

Does Neoclassical Realism Provide a Compelling Approach to Military Change?

Written by Riccardo Tomada

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RICCARDO TOMADA, MAR 17 2015

“Neoclassical Realism Provides the Most Compelling Theoretical Approach to the Sources of Military Change.” Discuss.

We are given “merely the data of our consciousness [...] we are free to choose which elements we wish to apply in the construction of physical reality.”[1] With this ingenious reflection Albert Einstein educates that theories are what we make of them, similar to ‘lenses’ we ‘wear’ them in order to observe, comprehend and construct the material world. With respect to International Relations (IR), the political scientists “who are in love with practice [but] without knowledge are like the sailor who gets into a ship without rudder or compass and who never can be certain whether he is going.”[2] Therefore, given that theories are arbitrarily applied in this very same way – as preferred guidance through the complexity of reality – they are inherently dependent upon subjective interpretations of the world simply because theories are “the product of human ingenuity and creativity.”[3] Indeed, when we interrogate ourselves on central questions for explaining IR we tend to be driven by theoretical preferences, and in doing so we are going to have a specific perspective. As a consequence, in order to facilitate the arduous challenge of comprehending world politics, and in this particular case for unravelling the sources that drive military change, theories are conceived.

In fact, if from IR we extrapolate the ‘scale’ of military change in order to explore and rationalize the sub-domain of *Defence*, it will seem logical to invoke the dictates of Realism and its mixed blends as these theoretical approaches have ever since their conception paid particular attention to material factors – foremost in the form of military capabilities – as explanatory variables in the account of global trends.[4] However, contestation over the amount of analytical leverage between material and non-material factors, as well as the quantity of analysis that should take precedence in comprehending the actions of states in the international realm, characterises the broad Realist branch.[5] To this end, therefore, this paper is going to ‘wear’ Neoclassical Realist spectacles in order to critically evaluate their effectiveness in describing the sources of military change, and will swap theoretical glasses only when the Neoclassical Realist ones fail to adequately explain certain phenomena of defence reforms. The structure of the essay will thus invoke at first a comprehensive recapitulation of the developments of the Realist lineage up to the birth of Neoclassical Realism in order to show the continuity of thought between these loose but linked theoretical approaches and for delivering a broader understanding of Neoclassical Realism’s implication to the sources of military change. Secondly, focus will be concentrated on applying the imperatives of Neoclassical Realism to real life examples, and thus this paper will zoom into various countries and touch upon some case studies to assess the theory’s explanatory power. As already mentioned, in the instances where Neoclassical Realism faces limitations in enlightening specific *Defence* patterns, insights from other theoretical perspectives – such as constructivist and other domestic-level-centric approaches – will be borrowed so to give a complete three-hundred-and-sixty-degree account of the empirical data under scrutiny. However, it will emerge that even though Neoclassical Realism might not always provide the most compelling theoretical approach to the sources of military change, in any case, given its flexibility in accounting for the important intervening role played by unit-level variables,[6] it still recognises that many factors other than material ones can decisively influence the process of military change; hence it will be demonstrated that Neoclassical Realism whilst maintaining a certain degree of parsimony, does not discredit the potential power of alternative approaches, therefore, marking it as a powerful and elastic multidimensional theoretical tool.

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To begin with, it must be recalled that Realism is deeply rooted in the work of Thomas Hobbes.[7] Hobbes revolves around the security dilemma and the individual as basis for his principal arguments; the innately biological and psychological make up of human beings, coupled with a realisation of scarce material and symbolic resources, acts as the driver for individuals to be inclined towards universal conflictual and forcible measures in order to egoistically ensure that they get what they necessitate in the way they want it – that is to maximise survival and prosperity through the employment or threat of force and coercion.[8] The materialisation of the modern state, brought these assumptions also to the mind-set of countries, and thus to the international level. The Prussian General Carl Von Clausewitz rightly inferred that states are persistently in a condition of conflict or ‘total war’, whereby the extracted resources from society are mobilised to attain the domination of the opponent through a conclusive defeat.[9] Because of this, in a manner that resembles Biology’s evolutionary theory of the ‘survival of the fittest’, Thucydides famously expressed that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must;”[10] thus the underlying nature of mankind becomes exacerbated and further foments the anarchic condition within the international realm, whereby the absence of any higher authority above the state increases dishonourable action. This is indeed the core premise at the heart of Realist thought. In any case, even though it exists an insoluble stimulus towards conflict, elements that could reduce the intensity of interstate clash can be identified, such as: (i) material and moral limitations on resources, (ii) political context in which war is fought, and (iii) friction, or the uncertain environment.[11]

