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Introduction

This forum presents a snapshot of the current state of neoclassical realist theorizing. Its contributors are self-identified neoclassical realists who delineate their version of neoclassical realism (NCR), its scope, object of analysis and theoretical contribution. Their contributions discuss theories of foreign policy, grand strategy and international politics, and outline how NCR can contribute to normative prescription and non-Western theorizing. In so doing, they speak to theorizing and the utility of the theoretical enterprise in IR more generally.

The introduction of intervening variables has allowed neoclassical realists to explain state behavior beyond the long-term and average effects of systemic forces. Numerous authors employ NCR with such different intervening variables as strategic interaction (Onea 2012), regime type (Juneau 2015), extraction and mobilization capacity (Christensen 1996; Taliaferro 2006; Zakaria 1998), public opinion and media pressures (Steinsson 2017), culture and identity (Giusti 2016; Hadfield 2010; Schweller 2018; N. R. Smith 2016), and perceptions, ideas and beliefs (Dueck 2008; Foulon 2015; He 2017; Kitchen 2010; Meibauer 2020; Wohlforth 1993). Neoclassical realists have investigated core phenomena of the discipline, including grand strategy and systemic change (Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman 2018; Taliaferro, Ripsman, and Lobell 2012). They have theorized the geostrategic environment's permissiveness, the ambiguity of threat, and the salience of structural modifiers (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). While many neoclassical realists have wanted to uphold, to varying degrees, commitments to 'soft' positivism, i.e. to generalizability, testability and prediction, others have suggested more critical, reflexive variants (Gegout 2018; Gelot and Welz 2018; Toje and Kunz 2012).

Not least because of this breadth, NCR has arguably become the "new orthodoxy" for realist scholars (Narizny 2017, 155). However, it has also invited criticism. Its critics diagnose NCR with a lack of theoretical structure and "degenerative" theorizing (Legro and Moravcsik 1999; Narizny 2017; Tang 2009; Walt 2002). Some neoclassical realists have engaged this critique (Christensen and Snyder 1997; Fiammenghi et al. 2018), or argued that better explanations are more important than paradigmatic purity (Taliaferro in: Feaver et al. 2000; Rathbun 2008, 295; Schweller 2003). Others have attempted to systematize the approach. In so doing, they have broadened the scope of inquiry to general patterns of state behavior and positioned NCR as a theory of international politics (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016; also: Desmaele, Onea, Kitchen, forum). Here, NCR contributes new insights to an old debate (Elman 1996; Waltz 1996).

These developments raise questions as to the nature of this (theoretical) beast. Is NCR a mid-range, progressive research program? Can it formulate a grand theory informed by metatheoretical

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assumptions? Is it a reformulation of neorealism or classical realism, or an eclectic mix of different paradigms?

In asking where NCR fits in the discipline and where its contributions lie, it is necessary to delineate what one means by “the discipline” and the process of theorizing. In recent years, IR scholars have questioned the role, processes and power of theories and theorizing of international politics (Grieco 2019; Mearsheimer and Walt 2013; Zambarnardi 2016). They have highlighted the assumptions, particularities, and flaws of supposedly mainstream frameworks. The process of theorizing itself has come under scrutiny, e.g. regarding how the discipline reproduces some voices and represses others (Acharya 2016; Saideman 2018; Shilliam 2010; Tickner 2013; Tickner and Waever 2009). The value of IR theories and theorizing have been challenged to the extent that scholars investigated whether this heralded “the end of International Relations theory” (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013). They found that different ideas about and tensions surrounding the theoretical enterprise persist which, rather than marking the end of IR theory, speak of “new possibilities and new directions of inquiry” (Grayson, Coward, and Oprisko 2016, 1).

Two themes emerge from this debate which help situate NCR within the discipline. The first involves the “acceptance of greater theoretical diversity” and the no longer “heated debate aimed at achieving theoretical hegemony” (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013, 406). Indeed, diversity of (meta)theoretical perspective and analytical method is conventionally perceived as positive. NCR constitutes an example of exactly the kind of theoretical proliferation, diversity and pluralism that the “end of IR theory” debate seems to be about (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013; Grieco 2019). This forum consciously builds on the suggestion that theoretical diversity helps “more comprehensive and multi-dimensional accounts of complex phenomena” (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013, 416) by demonstrating how NCR, in smaller scale, maps onto the divides evident in the broader “end of IR theory” debate.

