

“Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” by Gideon Rose
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Neorealists consider interactions among states, leaving issues of behaviour of individual states to foreign-policy theorists. Some, like Waltz, consider foreign policy too complex for theory, which could never parsimoniously make all the contributing factors endogenous. Many others, however, do confront foreign policy issues, falling into four main schools, which Rose terms “*Innenpolitik* theorists,” “offensive realists,” “defensive realists,” and “neoclassical realists.”

Four Theories of Foreign Policy

Innenpolitik assumes that foreign policy is a direct outgrowth of domestic politics. Issues such as ideology, culture, and economics are oft-cited factors shaping states’ foreign policies. Rose criticizes *Innenpolitik* theorists for failing to explain why similar states behave dissimilarly (and vice versa).

Offensive realists – also termed “aggressive realists” – posit a Hobbesian world wherein states seek to maximize what little security they have. Foreign policy then consists of ‘nervous states jockeying for position within’ this anarchic framework. (149) According to Rose, offensive realism falls short because states in similar structural positions often behave dissimilarly.

Defensive realists also conceive of the system as fundamentally anarchic, but the anarchy is more innocuous. States can deal with most external threats through tweaks of the power balance; only in certain fear-breeding situations or with irrational rogue states does international violence break out. Foreign policy consists of (largely peaceable) reactions to systemic factors.

Neoclassical realists reject the assumption that states’ sole aim is security; instead, states attempt to use their power to direct the international system towards their own goals and preferences. Therefore, states that are more powerful will prosecute foreign policies that are more far-reaching. Unit-level factors also matter, though; factors such as state structure and élites’ psychology refract international politics and determine responses.

The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers

There have been three waves of books since 1980 dealing with relative power and its impact on foreign policy. All have noted the long-term link between economic growth and expanding military/political influence; conversely, when relative economic decline sets in, less sweeping policies result. These observations lead to a central tenet of neoclassical realism: “states use the tools at their disposal to gain control over their environment.” (157)

Perception and Misperception in International Relations

According to neoclassical realists, decision-makers’ beliefs strongly affect the relationship between relative power and foreign policy. These beliefs may be incorrect or cause distortions unforeseen by the structural realist. The neoclassical perspective thus allows for quirks such as Gorbachev’s destruction of the USSR through his attempts to strengthen it.

Bringing the State Back In

Another common neoclassical-realist concern is the ability of various state apparatuses to exploit their societies’ power; i.e., state power vs. national power. By postulating a failure of some governments to convert fully the means of their society, neoclassical realists can explain empirical cases wherein states with great power would be expected to have more expansive foreign policies than they in fact did.

Various neoclassical realists also inject other, idiosyncratic explanatory variables, such as Schweller's characterization of states as "status quo" or "revisionist."

Designing Social Inquiry

Methodologically, neoclassical realists begin their studies at the systemic level, but also consider how units operationalize systemic forces. Thus neoclassical realism demands expertise in the history and culture of the units under consideration before one can make foreign policy analysis. Neoclassical realists claim that power directly shapes only the generalities and not the specifics of foreign policy, and that the theory is therefore loose enough to make mid-range theorizing practicable.

Conclusion: The Road Ahead

Rose lists questions he considers ripe for future neoclassical realist research:

How does actual relative power connect with unit-level perceptions of power?

How does one determine the "usability" of various power resources?

How do relative power changes affect other factors (e.g., ideology)?

What drives changes in relative power?

What is the unique neoclassical realist view of policy?