Indeed, Hans J. Morgenthau also posed attention to the role of domestic-level factors in shaping state behaviour, recognising that the antagonising interests of individuals create an inherent immorality in international affairs, and that *machtpolitik* is motivated not only by fear and profit, but also by abstract causes like pride.[12] Morgenthau’s realist perspective stressed that “[an]other root of conflict and concomitant evil stems from the *animus dominandi*,” or “the desire to power.”[13] Therefore it is human nature that establishes the ‘international’ in self-help and zero-sum terms, with states focusing on the reduction of relative power gaps through intelligent adaptation.[14] However, Morgenthau underpinned that conflict is not simply a product of the systemic effects generated by the ‘desire to power’, suggesting that states have the capacity to shape the international structure, and thus to influence the intensity of the security dilemma, through domestic agential state power.[15] Yet, for Morgenthau, the success of a state in the global theatre is dependent upon the balance of power and the “system of anarchy to which the state must adapt in order to gain technical control in a hostile environment.”[16] In his conception, Morgenthau rather contradictorily alludes both to the importance of the balance of power, and to the significance of posing higher casual weight on the role of unit-level variables.[17]

Furthermore, over time, Realism developed into Kenneth Waltz’s Neorealism, which maintains some of the central aspects of Classical Realism, though it structurally separates the levels of analysis by distinguishing between three images of IR: (i) the actions of states are entangled to the behaviour of individuals; (ii) the conduct of states is governed by the way it is organised; and (iii) the actions of states conform to their specific power position in the anarchic global system.[18] Nevertheless, Waltz ultimately regards the third image (i.e. the structure of the international realm) as the decisive independent variable that explains the external policies of states, as states overall are relatively similar units functioning in the same international structure.[19] However, the fact that Waltz did not specify the extent to which the anarchical systemic level exerts ‘push and shove’ effects on states, created a division within Neorealism between *defensive* and *offensive* realists.[20]

In the first case, it is argued that the international structure does not provide enough impetus for states to maximise power but it incentivises them to attain the existing balance of power and increment their security; whereas offensive realists such as John Mearsheimer believe that a state’s final objective is to become the undisputed global hegemon, given that the international system provides potent opportunities to attain power at the expenses of rivals when the benefits of those actions outweigh the costs.[21] Yet, states do not always seek to balance aggregate capabilities and fear all states equally, but balance also against the state that is the most threatening,[22] therefore states pose attention to the balance of threat and power – with regards to the former, that is the rational calculation of a state’s intensity of the security dilemma in relation to its geographic region and in relation to the nearby interests of the dominant state(s).[23]

Finally, Neoclassical Realism merges Neorealism’s emphasis on systemic constraints – constrictions caused by the incessant quest of states for ‘survival’ in the anarchic global realm – with Classical Realism’s focus on the

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dependence of statesmen in acquiring domestic material power resources for regulating the magnitude and ambition of their foreign and defence policy aims.[24] Neoclassical Realism argues that over the long-run, the relative amount of material distributions and the existing context of the international system will engineer states to maximise their global influence, strength and security;[25] nevertheless, the internal power of a state is the core intervening unit-level variable that can account for the short-medium term delay from the imperatives of international structure.[26] Therefore, Neoclassical Realism identifies as the key independent variable that determines international patterns, the status of international structure as well as states' acquisition of material power capabilities.[27] As Rose notes "there is no immediate or perfect transmission belt linking material capabilities to foreign policy behaviour," since foreign policy choices are made by political leaders, and thus it is their perceptions of relative power that matter as well as physical capabilities.[28] The intervening variables, identified as unit-level factors, which are of significance in establishing state behaviour over the short-medium term, are indeed highly disputed within Neoclassical Realism.[29] Those intervening variables, which usually take the form of culture, ideology and nationalism, are determined through the inclusion of exogenous vulnerabilities with domestic material power relations that in turn form the devices on behalf of the 'national' or 'domestic' interest.[30] Instead the dependent variable is the variation in the types and intensity of the adaptive strategies the state will pursue: emulation, innovation, or persistence in existing strategies (i.e. stasis).[31] The application of *organisational*, *institutional* and *strategic* culture as intervening or independent variables directs the path for physical conditions persisting for a period of time creating ways in which political activity resides, and thus leading to the conscious exploitation of policy-makers in managing the process of adherence to systemic dictates.[32] However, due to Neoclassical Realism's distinct characteristic – i.e. the incorporation of variation in underlying domestic preferences – Legro and Moravcsik argue that it jeopardises (if not removes) its theoretical uniqueness as a form of Realism "by rendering it[self] indistinguishable from non-realist theories about domestic institutions, ideas, and interests." [33]

