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978-0-521-51705-8 - Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy

Edited by Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro

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1 *Introduction: Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy*

JEFFREY W. TALIAFERRO, STEVEN E. LOBELL,
AND NORRIN M. RIPSMAN

How do states, or more specifically the decision-makers and institutions that act on their behalf, assess international threats and opportunities? What happens when there is disagreement about the nature of foreign threats? Who ultimately decides the range of acceptable and unacceptable foreign policy alternatives? To what extent, and under what conditions, can domestic actors bargain with state leaders and influence foreign or security policies? How and under what circumstances will domestic factors impede states from pursuing the types of strategies predicted by balance of power theory and balance of threat theory? Finally, how do states go about extracting and mobilizing resources necessary to implement foreign and security policies? These are important questions that cannot be answered by the dominant neorealist or liberal theories of international politics.

Consider the following: in 1945, and again in 1990, the United States emerged victorious from a major war or an enduring rivalry. In each postwar period, officials in Washington faced the daunting task of assessing and responding to new and unfamiliar international threats.¹ However, the resulting shifts in grand strategy were not predictable solely based upon an analysis of relative power distributions or the dynamics of American domestic politics at the time.²

¹ See William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 21, no. 1 (summer 1999), pp. 1–36; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "American Primacy in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 4 (July/August 2002), pp. 20–33; Wohlforth, "US Strategy in a Unipolar World," in G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 98–120.

² Kenneth N. Waltz repeatedly states that his is not a theory of foreign policy and that it only purports to explain broad patterns of systemic outcomes. See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), pp. 39, 48–9,

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J. W. Taliaferro, S. E. Lobell, and N. M. Ripsman

The bipolar distribution of power following the Second World War does not explain why the United States embarked upon a grand strategy of containment, which eventually mixed both *realpolitik* and liberal internationalist ends and means, over the alternative of competitive cooperation with the Soviet Union through a sphere-of-influence arrangement in Europe.³ As others have noted, in an international system with only two first-tier great powers, some type of competition between them is likely. However, the system could not dictate how the superpowers would define their competitive relationship, let alone the nuances and evolution of their respective grand strategies.⁴

Neither a purely systemic theory of international outcomes, such as neorealist balance of power theory, nor a purely *Innenpolitik* theory of foreign policy, such as liberal or democratic peace theory, can explain why the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations sought to preserve and expand US influence in Europe and East Asia in the 1990s, despite the absence of a great power competitor (at least in the near term) and despite strong domestic pressure to reap the benefits of the so-called peace dividend following the Cold War.⁵

58–9, 72, 78, 87, and 121–3; Waltz, “Reflections on *Theory of International Politics: A Response to My Critics*,” in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 328, 339–40, and 343; and Waltz, “International Politics is Not Foreign Policy,” *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (autumn 1996), pp. 54–7.

³ For two recent neoclassical realist examinations of US grand strategy and strategic adjustment over the past century, see Christopher Layne, *Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); and Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁴ See Deborah Welch Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1985), p. 3; Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 118–22; and Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America’s Anti-Statism and its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), esp. chap. 2.

⁵ A structural realist exception would be offensive realism, which suggests that the international system provides strong incentives for all states to maximize their relative share of material power as the best route to security. The definitive statement of offensive realism is John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001). See also Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security* 15, no. 1 (summer 1990), pp. 5–56; Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of

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Instead, a combination of international opportunities, relatively low external threat levels, and domestic political constraints appear to account for the underlying continuities in US grand strategy during that decade.

Relative power and shifts in the level of external threat alone cannot explain the nuances of the George W. Bush administration's grand strategy after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Certainly, any presidential administration (Republican or Democratic) would have responded to the Al Qaeda attacks on New York City and Washington, DC by using American military might to topple the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and destroy Al Qaeda safe havens in that country. However, other aspects of the Bush administration's behavior defy simply systemic or domestic-level explanations. Instead, the so-called Bush doctrine, the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the administration's subsequent campaign to eliminate Islamist terrorism by fostering liberal democracy in the Middle East resulted from a veritable witches' brew of systemic and domestic-level factors. In other words, while external threats and preponderant American power set the parameters for a US military response, unit-level factors such as executive branch dominance in national security, policy entrepreneurship by neoconservatives within the administration and the think tank community, and the dominance of Wilsonian (or liberal) ideals in US foreign policy discourse determined both the character and the venue of that response.⁶

In each example, international imperatives filtered through the medium of state structure and affected how top officials assessed likely threats, identified viable strategies in response to those threats,

International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (winter 1994/5), pp. 5–49; and Eric J. Labs, "Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims," *Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (summer 1997), pp. 1–49. We consider the performance of neoclassical realism against offensive realism and rationalist approaches to foreign policy in our concluding chapter.

