

# Realism and Non-State Actors Revisited

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### Introduction

In applying Realism to the analysis of three sets of non-state actors (international organizations or institutions, non-governmental organizations or NGOs, and multi-national corporations or MNCs), I submit four primary inter-related arguments.

First, there is no coherent single theory called 'Realism'. As a meta-theoretical unit, what International Relations (IR) scholars consider as 'Realism' actually consists of different strands with different focuses, propositions, and policy prescriptions. Following Elman (2008), this paper considers six different primary variants of Realism: Classical Realism, Neo-Realism, Defensive Structural Realism, Offensive Structural Realism, Rise and Fall Realism, and Neo-Classical Realism. While all these different strands share common starting assumptions[1], disaggregating Realism is a necessary task to better place non-state actors' analytical value within the major research program.

Second, as a meta-theoretical whole, most scholars working within the Realism camp generally do not place non-state actors at the center of their theoretical propositions. This does not suggest that Realism simply dismisses non-state actors, or that they somehow simply do not matter. I argue that this is a "straw man" that Realist critics have occasionally employed to discredit the research program. Instead, a more nuanced reading of Realism would suggest that: (a) as a research program, Realism is generally more concerned with issues and puzzles surrounding inter-state relations and major power interactions, especially with regards to war and peace, and not in explaining all issues of international politics, including the behavior of non-state actors[2]; and (b) several strands of Realism, most prominently the Neoclassical variant, are willing to give analytical and theoretical space for non-state actors as one of the components or potential variable in explaining state behavior in international politics (i.e. foreign policy). However, as a matter of practice, not ontological, most scholars working within the Realist research program have tended to devote more attention to international institutions and organizations, rather than MNCs or NGOs. This is particularly within the context of its debate with neo-liberal institutionalism.

Third, while Neo-Realism, Offensive Structural Realism, Defensive Structural Realism, and Rise and Fall Realism effectively have no place for non-state actors other than being merely an epiphenomenon or extension of state power and interest, I argue that Classical Realism and Neoclassical Realism provide more analytical space for non-state actors. This is particularly the case with international institutions and organizations as an intervening variable, and in some cases one of several independent ones, in explaining state behavior in the international system. Additionally, a careful reading of Defensive Structural Realism would suggest that international institutions are increasingly becoming more important in managing global and regional relations. That being said, the focus of analysis of all strands of Realism generally remains on explaining state behavior and international outcomes, and not on the nature and role of non-state actors. After all, as Glaser (2003: 407) argues, "Realism is designed to understand relations and interactions between states; we should not be surprised that it has less to tell us about non-state actors."

Finally, given the analytical concerns of Realism, their relegation, not complete dismissal, of non-state actors in their theories is not a weakness. For one thing, a consistent focus on major questions of inter-state relations and great power conflict has allowed scholars working within the Realism lens to refine and better specify their theoretical propositions over time. For another, some scholars traditionally seen as working within the Realism paradigm have

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recently been willing to extend Realist concepts, logic, and propositions—sometimes in conjunction with non-Realist theories—to explain important questions and issues beyond great power relations and war.[3] As such, there is no need to fundamentally overhaul Realism just to take into account the role of non-state actors. After all, so long as states remain a significant, though not the most dominant, group-conflict unit within the contemporary international system, non-state actors could still be accounted for to a certain extent within the big “Realism Tent”, especially under the Neoclassical variant.

The following sections build on and expand these four arguments with regards to international institutions on the one hand and NGOs and MNCs on the other. I locate NGOs and MNCs under one category because as a matter of the sociology of knowledge within Realism, these two sets of non-state actors have generally been considered one and the same and distinguishable from international institutions.

### International Institutions and Organizations

When it comes to international institutions or organizations, Realism as a whole believes that they do matter, especially as “a means available to states for achieving their goals” (Glaser 2003: 409). In other words, when conditions facing a state make an international institution the best means available, there is no reason why Realists should dismiss their role outright. Structural realisms (Neo-Realism, Offensive, and Defensive) and Rise and Fall Realism however do not consider international institution as having an independent causal effect on state behavior—at best, they reflect states’ interests and the constraints they face (Glaser 2003; Mearsheimer 1994; Gilpin 1981; Copeland 2000). The difference between the two lies in the how structural realists see state power and interests as determined by the structure of the international system (anarchy, security dilemma, and distribution of capabilities), while Rise and Fall realism sees the rules and practices of the international system as being determined by the leading (i.e. most powerful) state.

