

Neo-classical Realism in International Relations

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Received: January 25, 2016 Accepted: February 14, 2016 Online Published: May 20, 2016

doi:10.5539/ass.v12n6p95

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v12n6p95>

Abstract

Neo-classical realism is result of foreign policy studies through studying both structure of international system and domestic factors and their complex interactions with each other. The main goal of neoclassical realism is to find out how distribution of power in international system, motivations and subjective structures of states toward international system shape their foreign policy. Neo-classical realists reject the idea of neo-realism in which it is argued that systemic pressures will immediately affect behaviours of units. They believe that the extend of systemic effects on states behaviour depends on relative power and also internal factors of states in anarchical system. This article is to study how neo-classical realism applies assumptions such as anarchy, effects of structure-agent, role of power in creating behaviours, national interests, survival and security in order to analyse international politics.

Keywords: Neo-classical Realism, classical realism, neo-realism, levels of analysis, Structure, international relations, foreign policy

1. Introduction

Neoclassical realism is used in International Relations not because of its capability of explaining different phenomena but because of its strength in emphasizing on different levels of analysis and also its avoidance from reductionist dogmatism that other theories suffer. In fact, neo-classical realism is new look at classic realism and neo-realism. The theory is developed by "Gideon Rose". Neo-classical realism is result of foreign policy studies through studying both structure of international system and domestic factors and their complex interactions with each other. Therefore, for studying foreign policy of states in context of international system, neo-classical realism insists, one should pay attention to analytical strengths of neo-realists such as Waltz, Gilpin and others and also to analytical strengths of unit level studies classical realists such as Morgenthau, Kissinger, Wolfers and others (Taliaferro, 2009).

Neo-classical realism applies new approach through using both independent and intermediate variables. So, neoclassical realism is considering variety of intervening factors for understanding foreign policy of different countries. "The History of the Peloponnesian War" written by Thucydides may be called the first version of neo-classical realism in which he believed the main cause of war was the feeling of fear among Spartans because of increasing power of Athena. In his book, he explained how systematic motives (Loosing balance of power) and unit variables of Greek city-states (feeling of fear out of loosing balance of power) are both important in understanding foreign policy.

Studying the effect of relative power on foreign policy is the core subject of neoclassical realism. The principal factor of foreign policy analysis for neoclassical realism is decision-maker's understanding from systemic pressures that make them to decide. The second intervening variable in neoclassical realism is the capability or relative power of states in relation with other states. In other words, though neoclassical realists are seeking for systemic analysis, they do it through analysing relative power of each state and attitudes of decision-makers towards the situation. Briefly, neoclassical realism is the theory attempts to combine factors of micro and systemic theories in order to provide better understanding of foreign policy of countries (Gideon Rose, 1998).

In fact, both theories of realism and neo-realism have problems in foreign policy analysis because of their reductionist approach. Realism takes under consideration the unit level of analysis and ignore systemic effects and also neo-realism studies necessities of international system and ignore effects of national level. Therefore, both are called non-complete for neo-classical realists. Neoclassical realism is trying to solve this shortage

(Baylis & Smith, 2001).

Unlike neo-realists, Neo-classical realists believe that subjective attitudes and domestic structures of states are as important as factors of systemic levels. While neo-classical realists recognize anarchy as important factor but they insist on assumptions of classical realism as well. It is why they have been called “neo-classic”. In fact neo-realism is the theory of international politics that explains the international outcomes of actions and reactions of states. Neo-realism understands states as black boxes in which internal factors such as individual and social roles and their effects on foreign policy behaviour are not important. Neo-realist theory leaves the explanation and analysis of states behaviour to realism (Waltz, 1979).

