's argument of social structure who said, "Structure" is not an external factor that affects agents. (Wendt, 1999, p. 251).⁸⁶ Foulon claimed that Wendt gave priority to the agents over structure thus the structure has no independent capacity without the agents.⁸⁷ Wendt contradicts Waltz's claim that the existence of structure is independent which posits obligatory restrictions on the agents, rather said the

⁸¹ Ibid, 152.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid. 156.

⁸⁴ Wendt, *Anarchy Is What States Make of It*, 1992, quoted in Rose, "Neoclassical Realism", 152.

⁸⁵ Foulon, "Neoclassical Realism", 637.

⁸⁶ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), 251.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 171-78.



social structure is created by the states.⁸⁸ He refers to an ideational structure by saying “Anarchy is what states make of it.”⁸⁹ To give an example of this ideational structure Foulon mentioned Hurd who said “Japan’s military and the economy were superior to that of China during the early 1990s and posed more of a material threat to the United States. Yet China was perceived to be more of a threat at that time.”⁹⁰ The constructivists explained that since the end of the Cold War a friendly perception of the US leaders in Japan relative to China had prevailed. To them, international relations are determined by the changes in the state’s structural motivations in other states.⁹¹

Neoclassical realists believe that material relative forces form the basic parameters for a country’s foreign policy. However, they point out that no instantaneous or perfect transmission belt directly converts material relative powers into foreign policy behavior. Neoclassical realism presents an imperfect “transmission belt” between systemic motivations and obligations on the one hand and the concrete diplomatic, military, and foreign economic policies adopted by the state on the other. Foreign policy choices, therefore, have to be made by real political leaders and elites who can consider not only the relative material resources or the quantity of power but also the relative power of the state in the true sense. However, not every argument that emphasizes the importance of objective perception is a realist. Rational scholars, for example, have created a paradigm based on the process of signaling and screening that is not realistic at all. Unique actors and objective perceptions are not the assumptions in the true sense but the inspiration provided to states through the system.⁹² For this reason, NCR argues that the system inspires the states, but it never determines the actions of a state.

Only systemic interpretations of foreign policy hold the view that state officials have a reasonable and appropriate understanding of the distribution of global power, and for very reasonable grounds this realization is directly reflected in national policy. Friedberg noted, “In most structural realist formulations assessment of relative power through rational calculation plays the part of a reliable but invisible transmission belt connecting objective material

⁸⁸ Foulon, “Neoclassical Realism”, 638.

⁸⁹ Foulon, “Neoclassical Realism”, 639.

⁹⁰ Ian Hurd, “Constructivism,” In *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*, edited by Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford: Oxford University Press Inc. [Online version], 2009).

⁹¹ Foulon, “Neoclassical Realism”, 639.

⁹² Rathbun, “A Rose by Any Other Name”, 305.



change to adaptive behavior.”⁹³ Robert O. Keohane agrees. He argues that to most systemic theorists “the link between system structure and actor behavior is forged by the rationality assumption, which enables the theorist to predict that leaders will respond to the incentives and constraints imposed by their environments. Taking rationality as a constant permits one to attribute variations in state behavior to various characteristics of the international system.”⁹⁴ Moreover, those leaders and elites do not always have full freedom to acquire and manage national resources for use in foreign policy. This means that relatively full-fledged but structurally different states operate differently. And finally, it can be said that systemic pressures and incentives can create broad outlines and general guidelines regarding foreign policy even though they are not precise and clear enough to determine the accurate details of state behavior. This means that the effects of systemic factors may not be as strong at first, but may be more pronounced at a distance. This is evident when it is observed that at a given time, state leaders are forced to accept a particular option from a menu of foreign policy alternatives rather than limiting the alternatives considered by them to the most logical option.

For the above reasons, neoclassical realists believe that to better master the connection between systemic obligation and the foreign policy of the state, it is necessary to examine the local and global contexts through which foreign policies are formulated and implemented.⁹⁵ And herein lies the rationale of independent and intervening variables that the NCR considers important for the states' foreign policy behavior.

8. Conclusion

The term “neoclassical realism” was invented by Gideon Rose in a combination of books by Thomas Christensen, Randall Schweller, William Wohlforth, Fareed Zakaria, and a compilation of scholarly articles formerly published in the journal *International Security*. The basic purpose of all these writers was to explain a great strategy for a modern great power in terms of a specific time or place, not to explain the recurring pattern of international political consequences. According to Rose, through these books, one can find the outline of a holistic school about foreign policy theories. This is because these authors present the concept of a single independent variable (relative strength) and a universal set of intervening variables (the

⁹³ Friedberg, *The Weary Titan*, 13.

⁹⁴ Robert O. Keohane, “Theory of World Politics,” in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, edited by Robert O. Keohane, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 167.

⁹⁵ Rose, “Neoclassical Realism”, 156.



power of the institutional organs of states and their relation to the surrounding society and the perception and calculation of leaders about the relative power of the state) and they point to a distinct systematic perspective characterized by causal processes and thorough historical analysis. Accepting neo-realism as a cornerstone of the discussion, they emphasize the importance of anarchic international systems, the distribution of relative power, and the universal uncertainty of global events. Neoclassical realists, however, regard anarchy as a permissive situation, not as a self-determining underlying factor. Rose mentioned the reason behind this position by saying that the governments or leaders who have long failed to respond properly to systemic incentives have largely jeopardized the sovereignty of their state.⁹⁶ From this point of view, all these writers seem as if they have returned to the previous doctrine like Morgenthau, Kissinger, Wolfers, and other classical realists.⁹⁷ Within this broad anarchic framework, the overall calculations and deep understanding of the relative strengths of the state leaders help to provide a timely and purposeful efficient response to policy adaptations to the pressures of the external environment. Besides, leaders are often confronted with a two-tiered game in terms of inventing and implementing super strategies. From one side, they must respond strategically to the effects of the external environment, and on the other side, they must take steps to mobilize resources from local communities, implement through existing internal institutions, and maintain the support of key partners. This is the very fundamental structure neoclassical realism suggests or in other words, requires the foreign policy analysts essential for making an ideal foreign policy as illustrated with a historical great power analysis.

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⁹⁶ Ibid, 151-59.

⁹⁷ Marc I. Trachtenberg, "The Question of Realism: A Historian's View," *Security Studies* 13, no. 1 (2003): 156–194.



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