That being said, Defensive Structural realists, generally bent on seeking state security (rather than power maximization) and status-quo preservation, seem to be more optimistic than Offensive Structural realists when it comes to the prospect of having international institutions as one of the pathways to reduce the effects of the security dilemma and as an instrument to promote mutually beneficial cooperation and manage great power relations (Glaser 2003; Schweller and Priess 1997; Taliaferro 2000). In any case, international institutions can play a variety of roles in helping states manage its security relationships with other states in ways that are consistent with structural realism (Glaser 2003: 409).

Meanwhile, following E. H. Carr and Robert Gilpin, Classical (or traditional) realists recognize that institutions are a vital part of the landscape of world politics because they can act as intervening variables between the pressures of the international system or power-driven states and related behavioral outcomes like conflict or cooperation (Schweller and Priess 1997: 2-9; Krasner 1983:7-8). In other words, while institutions may not be entirely independent of state power and interests, they can still modify the outcomes and behaviors of states. When and how specifically that takes place however will unfortunately depend on the desire for more power rooted in the flawed nature of humanity and in how states are continuously engaged in a struggle to increase their capabilities. After all, Classical Realism still explains conflictual behavior by human failings (Elman 2008: 17).

Finally, Neoclassical Realism is more indeterminate regarding international institutions because it is primarily interested in foreign policy behaviors, rather than international outcomes. In essence, Neoclassical realists suggest that what states do depends in large part on domestically derived preferences (Elman 2008: 25; Schweller 2003). Additionally, while they share similar concerns and starting points with structural realists about systemic pressures and the distribution of capabilities and power, Neoclassical realists believe that state characteristics and leaders’ views intervene between structural constraints and foreign policy outcome or behavior (Elman 2008: 25). As such, they are often concerned with features of “stateness” and domestic political structure (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009). Thus far, only a few scholars working within the Neoclassical realist lens, which officially existed after Gideon Rose (1998) coined the term, have examined the effects of domestic structure vis-à-vis state behavior associated with international institutions (e.g. Ripsman 2004); leaving a lacuna within this particular strand compared to structural realism. As the next section will show however, Neoclassical Realism is more suited to account for

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NGOs and MNCs than international institutions.

### Non-Governmental Organizations and Multi-National Corporations

This section places NGOs and MNCs under the same heading because Realism generally considers them to be one and the same, regardless of their obviously different nature, affluence and influence, and trans-national as well as normative characters. Given the concerns of Rise and Fall Realism and Structural realisms (Neorealism, Offensive Structural, and Defensive Structural) as mentioned above, it is not surprising that they have almost no concern with NGOs and MNCs. As realists working under these strands generally employ the rational and unitary state—or “blackbox”—model, they leave no analytical space for how MNCs and NGOs might affect state behavior and interaction within the international system. As shortly discussed below, while rationality is a common assumption among realists to describe state actors despite the clear differences in their interpretation of strong vs. weak rationality (Elman 1996; Glaser 2010; Waltz 1979; Schweller 2003; Mearsheimer 2001), the unitary model is not shared by Neoclassical realists.

In essence, rationality and unitary state assumptions are not part and parcel of a single assumption, nor do realists of all stripes universally and similarly share them. However, when realists do clearly and explicitly employ the unitary state actor assumption, such as in Neorealism (Waltz 1979), Rise and Fall Realism (Copeland 2000), and Offensive Structural Realism (Mearsheimer 2001), then it is safe to argue that NGOs and MNCs have little or no role in their theoretical propositions. In addition to this assumption, these strands of realism also clearly emphasize the importance of state actors in explaining major systemic or international outcomes. It is not a coincidence that these strands of Realism focus on international political outcomes such as war, and not foreign policy behavior specifically.[4]

That being said, following Glaser (2003), if there is nothing ontologically forbidden with combining structural realism and other non-realist theories to explain important puzzles beyond inter-state relations, then technically NGOs and MNCs might be featured in such intellectual exercise. For example, one can imagine how states interact with major oil and gas companies as they seek to stabilize resource-rich regions, or how NGOs and MNCs shape the norms and policies of major international institutions, which in turn deal with major powers in managing traditional security issues such as nuclear proliferation. Structural realists would say however that such direction might stretch their theories too much.