⁶ Robert Jervis, "Understanding the Bush Doctrine," *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (fall 2003), pp. 365–88; Chaim Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace for Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security* 29, no. 4 (summer 2004), pp. 5–48; Colin Dueck, "Ideas and Alternatives in US Grand Strategy, 2000–2004," *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (October 2004), pp. 511–35; and Jonathan Monten, "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in Grand Strategy," *International Security* 29, no. 4 (spring 2005), pp. 112–56.

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and ultimately extracted and mobilized the societal resources necessary to implement and sustain those strategies. Furthermore, complex relationships between systemic and unit-level variables in shaping foreign policy are not unique to the United States. Unit-level variables constrain or facilitate the ability of all types of states – great powers as well as lesser states – to respond to systemic imperatives.

This volume examines the intervening role of the “state” in neo-classical realism, an emerging school of foreign policy theories. Specifically, it seeks to explain why, how, and under what conditions the internal characteristics of states – the extractive and mobilization capacity of politico-military institutions, the influence of domestic societal actors and interest groups, the degree of state autonomy from society, and the level of elite or societal cohesion – intervene between the leaders’ assessment of international threats and opportunities and the actual diplomatic, military, and foreign economic policies those leaders pursue. Neoclassical realism posits an imperfect “transmission belt” between systemic incentives and constraints, on the one hand, and the actual diplomatic, military, and foreign economic policies states select, on the other. Over the long term, international political outcomes generally mirror the actual distribution of power among states. In the shorter term, however, the policies states pursue are rarely objectively efficient or predictable based upon a purely systemic analysis.

Proponents of neoclassical realism draw upon the rigor and theoretical insights of the neorealism (or structural realism) of Kenneth N. Waltz, Robert Gilpin, and others without sacrificing the practical insights about foreign policy and the complexity of statecraft found in the classical realism of Hans J. Morgenthau, Henry Kissinger, Arnold Wolfers, and others. Like other variants of realism, neoclassical realism assumes that politics is a perpetual struggle among different states for material power and security in a world of scarce resources and pervasive uncertainty. Anarchy – the absence of a universal sovereign or worldwide government – is the permissive cause of international conflict. Systemic forces create incentives for all states to strive for greater efficiency in providing security for themselves.

Relative power distributions and trends set broad parameters for states’ external behavior. Thucydides’ observation about state behavior still holds true: “The strong do what they have the power to

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do and the weak accept what they have to accept.”⁷ However, as Gideon Rose observes in the 1998 *World Politics* review article that coined the term “neoclassical realism”:

Neoclassical realism argues that the scope and ambition of a country’s foreign policy is driven first and foremost by the country’s relative material power. Yet it contends that the impact of power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening unit-level variables such as decision-makers’ perceptions and state structure.⁸

The succeeding chapters examine different ways in which the state – that is, the central apparatus or institutions of government – inhibits or facilitates the ability to assess international threats and opportunities; to undertake grand strategic adjustments; and to implement specific military, diplomatic, and foreign economic policies.

The remainder of this chapter has five sections: the next one discusses the three overall objectives of this volume. A discussion of the relationship among classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism follows in the second section. The third and fourth sections discuss the neoclassical realist conceptions of the state and the international system. The final section identifies questions that guide the rest of the volume and provides an overview of the following chapters.

Objectives of the volume

This volume has three overriding objectives. First, we seek to refine and systematize neoclassical realism and establish new avenues for research. Second, we seek to differentiate neoclassical realism from classical realism and neorealism, as well as from other schools of international relations theories. Finally, we seek to develop the concept of the state more fully as both an analytical concept in security studies and as an intervening variable in the study of foreign policy. Below, we discuss each of these goals in detail.

Rose coined the term “neoclassical realism” specifically in reference to books by Thomas Christensen, Randall Schweller, William Wohlforth,

⁷ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (1954; reprint New York: Penguin, 1988), p. 402.

⁸ Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998), pp. 144–77.

