

# NEOCLASSICAL REALISM, THE STATE, AND FOREIGN POLICY

*Edited by*

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



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*Neoclassical Realism, the State,  
and Foreign Policy*

Neoclassical realism is an important new approach to international relations. Focusing on the interaction of the international system and the internal dynamics of states, neoclassical realism seeks to explain the grand strategies of individual states as opposed to recurrent patterns of international outcomes. This book offers the first systematic survey of the neoclassical realist approach. The editors lead a group of senior and emerging scholars in presenting a variety of neoclassical realist approaches to states' grand strategies. They examine the central role of the "state" and seek to explain why, how, and under what conditions the internal characteristics of states intervene between their leaders' assessments of international threats and opportunities, and the actual diplomatic, military, and foreign economic policies those leaders are likely to pursue.

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

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

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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,

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

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

do and the weak accept what they have to accept.”<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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,

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

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

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.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> 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.