

# Is There Anything 'New' in Neoclassical Realism?

Written by Ali Abdi Omar

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ALI ABDI OMAR, FEB 13 2013

For more than half a century, the realist tradition has been the leading theory in the international political landscape, tracing its origins back to Athenian era. Since then, realism has not only survived assaults from other paradigms, but also showed divisive trend (Snyder, 2002). Various international relations theorists have attempted to construct a new variant of realism, each using new terminology or adjectives to announce these different branches, while other scholars (Brooks, 1997, Rose 1998, Snyder, 2002) have constructed a typology of realism. In other words, realism has flourished and gave birth to several new strands. The first of these is Neorealism or structural realism, developed in Waltz's (1979) seminal work *Theory of International Politics*, which cut the umbilical cord from the traditional or classical realism. Since this work, the assumption of 'systemic determinacy' has, in a sense, conquered the theoretical literature on IR (Sterling-Folker, 1997:1). Thus, domestic-level variables have usually been neglected or consigned to a less important explanatory position in this IR theory literature.

A growing number of scholars (Schweller, 2004; Zakaria, 1998; Wohlforth, 1993), although not completely rejecting the systemic explanations, have stressed the importance of combining systemic and unit-level variables. As Fareed Zakaria (1992:198) has remarked, "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". The works of these scholars have been termed "neoclassical realism" by Gideon Rose in his 1998 review article *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, to show its intellectual connexion with Classical realism. A bulk of literature has been devoted to realism in general, so the aim of this article is not to have the last word but to assess the "newness" of neoclassical realism. It will have four sections. The first section will summarise Neorealism as a theory. The second will outline the transition from Neorealism to neoclassical realism. The third section is an analysis of neoclassical realism. The fourth and the last section of this paper will conclude that neoclassical realism is a more or less new version of realism.

The main concern of traditional realism is the use of a state's national power in an anarchic international system. Realists such as Morgenthau believed that skilled statesmen could maintain the balance of power. The focus of realist scholars is the distribution of power among units, state's character and its relation with its society. Since Waltz's (1979) seminal work, the intellectual current has shifted. Waltz has merged Realism with system level theory, which apparently led Robert Cox to call it 'Neorealism' to show its intellectual similarity with traditional realism as well as its distinctiveness (Keohane, 1986:15-16). Waltz found a recurring pattern of behaviour for states to pursue the same policies in order to guarantee their security. For Waltz (1979:80), the structure of the international system is the driving force and not the internal characteristics of the states. So Neorealism, using its key variable (relative distribution of power), explain state behaviour and also the systemic outcomes. In other words, Waltz's Neorealism rejects explanations developed at the unit or state level of analysis, claiming that explications at the systemic level are enough to account for the core developments in world politics. In explaining a state's behaviour, Waltz (2000: 74) contends that "international structure emerges from the interaction of states and then constraints them from taking certain actions while propelling them towards others". Neorealism, in fact, turned the state into a 'black box'.

There is no doubt that Waltz (1979) Neorealism's beautiful creation of a grand theory at systemic level had remarkably influenced later IR researches. For some time, the most important paradigms of international politics were all system level theories. This situation has, in a sense, caused a lot of scholars (Schweller, 2004; Zakaria, 1998; Wohlforth, 1993) to oppose to the disconnection between system or structure and state. These scholars are

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left wanting by the frugal account of Neorealism, so in order to get superior accuracy, neoclassical realists incorporated domestic-level variables into their explication of international politics. Thus, neoclassical realists lay open the black-box of the state (Baylis et al, 2008:99).

The intention of neoclassical realists is not to create a general theory with regard to international politics. Rather, their interest is to explain the foreign policy behaviour of a specific state. The central tenets of neoclassical realism, according to Baylis et al, (2008:99) are that foreign policy is the result of international structure, domestic influences, and a complex relations between the two. Although national power and the state's position in the international structure are decisive factors in state foreign policy choices, domestic variables can also shape a state's foreign policy. Rose (1996:145) classifies neoclassical realism as being a theory of foreign policy. He argues that Neorealism, as a theory of international politics, is concern primarily about the outcomes of 'units' interaction' and "much of the daily stuff of international relations is left to be accounted for by theories of foreign policy."