Inevitably, what kind of theory NCR is, what its ontology and epistemology might be, and what this means for its scope and future contributions, are debated among neoclassical realists themselves. The aim is to avoid a blind pluralism or “shallow eclecticism” that mainly produces mid-level theories with little regard for ontological and epistemological consistency (Guzzini 2013, 532). At the same time, the point of NCR cannot be simply to stake out a new position in a “theological debate” and retread old “paradigm wars”, fought with fervor but little result in decades past (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013, 406; Lake 2011, 465). While neoclassical realists might share attributes which make them belong to a disciplinary “camp”, for example common research interests or even methodologies (Sylvester 2013), each of the forum contributors also delineates different NCR versions and contributions. Even within

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the framework, then, we find a diversity of ideas, scope conditions, and purposes of theory. Indeed, as highlighted by Kitchen (forum), new variables continue to proliferate as neoclassical realists apply their theories to new cases and objects of study. To avoid a descent into “cacophony” (Jackson and Nexon 2013, 543), how is such diversity best captured? How can theoretical progress be evaluated?

The second theme emerging from the “end of IR theory” debate centers on the decline of theory development (the grand theorizing of old) and the rise of theory-testing (mid-range theorizing involving hypothesis testing and correlation). This may represent a general “change in attitudes towards theory” (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013, 406; Oren 2016).

NCR scholarship is often evaluated against theoretical standards that are shaped by mid-range theory expectations, e.g. demands for a unity of thought and theoretical assumptions. Per the latest critic, NCR fails to adhere to the realist paradigm, “nomothetic” epistemology, and top-down method (Narizny 2017, 160–61). It cannot therefore present coherent “arguments, explanations, and predictions”, i.e. formulate empirically testable and falsifiable hypotheses (Narizny 2017, 161–62). Indeed, Narizny suggests, “disagreement among self-identified neoclassical realists”, for example about the role of domestic politics, is problematic and “bound to generate endless debates” (Narizny 2017, 170, 178–80). Of course, the charge that NCR wrongly appropriates concepts “belonging” to other frameworks is epistemologically shaky itself (Rathbun 2008, 299). Also, the notion that scholarly agreement rather than contention begets scientific progress is (at the very least) contestable.

Narizny's criticism latches onto one side of the “end of IR theory” debate. While some authors celebrate mid-range theorizing for its problem-solving, hypothesis testing, and utility to policymakers (Bennett 2013; Lake 2013), others find this trend troubling (Jackson and Nexon 2013; Mearsheimer and Walt 2013; Reus-Smit 2013), partially because mid-range theory is grounded in particular epistemological and normative commitments and thereby (intentionally) limits the discipline's analytical horizons. This tension is similarly visible between those forum contributors that uphold commitments to mid-range theorizing (Desmaele, Onea, Foulon and Meibauer), and those that aim for wider theoretical claims (Kitchen, Reichwein). As evidenced here, then, neoclassical realists straddle the boundaries of different, complementary modes of theorizing (Guzzini 2013; Jackson and Nexon 2013): While some strive for better explanatory theory, others seek to push NCR's boundaries towards more reflexive, conceptual, or normative forms.

If there are tensions between mid-range and “grand” theorizing within NCR, what does this suggest about its relationship to the discipline? NCR mirrors IR theory writ large in that it is pluralistic, epistemologically diverse, and grappling with how and what to theorize in “end of IR theory” times.

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Indeed, the forum's contributions present a microcosm, within a specific approach, of the theoretical diversity and disagreement which characterizes the discipline. They contribute to ongoing debates, within the approach and outside it, on NCR's merits, assumptions and explanations by showing new and theoretically rigorous ways forward. Their explicit engagement of alternative explanations for and modes of theorizing about international relations makes the contributions interesting for scholars and students beyond NCR. The themes they cover span ontological, epistemological and methodological concerns raised in the "end of IR theory" debate. In so doing, they present a realism which has grown out of, and up in, this debate and thus reflects its dynamics. A continuously developing NCR is likely to embrace recent theoretical developments in the discipline. It is not your grandmother's realism anymore – in fact, it seems to be an entirely different theoretical beast.