Neo-classical realism does not reject assumptions of neo-realism but is seeking to modify them in order to give better explanation of foreign policy of single states. It attempts to explain grand approaches of states towards repeating patterns of international environment through insisting on international system interactions and actions of states. As well, neo-classic realism pays attention the most to power and define it according to capabilities just like neo-realists. In contrast to neo-realists, neo-classic realists does not focus just on systemic levels, but on subjective and domestic structures of states and believe that different levels of analysis are as important as anarchical structure of international system.

Neo-classic realist thinkers argue that internal and local factors are intervening variables that play the role of string between independent variable (relative power) and dependent variable (foreign policy outcomes). These factors such as interests of domestic groups, interests of states, or attitudes of elites all participate in shaping foreign policy of a state. In this regard, Gideon Rose note that theories of foreign policy are seeking to explain what and when states are looking for to reach in foreign policy. According to Rose, realists have ignored these factors and the main goal of neo-classic realism is to solve these shortcomings (Rose, 1998).

Neo-classic realists like other versions of realism believe that politics is permanent struggle among states in order to reach power and security in environment of scarcity. As they believe that structure is important and therefore argue that anarchy is the main cause of struggle. In other words, they accept effects of anarchy on behaviour of states and begin with this assumption that pressures of anarchical system bound choices of states in foreign policy, meaning that casual priority of independent systemic variables are determinant factors of foreign policy of states. In other words, nature of states’ foreign policy is rooted in relative power of states. On the other hand, like classic realists, characteristics of states and unit variables are important as well.

Therefore, means and capabilities of states have indirect effect on behaviour of states because systemic limitations and pressures operate through intervening variables of unit level. Unit level variables such as attitudes of decision-makers and state structure operate as connecting factors in shaping foreign policy. Understanding relation between distribution of relative power and foreign policy needs to consider both domestic and external environment in which foreign policy of a state operates. So, the main goal of neoclassical realism is to find out how distribution of power in international system, motivations and subjective structures of states toward international system shape their foreign policy (deghanifirouzabadi, 1390).

2. Classical and Neo-Classical Realism

Label of classic is applied for neo-classical realism because it uses main ideas of classical realism. But international level of analysis and concept of anarchy as core points of neoclassical realism distinguish it from classical one. In other words, neo-classic thinkers go beyond micro level (state) of analysis and apply systemic approach. What differ neo-classical realists from other versions of realism is their emphasis on subjective and non structural factors such as leaders’ attitudes beside structural ones. They argue that though super-powers matter but their capabilities should be measured under influences of anarchical system. Meaning that if we understand anarchy as benignant phenomenon, then security would not be an infrequent phenomenon; and vice versa, we understand anarchy as malignant phenomenon, then security would be an infrequent phenomenon, and therefore increasing power would become main agenda of every state.

Neo-classical realists reject the idea of neo-realism which argues that systemic pressures will immediately affect behaviours of units, but they believe that the extend of systemic effects on states behaviour depends on relative power and also internal factors of states in anarchical system (Schweller, 2004). Therefore, this is perceptions and misperceptions of states, not existent realities, which make states to inter in arms competition or struggle. Those who are responsible for equipment of military forces make clear distinction between military equipment for an attack and defending an attack. Therefore, perceptions of leaders are the main motive of specific foreign policy (Baylis & Smith, 2001).

3. Differences of Structural and Neo-classical Realism

Structural realism or in other words neo-realism attempts to provide realistic explanation of international politics through systematic analysis. Effects of structure on agents in anarchical environment, according to neo-realists, happen without any mediation of other factors; but in contrary, neo-classics argue that effects of structure on units happen through mediating factors. In other words, Neo-classical thinkers analyze international politics through considering independent variable of “relative power” and set of mediating variables such as state’ structure, perceptions and evaluations of state’ leaders about relative power (Taliaferro, 2009). Therefore, levels of unit and agents matter for neo-classical realists. So, beliefs and values of decision-makers influence relation between relative power and foreign policy. It is key difference between neo-realism and neo-classical realism (Rose, 1998).