For Rose (1996), foreign policy theories have been ignored by realists. So, neoclassical realists offer a framework in which a precise picture of any country's foreign policy can be obtained. Neoclassical realism draws upon "the rigor and theoretical insights of the Neorealism... of Waltz, Gilpin, and others without sacrificing the practical insights about foreign policy and the complexity of statecraft found in the classical realism of Morgenthau, Kissinger, Wolfers, and others" (Taliaferro, *et al.* 2009: 4, cited in Juneau, 2010:5). To reiterate the point made earlier in this section, for neoclassical realism, a country's foreign policy is primarily driven by its position in the international structure and also its relative power. However, they see the system, like traditional realists, as a dependent variable, contrary to neorealists who see the system as an independent variable. Neoclassical realists argue the system cannot be directly influenced. Any effects to be exerted on the system have to come from an intervening factor (Taliaferro, 2000; Wohlforth, 1993). In other words, 'units' or states cannot interact with the system. As Rose (1998: 145) succinctly puts it, "They argue ... 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".

Neoclassical realists, opposing the neorealist's assumption that the pressures from the system are immediately translated into 'units' actions, offer a more clear and connecting chain between a country's relative power in the anarchic system, the domestic-level variables which according to Schweller ( 2004: 164) "channel, mediate and (re)direct" pressures from the system, and its foreign policy outcome.

Domestic-level variables are the central piece of the chain. One of these variables is the statesmen or elite perception of power distribution. Neoclassical realists such as Zakaria (1998: 42) contend that statesmen are the principal actors and that their perceptions are crucial. This argument can be traced back to classical realism. Wohlforth (1993) illustrates the importance of perception with the example of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. He argues that these great powers interpreted their actual capabilities differently, which led the two powers respond in a different way, conflicting with the neorealist's prediction that 'units' with similar position in the system would react the same way to systemic pressures (Waltz, 2000:13). This prediction, Schweller (2004) argues, do not take into account the interests and motivations of states, which are important intervening variables. Another domestic variable is the restriction of national power. This variable, in a sense, defines how public opinion and pressure groups affect a state's ability to extract the maximum resources from its society (Zakaria, 1998).

Domestic variables have created a lot of controversies among scholars such as Legro and Moravcsik (1999), who accused neoclassical realists for allegedly rejecting the main assumptions of Neorealism. In their words, "Research programs advance, after all, by the refinement and improvement of previous theories to account for anomalies. There can be little doubt that realist theories rightfully retain a salient position in international relations theory" (Legro and Moravcsik, 1999:5). They go on to argue that neoclassical realists even include liberal elements in order to save realism. This is clearly a misreading of the neoclassical realist research. As Sterling-Folker (1997:1), in her research *Realist Environment, Liberal Process, and Domestic-Level Variables*, concluded that, "When the deductive logic of systemic liberal and realist theory is examined, however, it becomes clear that domestic-level variables can be consistently causal in systemic realist theory, but are accorded little causal weight in systemic liberal theory."

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Realism has been the leading theory of international politics for a long time. It has flourished and gave birth to several new strands. One of which is neoclassical realism, which has been assessed in this paper. This article concludes that neoclassical realism is more or less a variant of realism. Neoclassical realism focuses on developing greatly detailed account of a country's foreign policy. Neoclassical realists, acknowledging the importance of a state's relative power in shaping its intention, argue that in order to gain a more specific and clearer overall picture of a state's foreign policy, one must include domestic-level variables to complete the causal chain. In other words, open up the state 'black box'. Neoclassical realists' intention is not to create a grand theory with regard to international politics. They are more interested in explaining the foreign policy behaviour of a specific state at any one time and any situation. The central tenets of neoclassical realism are that foreign policy is the result of international structure, domestic influences, and also of complex relations between the two. Although national power and the state's position in the international structure are decisive factors in state foreign policy choices, domestic variables can also shape a state's foreign policy. On this basis, neoclassical realists attempt to solve a problem in international relations research by building a bridge between the international system and the state. It is a difficult process to create a multilevel theory, but neoclassical realism has the potential to overcome these problems.

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