Similarly, Classical Realism’s focus on power-seeking and capability-maximizing of individual state leaders under *realpolitik* would make it difficult to seriously take into account the role of NGOs and MNCs. Once again, only by stretching Classical Realism to take international institutions more seriously, while incorporating non-realist theories of how NGOs and MNCs affect international institutions, would there be sufficient analytical space for these sets of non-state actors.

Before moving to discuss how Neoclassical Realism might incorporate NGOs and MNCs, I want to note the place of NGOs that cause security problems such as terrorist groups. When it comes to explaining and responding to threats posed by rebel or terrorist groups, I concede that Realism as a meta-theoretical whole has little to contribute, although as Posen (1993) showed us, Realist concepts like security dilemma can be extended to look at internal conflicts. However, as the recent debacle in the South China Sea and Russia’s invasion of Georgia have shown us, the prospect for great power conflict is never completely off the table. Structural realism remains highly salient to explain such issues.

Nevertheless, Neoclassical Realism ontologically provides the analytical space necessary to account for and analyze the role of terrorist groups in affecting state behavior. For example, a Neoclassical realist model can explain the role of domestic interest groups such as neo-conservatives in pressuring Washington to respond to “global terrorism” and international systemic pressures by invading Iraq in 2003. As Caverley (2010) noted, such Neoclassical realist interpretation of neo-conservatives could work well with theories of democratic weakness. To give another example, as Lobell (2009) has shown, a Neoclassical realist model that includes non-state actors can explain well the variation of threat assessments in shaping a state’s foreign policy. Snyder (1991) and Brawley (2009) have also suggested

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how domestic interest groups, such as the military, or imperialist groups that include some trans-national MNCs and NGOs, explain the variation in war decision-making.

Similarly, Neoclassical Realism also provides analytical space for emerging “gray-zone” NGOs like private security companies (PSCs). In this regard, we can locate PSCs either as one of the independent variables explaining state military strategies (e.g. the availability and pressures from big PSCs could lead to more foreign policy attention to failed states), or as a dependent variable (e.g. when states facing systemic pressures, domestic interest groups might push the state to outsource some of its security needs). One recent study for example has shown how under Neoclassical Realism the use of PSCs can be conceptualized as a strategy dictated by the need to circumvent the tightening hurdles to the conversion of societal resources into military power (Cusmano 2012). This logic fits with the overall orientation of Neoclassical Realism but has no place in the other five realist strands.

The bottom line is that Neoclassical realist logic is useful to explain the role of trans-national NGOs and MNCs as domestic pressure or interest groups in shaping domestic coalitions that would in turn determine state foreign policy behaviors (Ripsman 2009), though the central analytical focus would be on the “stateness” (e.g. degree of state capacity or strength), or institutional structure (e.g. democracies and authoritarian regimes). In short, because Neoclassical Realism is equally if not more concerned with foreign policy as it is with international outcomes, NGOs and MNCs can still play a role; a more prominent one even compared to other strands of Realism.[5] A puzzle-driven research could even place NGOs and MNCs in a more central role in Neoclassical Realism by showing for example how the degree to which the state is “captured” by business oligarchs and MNCs (in which the Comparative Politics literature has much to say) affects foreign policy decisions with regards to international trade negotiations and global financial policies.

In summary, the early strands of Realism—Classical, Neorealism, Offensive Structural, Defensive Structural, and Rise and Fall—generally have no concern or analytical space for NGOs and MNCs in their theoretical propositions, although one could stretch their argument and combine them with non-realist theories to explain certain puzzles. This is partially because of their assumptions about the state (primarily as being unitary and the most important group-conflict actor), and partially because of the puzzles of international politics, rather than foreign policy, that they are more interested in. Only Neoclassical Realism that provides sufficient analytical space for NGOs and MNCs as interest or pressure groups that could significantly affect foreign policy decision making and thus state behavior in the international arena. Recent studies using Neoclassical Realism shown above also suggest that the issues or puzzles addressed when taking into account the role of NGOs and MNCs have expanded and remain open for future research projects.