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Socialization and Path-Dependent Emulation

Neorealism views socialization and competition as the primary dynamics through which the structure of the international system affects state behavior, but it stops short of illustrating how these mechanisms actually unfold (Waltz 1979, 74–77). This is where NCR comes in. Motivated by a desire to explain “why state X made a certain move last Tuesday” (Waltz 1979, 121), NCR unpacks the domestic processes which govern the more precise impact of anarchy and polarity on individual state behavior. Although widely used in historical case analysis of foreign policy, critics have dispraised the approach as ad hoc, inconsistent with realism’s core assumptions, and of limited theoretical utility (Legro and Moravcsik 1999; Narizny 2017; Walt 2002). Drawing on the notion of path-dependent emulation, I offer a pragmatic reinterpretation of NCR in response. This way, I show that NCR can offer a coherent theory of foreign policy that consists of a series of propositions with clearly defined relations to one another (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013, 409). This version of NCR does not prescribe what unit-level behavior “ought to be like”, but instead seeks to provide explanation from a distance and thereby enriches realism’s understanding of change in global politics (Goddard and Nexon 2005; Goldman 2001; Guzzini 2013, 524; Sterling-Folker 2002, 88–89).

From Structure to International Outcomes, from Domestic Processes to State Behavior

Although disagreement among realists continues, all ultimately agree that world politics are defined by conflict groups, in the modern epoch states, that are survival-seeking actors and operate within transhistorical limits which cannot be fully overcome (Schweller 2003, 325–32; Sterling-Folker 2002, 76). Debates among realists are rarely about whether it is legitimate to posit limitations, but rather about where responsibility lies for such limits and what that means for the range of anticipated outcomes (Sterling-Folker 2002, 76). In this regard, Waltz was right that the structure of the international system imposes an inescapable set of constraints upon world politics (Waltz 1979, 69–70). Specifically, structure acts as a selector that rewards some behaviors and punishes others through two recurring mechanisms: competition and socialization (Waltz 1979, 74–77, 92).

Since Waltz’s principal interest was to elucidate systemic continuity in international politics, however, he gave only anecdotal evidence for how precisely these mechanisms develop. Neorealism, as a theory of international outcomes, tells us what international conditions policies have to cope with, but stops short of making claims about specific historical events (Schweller 2003, 316–17; Waltz 1979, 72). This does not mean that neorealism does not have expectations of what the system “prefers” in terms of unit-level behavior (Reichwein, forum; Rathbun 2008, 308). Nonetheless, in terms of explaining world politics, “Waltz brilliantly said everything that can be usefully said about neorealism” (Schweller 2003, 313).

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To explain concrete state behavior of interest to practitioners, therefore, NCR has sought to unpack the mechanisms of competition and socialization at the national level. Neorealism posits that the competitive pressures inherent in self-help systems compel survival-motivated states to continuously make improvements in their internal organization through innovation or the imitation of processes successfully used by others (Resende-Santos 1996, 206–7; Sterling-Folker 2002, 84–90). The pressures of competition encourage socialization, or states' tendency to conform their behavior to common international practices even though for internal reasons they would prefer not to (Waltz 1979, 127–28). In a first sense, domestic processes are dependent variables because states that do not recognize the limits imposed upon them will ultimately select themselves out of the environment (Sterling-Folker 1997, 18). At the same time, domestic processes serve this survival function, which means that they must be immediately causal themselves (Sterling-Folker 1997, 19). Accordingly, there is no deductive reason why NCR cannot incorporate domestic processes while maintaining the causal primacy of structural variables (Taliaferro 2006, 482).

Dual Pressures and Path-Dependent Emulation

NCR problematizes that states do not make foreign policy, but governments and bureaucracies composed of human beings do (Schweller 2006, 47). Governments are not pre-programmed machineries, but rather group together actors who may reach different conclusions as to which interests are at stake at any particular moment (Kitchen 2010, 135–36). In fact, domestic actors do not operate in a vacuum but are subject to dual pressures from both structure as well as existing domestic processes they are part of. Even if neorealism assumes that a state's primary interest is survival and that this interest is exogenously driven by the nature of the environment, this does not rule out that "the aims of states may be endlessly varied" (Fiammenghi et al. 2018, 193–95; Waltz 1979, 91–92). Indeed, before interacting with one another, conflict groups may have different attributes and goals (Taliaferro 2006, 476). Only once states begin to interact is survival "a prerequisite to achieving any goals that states may have" (Waltz 1979, 91).