Neo-classical realism, like neo-realism, argues that the demand for security is the main cause of states to search for power in anarchical international system in which self-help is determinant factor in providing security. Therefore, power is not the goal but an instrument in order to reach security. Neo-realism considers one independent variable of polarity and one dependent variable which are results in international system; but neo-classical realism considers two independent variables of unit and structure and their effects on results which are behaviour of states in their foreign policy. Neo-realism study general effects, limitations and motivations of system on behaviour of states as whole. A tight systemic theory, as Waltz argues, can explain how different structures put pressures on states, but it cannot explain how states react to these pressures, while neo-classical realism can tell us how states according to their unique situation, relative power and motivations react to structural pressures of international system (dehghanifirouzabadi, 1387).

Thinkers of neo-classical realism reject the assumption of neo-realism that argues security is the sole goal of any state in anarchical international system and instead argue that states attempt to change international system based on their own preferences through increasing their own power. Therefore the states that possess more power follow more ambitious foreign policy (Rose, 1998). Another difference between these two versions of realism is that despite of neo-realists, neo-classical realists pay attention to subjective structure in the states. Neo-classical realists believe that behaviour of states in international system can be understood through cognitive variables such as perceptions and misperceptions of states rooted in systemic pressures and threats as well as systemic variables such as distribution of power and capabilities of states (Dunne, 2001).

According to neoclassical realism, ideas matter. State is collection of individuals. These individuals create systems, institutions and bureaucracies and leading individuals. Two elements empower this idea: 1) internal quality and consistency of the idea, 2) ability of idea’ provider. Briefly, power of ideas in different historical periods influences foreign policy of countries. Hence, it matters what idea is chosen and how it affects foreign policy. In order to understand foreign policy of any state, we should realize governing ideas and ideology and their proponents. It does not refer that external factors do not matter, but internal factors matter as much as external ones. In other words, neoclassical realism emphasize that ideas are important especially when they are presented by powerful individuals. For example, personality or capabilities of specific president directly affect foreign policy of states (Kitchen, 2010).

4. Combination of Levels of Analysis in Neoclassical Realism

As mentioned above, neo-classical realism pay attention to pivotal role of state and attempts to explain how and under what condition internal characteristics of state stays between understanding of decision-makers from international threats and opportunities and shape their foreign policy. The main goal of neo-classical realism is to improve analytical power of neo-realism through adding mediating internal variables between incentives, systemic motivations and decisions of foreign policy, because the main thinkers believe that structure of international system as distribution of power and extend of external threats cannot alone explain foreign policy behaviour. Both internal and external factors together can provide better explanation (dehghanifirouzabadi, 1385).

Though neo-classical realism accepts neo-realistic assumption of anarchy, it rejects the idea that systemic level is the sole level of analysis in studying foreign policy. According to neo-classical realism, foreign policy analysis includes systemic, internal and individual level of analysis. Though neo-classical realism is based on neo-realist assumptions, it explicitly reject the argument that systemic analysis is the sole way of analysing international politics and foreign policy. Therefore, individual, internal and systemic levels of analysis all together should be used for process of analyzing; because each one covers part of explanation. In other words, neoclassical realism, as Rose note, uses both internal and external factors. Neo-classical thinkers argue that foreign policy of a state depends on its position in international system and its relative power or its capabilities. But the effect of its

relative power on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures happen through mediating unit variables (dehghanifirouzabadi, 1386). In fact, attention of neoclassical realism as theory of foreign policy is paid on power more than any other factors and like neo-realists it defines power as capabilities of states. It is important to note that neo-classical realism possesses better explanatory power rather than neo-realism because of its attention to systemic and unit levels of analysis and also paying attention to historical background.