## Conclusions

In the post-Cold War world, scholars and pundits alike have written-off Realism as a whole to be irrelevant and even degenerative. A part of this critique lies with the supposed inability, and even stubbornness, of realist scholars to take into account the growing role of non-state actors, including international institutions or organizations, NGOs, and MNCs. However, as the essay has shown, we must first be clear about the different strands within Realism before dismissing the research program entirely because they view non-state actors differently. It is crucial therefore to provide a careful and nuanced reading of Realism before launching into general critiques of the research program.

Furthermore, while earlier strands of Realism have devoted much attention to international institutions in their debate with neo-liberal institutionalism, most of these structural realists are still reluctant to give full analytical weight and independent causal powers outside of the power and interest of states. While Classical Realism and Neoclassical Realism is generally more open to the idea of international institutions’ growing role in affecting state behavior, practicing scholars working within these two lenses have rarely produced such research. Furthermore, a careful reading of Defensive Structural Realism suggest that while international institutions remain dependent on state power and interests, there is a growing realization of their utility for maintaining stability and dampening the effects of the security dilemma. However, as Elman (2008: 21) noted, when it comes the security dilemma, Defensive Structural Realism is better suited for investigating structurally constrained responses to revisionism, rather than where expansionism comes from.

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Meanwhile, when it comes to NGOs and MNCs, the preceding analysis suggests that while the earlier dominant strands of Realism—Classical, Neorealism, Offensive Structural, Defensive Structural, and Rise and Fall—have generally no analytical space for, or devote very little attention to, these sets of non-state actors, there is hope in Neoclassical Realism. In fact, not only has Neoclassical Realism provide sufficient analytical space for NGOs and MNCs as interest or pressure groups affecting state foreign policy and behavior, but it also appears to have the most promising venue to expand the research agenda to tackle new puzzles, such as the role of the military or rebel groups, that are empirically important but had previously been neglected by structural realists and other earlier strands.

Therefore, differentiating Realism into its various strands—a central claim of this essay—is a key pre-requisite in evaluating the research program's views on non-state actors. Furthermore, as the essay has also shown, given the central questions and puzzles that animate realist scholars, there is no need to fundamentally overhaul or revise Realism as a research program to take into account the role of non-state actors. Theoretically, the evolution of different realist theories has allowed over time more specific and refined propositions to be tested. Empirically, traditional security issues and great power politics have never completely disappeared—and might even stage a comeback in the next decade. More importantly, Neoclassical Realism is sufficiently broad to incorporate non-state actors in their analysis. And given its comparatively young age, there is still much room for future research projects that would bring different sets of non-state actors into more salient roles in more specifically puzzle-driven research projects.

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[1] According to Schweller and Priess (1997), these assumptions are: (1) humans do not face one another primarily as individuals but as members of groups that command their loyalty, which makes states as the dominant actor, though not the only one, (2) international affairs take place in a state of anarchy, (3) the nature of international interaction is essentially conflictual, and (4) power is the fundamental feature of international politics. Other Realists have a different though similar list.

[2] As Waltz (1986: 329) once argued, “structure never tells us all that we want to know. Instead they tell us a small number of big and important things.”

[3] This includes, for example Stephen Van Evera’s work on nationalism (1994), Barry Posen’s work ethnic conflict and security dilemma as well as terrorism (1993; 2001), Jack Snyder’s work on the role of domestic interest groups in war initiations, and nationalist conflict and democratization, (1991; 2000), and Stephen Walt’s work on terrorism (2001)

[4] Waltz (1979) insisted that his theory is a theory of international politics, not of foreign policy, that is, it is not meant to explain individual state’s foreign policy choices or behavior. Elman (1996) however has shown how Neorealism can be formulated to have foreign policy predictions. The debate continues with the birth of Neoclassical Realism that explicitly seeks to explain both foreign policy and international political outcomes (Schweller 2003; Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009)

[5] Legro and Moravcsik (1999) have criticized Realism in general and Neoclassical realists in particular because allowing domestic pressure groups to play a central role in realist theoretical propositions not only undermined the “unitary and rational” state actor assumption, but also tantamount to “borrowing heavily” from societal-preference Liberalism, essentially making Realism indistinguishable from other non-realist. As we have seen above, their critique about rationality is false. A longer and more persuasive rebuttal and debunking of Legro and Moravcsik’s arguments have been presented in Taliaferro (2000) and Rathbun (2008).

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*Date written: December 2012*