Nonetheless, Dyson underscores that the decisive variables affecting domestic power can be found within the state;[34] these include: the institutional structure, the formal constitutional powers of the executive over defence, and nested and interlinked policy subsystems.[35] The internal composition of states thus influences policy leaders in delivering timely tactical guidance with respects to convergence to systemic power shifts.[36] To this end, therefore, policy leaders are dependent not only on systemic-level factors but are also sensitive to the quantity of executive autonomy.[37] It is executive autonomy that crucially permits ideological, nationalist, and bureaucratic tools to be implemented over the short-medium term to orchestrate the temporality of reform or to promptly react to systemic imperatives.[38] Overall, given that the personalities of elites and leaders cannot be ignored, the assumptions of Classical Realism show the significance of domestic material power relations, and consequently executive autonomy emerges as an intervening variable, which mediates between characteristic IR outcomes.[39]

An explanation of the Realist thought and of its 'offspring' has been exhaustively delivered, and the underlying features of this theoretical domain have thus surfaced. In the following section of this paper, attention and analytical leverage will be dedicated to empirical accounts of military change. First it will be invoked the post-Cold War example of the United States in order to show the full power of Neoclassical Realism as a theoretical approach. The second case study will treat German post-Cold War military reform process, so that the open-minded eclecticism of Neoclassical Realism in 'renting' insights from alternative, constructivist approaches will be evident.

Firstly, post-Cold War U.S. defence reform, guided by the concept of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), is perfectly in line with Neoclassical Realism, and Neorealism more generally, as it stresses that in order to maintain a regional and global leadership, the U.S., as an undisputed great power, had to take the risk of initiating military innovation; this resembles Neorealist dictates, which predict that consequently to an external alteration in the international structure (from Cold War bi-polarity to post-Cold War uni-polarity/multi-polarity), states will adapt accordingly.[40] In fact, great powers will employ large resources to *Defence* as they continue to support their military capacity in order to stay ahead of other competing powers, as a means of maximising strength and security in the changed (post-Cold War) international system. Indeed, still respecting the inferences of Neorealism, all of the other competing states will adopt the strategy with the least risks, and thus emulate the leading state or states.[41] Over time this cumulative emulation, in turn leads to general military isomorphism, therefore the weapons and strategies of the major powers will look more alike.[42] Posen highlighted that "as in any competitive system, successful practices will be imitated. Those who fail to imitate are unlikely to survive." [43] In sum, states copy the victorious powers, thus

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producing military efficiency.[44] From these imperatives, it can also be understood the decision of Britain and France to partially and selectively emulate the RMA during the post-Cold War period.

However, the German case study is in sharp contrast to the U.S. post-Cold War example of military reform, as the former does not respect many of the deductions of Neorealism. German spasmodic emulation of established military and defence norms demonstrates a resistance to the adoption of defence reform in the way that Neorealism prescribes it. Also, possibly as a cause of the existing German strategic culture, reluctance in affirming its power and the favouring of a less belligerent role, are evidenced. A number of factors – most notably Germany's strategic culture, as well as allies' expectations and reservations – intervened to prevent the *Bundeswehr* from becoming a strategic resource of government.[45] By 1991, German obligations to NATO served as strong catalysts for a renewed participation in military operations. However, in the 1990s German citizens and the elites, consensually understood the role of the military primarily through the 'culture of restraint' – but this minimized the role of the *Bundeswehr* to peacekeeping and defence operations. The German national interest was therefore not achieved through the use of force but rather by economic aggrandisement. It is evident that strategic culture acted as a potent intervening variable in increasing the pressure of not resorting to the use of military force; specifically, societal relations restrained German executive manoeuvre and policy decision further towards a non-combative direction.

The slow pace in German defence reform is thus dependable on its strategic culture. This means that restricted executive autonomy wields a powerful level of influence on doctrinal development. With regards to German organisational culture, actors were motivated by self-gain instead of security concerns. Conflicting self-interested policy players guided military action or change – as noted by the bureaucratic and alliance politics literature.[46] The former literature identifies endogenous factors – that is the egoistic aspirations of military organisations, such as increases in budgetary share and policy influence – as determinants of military change.[47] In essence, the central intervening variable affecting the trend of German defence reform is indeed organizational culture coupled with national material power relations, which diminish the core executive's autonomy in defence policy formulation.

In light of the overall discussions, in final analysis, Neoclassical Realism provides a compelling understanding to the sources of military change. In most cases, countries conform to the imperatives of the systemic structure and when they fail this is because the intervening variables at the domestic unit-level are intensely in play; nonetheless Neoclassical Realism can easily welcome the insights of other unit-level approaches. Although several scholars accuse Neoclassical Realism of making reductionist and redundant invocations, it should be understood that its value is given by its maintenance of many of the core premises of Realist thought while accommodating the numerous useful insights of other theoretical approaches.

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[6] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

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