In the international system, competitive pressures lead states to emulate each other's practices and their military, institutional and technological practices begin to converge (Taliaferro 2006, 476). Nevertheless, neorealism does "not lead one to expect that emulation among states will proceed to the point where competitors become identical" (Waltz 1979, 124). This is because whatever processes are emulated are layered on top of and integrated into existing domestic processes and related vested interests (Sterling-Folker 2002, 88–89; Taliaferro 2006, 476). The latter do not only derive from pre-interaction goals but are also constantly created through survival-seeking behavior. For example, modern bureaucrats would probably not describe the purpose of bureaucracy in terms of resource

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allocation for state security. Rather, they work to protect the department's prerogatives out of a personal interest in employment. Hence, although initially conceived in response to structural incentives, through time the maintenance of a domestic process may become an end in itself for involved actors. This explains why existing institutional arrangements – both formal and informal – do not necessarily disappear because a practice used by an external group appeared more successful for survival (Sterling-Folker 1997, 19–20). In short, emulation is path-dependent (Sterling-Folker 2002, 89). Ultimately, however, because structure is inescapable, states which fail to imitate successful practices find themselves at a disadvantage (Taliaferro 2006, 476; Waltz 1979, 128).

Thus, to explain state behavior, one must elucidate the existing domestic processes that act as a perceptual filter through which all choices regarding international pressures are made (Sterling-Folker 1997, 19). Because NCR problematizes that states do not confront each other as clean slates, it can account for change in international politics, within the confines of the trans-historical limits units are subject to (Sterling-Folker 2002, 76, 88). Consider the rise and fall of great powers. On the one hand, the unique domestic practices that result from blending existing and exogenous pressures sometimes allow previously powerless states to accumulate more power than ever imagined by those who they imitated (Sterling-Folker 2002, 89). "Innovation" then results from adding what has worked elsewhere to what already exists (Resende-Santos 2007, 71; Sterling-Folker 2002, 89–90). On the other hand, in assessing why powerful groups decline, NCR explains how they are less open to emulation and the adaptation of existing structures because their past success made them convinced of their own superiority. Under conditions of anarchy and inter-state competition, domestic rigidity may impact relative power (Sterling-Folker 2002, 89–90).

Seen through this lens, NCR may be able to offer a theory of international politics (Kitchen, forum). Since it can account for shifts in the configuration of relative power, NCR recognizes that the system is both productive as well as a product (Waltz 1979, 50, 93–97). Future scholarship can elucidate how the recurring restructuring of domestic processes that takes place in response to structural incentives conditions and constrains the mode of interaction between states (Ruggie 1986, 281–85). Importantly, this does not require a wholly new theory of international politics, nor does it pose a challenge to Waltzian insights regarding the sources of systemic continuity. Alternately, as a theory of foreign policy, NCR can illustrate how the combination of foreign policies triggers *specific systemic outcomes*. But ultimately, path-dependent emulation fully vindicates Waltz's propositions that balances form and successful innovations are emulated across the system (Waltz 1979, 124).

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Unpacking Path-Dependent Emulation: State Adaptation and National Net Assessment

Path-dependent emulation encompasses the intervening variables identified in NCR scholarship. Two stand out: state adaptation and national net assessment (Schweller 2003, 336–44). Scholars interested in the former have illuminated the ways in which the strength and functions of domestic institutions affect a state's *ability* to emulate the successful practices of the system's leading states in a timely fashion (Taliaferro 2006; Zakaria 1998). The above example of the modern bureaucrat clarified the underlying logic here.

In addition, and more controversially, scholars looking at national net assessment have investigated (not whether but) *how* states respond to external pressures. Here, a state's ability to extract resources is assumed, and observers are instead interested in the factors that lead to specific policy choices (Schweller 2003, 336–44). Since policymakers are human and have limited cognitive capacities, the complexity of the world compels them to rely on simplifying mechanisms to cope with the massive amount of information they encounter (Khong 1993, 20; Larson 1994). Cognitive psychology tells us that objects and events in the world are rarely approached as if they were *sui generis* configurations. Instead, they are assimilated into pre-existing structures in the receiver's mind (Nisbett and Ross 1980, 36). Waltz alludes to this, stating that "in the pursuit of security no state will act with perfect knowledge and wisdom" (Waltz 1979, 92). Such "knowledge structures" do not float freely; they develop from a person's experiences with their environment (Jervis 1976, 143–71). This way, cognitive features contribute to path-dependent emulation since they serve as perceptual filters for policymaking. This clarifies that insofar as threats to survival are not perceived domestically, even faced with objective evidence there is nothing that will compel governments to subordinate their secondary goals to the primary survival objective (Waltz 1979, 92). Overall, since structure does not determine unit behavior, states "are free to act as they wish (...) they are also free to die" (Sterling-Folker 1997, 19).