5. Neo-classics and Mediating Role of State and Society in Foreign Policy

Neo-classical realism analyses foreign policy through concentrating on relative power of states in international system as independent variable; structure of states, perceptions of decision-makers as mediating variables; and behavior of states in international system as dependent variable. Especially this theory is to explain how, why and under what conditions, internal characteristics of state, its ability to mobilize militaristic political institutions, influence of internal social actors, interest groups, and extent of state independence from society and other societal factors stay and mediate between decision-makers evaluation from international threats and opportunities and their behaviour in international environment as foreign policy (dehghanifirouzabadi, 1388). In other words, neo-classical realists provide a causal chain that has three phases: independent variable (relative power of states in anarchical international system), mediating variable (transmitting factor that filter systemic pressures), and dependent variable (results of foreign policy). Neo-classical realists reject to accept that states are the sole actors of international system and also the idea that systemic pressures are the principles that force specific results. According to this assumption structure strengthens specific behaviour (Keohane, 1984).

In neo-classical approach of realism there is relation among incentives, motives, stimulus, systemic limitations and foreign policy of states; in a way in which systemic variables, international anarchy, relative distribution of power and uncertainty out of them make states to attempt for maximize their security. But anarchy is rather a permissive condition than a tight causal and independent variable. In other words, power just specify the determinant causes of macro approach, but does not specify evaluations and perceptions of decision-maker in reaction to developments of international environment. In addition, decision-makers of foreign policy always are engaging in two-level game in which they react to international environment in one hand and mobilize internal resources of country on the other hand (Dehghanifirouzabadi, 1390). It is important to note that behaviour of a state in long term is based rather on calculations and predictions according to structural factors; but in short term, they should answer to internal expectations. Intervention of internal factors canalizes and mediates systemic approaches (Schweller, 2004).

According to neo-classical realism, international anarchy is not Malignant or benign. They argue that international anarchy cannot be understood easily and it is responsibility of decision-makers to calculate extend of threat or opportunity in variety of situations. In other words, understandings and perceptions of statesmen play a critical role in creating behaviours. This means that effects of structures happen through perceptions and understandings of national leaders. They analyse information according to their historical backgrounds and understandings, therefore, this is an important mediating factor. In addition, according to neo-classical realism, dependence of a state from civil society, political coalitions, organizational politics, and its relations between military and civil sectors all together affect leaders how to mobilize resources.

Characteristics of states, leaders and their attitudes toward how to use power mediate between structural limitations and foreign policy behaviour. Therefore, in analysing foreign policy, all internal characteristics of states and ability of decision-makers in using resources are to be considered; because, states adapt themselves to external environment according to their internal conditions. It is why different states react to systemic pressures and opportunities differently (dehghanifirouzabadi, 1387). Generally, neo-classical realism analyzes the basis of relation between state and foreign policy on three sets of variables:

- Evaluation of threats and opportunities of anarchical international system by states or more precisely main decision-makers.
- Strategic adaptation according four key factors: who is the decision-maker and how he/she reacts to international threats; how internal actors affect foreign policy; which internal actor is more important; under what condition decision-makers negotiate with internal actors.
- Mobilization of internal resources that can be explained through three factors: how states mobilize internal resources to reach specific goals; to what extent internal actors are able to change decisions of leaders; and what is the determinant factor in bargaining social groups.

6. Conclusion

Theory of neo-classical realism applies main assumptions of neo-realism including anarchy, effects of

structure-agent, role of power in creating behaviours, national interests, survival and security in order to analyse international politics. Therefore, neo-classical realists like Waltz provide structural and systemic explanation about international politics on the one hand, and emphasize on assumptions of classic realism on the other hand. It has weaknesses: it is still immature theory and there are few writings; it is still giving general explanation without details. But strength of this theory is its applicability in analysing foreign policy of states. The most important strength of neo-classical realism is its simultaneous attention to systemic and unit factors and also historical explanation. This strength makes the theory rather applicable than other versions of realism. Though it is important to note that critics of other thinkers out of realist league such as constructivists, postmodernists and proponents of critical theory is extended to neo-classical realism as well.

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