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and Fareed Zakaria, as well as an anthology of articles previously published in the journal *International Security*. These authors seek to explain the grand strategy of a particular modern great power at a specific time or place and not recurrent patterns of international political outcomes. Christensen argues that hostility between China and the United States in the early years of the Cold War was an unintended consequence of strategies Mao Zedong and the Truman administration used to mobilize societal resources for national security. Ultimately shifts in the international distribution of power drove Chinese and US foreign policies, but in both countries domestic politics led to the pursuit of overly competitive policies in secondary regions to secure broad support for necessary policies in primary regions. Soviet grand strategy during the Cold War, according to Wohlforth, was an outgrowth of disagreements between the Kremlin and Washington about the actual post-World War II distribution of power in Europe and the influence of Communist ideology on Soviet net assessments. Schweller argues that the tripolar international system of the late 1930s and early 1940s, as well as the distribution of revisionist and status quo interests among the three poles – Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States – actually facilitated Adolf Hitler’s expansionist grand strategy. Finally, Zakaria argues that the relatively weak extractive and mobilization capacity of the federal government (i.e. state power) delayed the United States’ emergence as a great power in the late nineteenth century, despite a dramatic growth in population and economic capabilities (i.e. national power) in the decades following the American Civil War.⁹

⁹ See Michael E. Brown et al., eds., *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler’s Strategy for World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); and Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America’s World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). Rose identifies Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988) and Melvin P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), as immediate precursors of neoclassical realism.

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Rose argues that these books constitute a coherent school of foreign policy theories because they posit a single independent or explanatory variable (relative power), a common set of intervening variables (state structure and leaders' perceptions and calculations of relative power), have explicit scope conditions,¹⁰ and share a distinct methodological perspective characterized by detailed historical analysis and attention to causal mechanisms. Drawing upon neorealism, they emphasize the importance of the anarchic international system, relative power distributions, and pervasive uncertainty. However, they see anarchy as a permissive condition, rather than an independent causal force. In this sense, these authors represent a return to the earlier views of Morgenthau, Kissinger, Wolfers, and other classical realists.¹¹

In the short run, anarchy gives states considerable latitude in defining their security interests, and the relative distribution of power merely sets parameters for grand strategy. The actual task of assessing power and the intentions of other states is fraught with difficulty. The calculations and perceptions of leaders can inhibit a timely and objectively efficient response or policy adaptation to shifts in the external environment. In addition, leaders almost always face a two-level game in devising and implementing grand strategy: on the one hand, they must respond to the external environment, but, on the other, they must extract and mobilize resources from domestic society, work through existing domestic institutions, and maintain the support of key stakeholders. Over the long run, however, regimes or leaders who consistently fail to respond to systemic incentives put their state's very survival at risk.¹² Thus, while the international system may socialize states to respond properly to its constraints over time, as

¹⁰ For a discussion of the importance of scope conditions for theories and competitive hypothesis testing, see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 113–20.

¹¹ For a critique of neorealism's reliance on anarchy as an implicit explanatory variable instead of a permissive condition for interstate conflict, see Marc I. Trachtenberg, "The Question of Realism: A Historian's View," *Security Studies* 13, no. 1 (autumn 2003), pp. 156–94.

¹² See Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," pp. 152–4 and 165–8. On two-level games, see Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (summer 1988), pp. 427–61.

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Waltz contends, it cannot alone explain the shorter-term policy choices that states make, which can have dramatic consequences for both national security and the structure of the international system.¹³

Since the publication of Rose's article, other scholars have employed neoclassical realist approaches to address an array of theoretical, historical, and policy debates, including: the politics of threat assessment and alliance formation in Britain and France before the two world wars and in Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay before the 1870 War of the Triple Alliance;¹⁴ the origins of Italy's revisionist grand strategy in the 1920s and 1930s;¹⁵ the interventions of Wilhelmine Germany, Imperial Japan, and the United States in peripheral regions;¹⁶ the dilemmas of assessing the intentions and capabilities of rising great powers;¹⁷ the impact of individual leaders and ideology on grand strategy;¹⁸ domestic constraints on great powers' ability to construct durable settlements after major wars;¹⁹ the origins of containment and the evolution of the US military commitment to

¹³ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 118–28.

¹⁴ Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 2006); and Steven E. Lobell, *The Challenge of Hegemony: Grand Strategy, Trade, and Domestic Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Jason W. Davidson, "The Roots of Revisionism: Fascist Italy, 1922–39," *Security Studies* 11, no. 4 (summer 2002), pp. 125–59, and Davidson, *The Origins of Revisionist and Status Quo States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁶ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ David M. Edelstein, "Managing Uncertainty: Beliefs about Intentions and the Rise of Great Powers," *Security Studies* 12, no. 1 (autumn 2002), pp. 1–40; Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (summer 1994), pp. 72–107; and Schweller, "The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–39: Why a Concert Didn't Arise," in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 181–212.

¹⁸ Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (spring 2001), pp. 107–46.