So, does NCR help improve our understanding of "why state X made a certain move last Tuesday" (Waltz 1979, 121)? Based on the above, I feel confident to say that it does. As a theory of foreign policy, NCR unpacks the domestic process of path-dependent emulation through analyzing state adaptation and national net assessment. Thus, NCR applies to the particular realm of unit-level behavior (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013, 432), even if it recognizes that these processes partly form the character of the international system. It is coherent and distinct not because of what it incorporates or not, but rather because of where it begins, i.e. the fact that anarchy is inescapable (Rathbun 2008, 312).

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Neoclassical Realism and Grand Strategy

If IR theory is ending, what role is left for NCR? The end of theory may refer to: the end of the great debates that have shaped IR since the field's inception (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013); the tendency to subordinate theory to hypothesis testing (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013); or the decline of grand theories in favor of mid-range theorizing (Jackson and Nexon 2013; Lake 2013). It is to the latter that NCR is particularly relevant. Mid-range theories are "constructed to shed light on specific sets of empirical phenomena (...) they do not aspire to offer a general model or universal theory that can be readily adapted to investigate other kinds of phenomena" (Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 22).

In some ways, NCR is the poster child for mid-range theories. Neoclassical realists are often not interested in exploring metatheoretical questions of ontology and epistemology, preferring to move along briskly to discussing substantive issues with practical and normative applications. NCR is eclectic, including, besides structural factors, a host of non-structural ones: domestic dynamics and institutions, perceptions, identity, and strategic interactions. NCR is also pragmatic. For orthodox realists and liberals, it would be anathema to not only bring variables from rival schools of thought into their cherished theory, but also confer them a central role. Meanwhile, strict adherence to a school of thought is not useful for solving foreign policy or grand strategic puzzles, which require casting a wide explanatory net to maximize explanatory power. Thus, NCR supports explanations that 'work' even if they trample on dogma. To paraphrase Deng Xiaoping, NCR scholars do not care what color the cat is as long as it catches mice.

However, such pragmatism has resulted in strong responses from those who indict NCR as "an unwieldy hybrid that invites confusion and contestation over its meaning" and "an unhappy medium", "halfway between realism and liberalism" (Narizny 2017, 169; also: Fiammenghi et al. 2018; Coetzee and Hudson 2012). This is not altogether surprising, as mid-range theory is regularly taken to task on the grounds of incommensurability: that the variables, concepts, and standards of one paradigm are not interchangeable with those employed by another (Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 13–16, 215). Consequently, on the one hand, NCR stands accused of not being realist enough and adding unnecessary variables to more parsimonious theory. On the other, NCR is admonished for intruding on liberalism's turf by misappropriating its variables. These criticisms may be dismissed as straw-manning NCR. However, they have been reiterated in largely unchanged form for two decades (Legro and Moravcsik 1999; Waltz 1997), are not likely to go away anytime soon and risk swaying the scholarly audience. Hence, they deserve to be taken seriously.

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One way to defuse these criticisms is to pursue an insight from recent NCR attempts to formulate a theory of international politics (Type III; Kitchen, forum). Type III claims to explain international outcomes, which are affected by the grand strategies of great powers (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 82–83). Accordingly, NCR might benefit from strategic interaction supplementing structure to account for grand strategy.

For Waltz, states' attributes do not affect outcomes decisively: being a peacemaker or a troublemaker need not result in international peace or trouble (Waltz 1979, 60–61). However, while the system's structure inhibits or encourages how frequently certain results occur (e.g. more trouble than peace), it is how great powers relate to each other and anticipate each other's reactions which determines whether trouble or peace prevails. In this, one may compare world politics with soccer. Without an understanding of the rules or the structure of the game, any movement on the field will not make sense. But one cannot infer from the rules of the game how any particular match will be played (e.g. defensively or offensively) or predict its score line (Aron 1966, 8–9). The same logic holds in world politics. Structure, socialization (Desmaele, forum) and the distribution of relative capabilities determine the range of expected outcomes. But which specific outcomes occur in practice and the form they assume is determined at the level of strategic interaction.