¹⁹ Norrin M. Ripsman, *Peacemaking by Democracies: The Effects of State Autonomy on the Post-World War Settlements* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002); and Ripsman, "The Curious Case of German Rearmament: Democracy and Foreign Security Policy," *Security Studies* 10, no. 2 (winter 2001), pp. 1–47.

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western Europe between the 1940s and the 1960s;²⁰ the interaction of relative power shifts, the changing nature of global production, and domestic constraints on the Soviet leadership's response to deep relative decline in the 1980s;²¹ US, South Korean, and Japanese strategies in the current North Korean nuclear crisis;²² the evolution of US monetary policy after the demise of the Bretton Woods monetary regime in 1973;²³ the origins of the Bush doctrine and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq;²⁴ the possibility of ontological convergence between neoclassical realism and constructivism;²⁵ and debates over the usefulness of Imre Lakatos' methodology of scientific research programs (MSRP) in appraising theoretical progress in international relations.²⁶

While there are numerous empirical applications and three frequently cited review or theoretical articles, we seek to develop

²⁰ James McAllister, *No Exit: America and the German Problem, 1943–1954* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2002); Aharon Barth, "American Military Commitments in Europe: Power, Perceptions, and Neoclassical Realism" (PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 2005); Dueck, *Reluctant Crusader*, chap. 4; and Layne, *Peace of Illusions*, chaps. 3–5.

²¹ Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth "Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Re-Evaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (winter 2000/1), pp. 5–53.

²² Victor D. Cha, "Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism in Asia: The United States, Japan, and Korea," *International Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (June 2000), pp. 261–91; and Cha, "Hawk Engagement and Preventive Defense on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security* 27, no. 1 (summer 2002), pp. 40–78.

²³ Jennifer Sterling-Folker, *Theories of International Cooperation and the Primacy of Anarchy: Explaining US International Monetary Policy-Making after Bretton Woods* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

²⁴ See Layne, *Peace of Illusions*, pp. 159–205; and Dueck, *Reluctant Crusader*, pp. 169–71.

²⁵ Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Realism and the Constructivist Challenge: Rejecting, Reconstructing, or Rereading," *International Studies Review* 4, no. 1 (spring 2002), pp. 73–97; and Sterling-Folker, "Realist-Constructivism and Morality," *International Studies Review* 6, no. 2 (June 2004), pp. 341–43.

²⁶ Randall L. Schweller, "The Progressive Power of Neoclassical Realism," in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 311–47; Schweller, "New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, Not Refuting Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997), pp. 927–30; Charles L. Glaser, "The Necessary and Natural Evolution of Structural Realism," and William C. Wohlforth, "Measuring Power – and the Power of Theories," in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds., *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), pp. 250–79.

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neoclassical realism theoretically, expand its empirical applications, and establish its limits as well.²⁷ As the following chapters illustrate, there is no single neoclassical realist theory of foreign policy, but rather a diversity of neoclassical realist *theories*. This volume, therefore, contains a mix of theoretical and empirical chapters dealing with the grand strategies of current and former great powers as well as second-tier states, such as Canada, Italy, and Taiwan, across different historical periods. Furthermore, several contributors address the theoretical and empirical limits of neoclassical realism, both from within this research program and from the perspective of *Innenpolitik* theories of foreign policy. In this way, we seek to highlight how the neoclassical realist conception of the state differs from those of non-realist schools of international relations theories.

The second objective is to differentiate neoclassical realism from classical realism and neorealism. (In this introduction, we focus particularly on the differences between neoclassical realism and its classical realist and neorealist antecedents. In the concluding chapter, we will further differentiate neoclassical realism from liberal and other approaches to foreign policy.) We believe there is considerable ambiguity over the empirical scope of neoclassical realism, the contingent nature of its hypotheses and policy prescriptions, and its exact relationship to other variants of realism. As a result, other international relations scholars criticize neoclassical realism on epistemological, methodological, and theoretical grounds. The following section addresses the relationship among neoclassical realism, neorealism, and classical realism in greater detail.

This volume's third goal is to fill a gap in the security studies literature about the role of the "state" and the interactions of systemic and unit-level variables in shaping foreign policies. For almost twenty years following the publication of Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, much of the international relations literature focused on systemic or environmental constraints or inducements on actors' behavior, or on the outcomes of actors' interactions given certain background conditions. The emergence of constructivism and the

²⁷ See Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy"; Schweller, "The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism"; and Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Realist Environment, Liberal Process, and Domestic-Level Variables," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 1997), pp. 1–25.