Waltz expunges such interactions from his theory alongside domestic attributes. Interaction is reductionist because it "occurs at the level of the units, not at the level of the system (...) conclusions about the condition of international politics cannot be directly inferred from the data about the formal or informal relations of states" (Waltz 1979, 66–67). However, it depends what sort of interaction one contemplates. *Strategic interactions* do not occur between units, but between units and system (Snyder 1996). State-to-state interactions constitute foreign policy, or how country A relates to country B. One speaks of American policy towards Russia, or of American-Chinese relations, but not of a grand strategy directed towards a certain country. Foreign policy is about dyadic interactions, or their total sum. It is not about how such interactions impact each other. An analysis restricted to dyadic interactions is reductionist in the same way military commanders might think only about the requirements of their theaters of operation, without considering how it affects the whole war effort.

Grand strategy, by contrast, integrates distinct state-to-state relations into a cohesive whole. It is something more than (the sum of) state-to-state interactions. It is a blueprint that orders and guides these relations (Brands 2014, 3–4; Friedman Lissner 2018; Silove 2018). Assuming a system of four states, A's grand strategy is concerned with how its behavior towards state B will affect its relations with C and D, B's relations with C and D, and relations between C and D, as well as the moves these

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states are likely to undertake next, instead of treating these relations as autonomous. If the study of foreign policy concerns how certain decisions are produced, the study of grand strategy is about how decisional contexts are intertwined. Foreign policy is dyadic, grand strategy is systemic.

NCR opts for a mid-level between the second and third image: between interactions and structure. This consists of the geostrategic environment confronting the state, designating all external phenomena, whether material or non-material, human or non-human, psychological or operational, to which the state's activities may be related (Sprout and Sprout 1957, 311–16). The geostrategic environment subsumes material capabilities, but also non-material capabilities like competence, morale, and diplomacy; geopolitical location and territorial layout; the history of previous interactions; the perceptions of decision-makers of each other's and third parties' capabilities and motives; technology and innovation; strategic culture; and alignments. Furthermore, states consider the other parties' likely response to their intended course of action: "The essence of strategy is that it involves interdependent decision-taking. The strategy of A depends on an assumption about the likely strategy of B, which in turn anticipates A's strategy and so on" (Freedman 2004, 43–44).

Is this still realism? Very much so, because, for realism, the international component of a state's activity is more important than its domestic counterpart. Parent and Baron write: "what makes a realist a realist" consists precisely in the assumption that "state behavior (...) is a product of circumstance" or of "environmental compulsion" (Parent and Baron 2011, 201). Zakaria notes that "states conduct their foreign policy for 'strategic' reasons, as a consequence of international pulls and pushes, and not to further domestic ends" (Zakaria 1992, 179–81). If, as realism holds, states are the main actors in world politics, and if world politics is characterized by conflict with the potential to cause war, it follows that states' main concern must be how their actions impact other states and how these other states' actions affect them in turn.

Hence, NCR's theory of grand strategy proposes an outside-in approach. The formulation of grand strategy starts with decision-makers surveying the geostrategic environment, paying attention to the situation of their own state, its enemies, allies, third parties, and of these actors' likely responses. At this stage of strategic planning, decision-makers leave aside concerns of how to mobilize and maintain domestic support. The government is autonomous, able to take decisions independently of interest groups and to hold its own against domestic pressures. Contrary to Type III, this NCR version discounts that grand strategy is susceptible to hijacking by domestic actors.

However, carrying out grand strategy is impossible without the endorsement of voters, bureaucracies, armed forces or intelligence services. To mobilize resources efficiently, decision-makers must convince

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relevant domestic audiences to support their plans. This requires a combination of persuasion, side payments, coercion, and compromise on the strategy's timing, extent of application, wording, or scale of employed means. Therefore, selling strategy is the necessary second step towards a workable grand strategy. But if grand strategy resembles a game played simultaneously on two chessboards, one international, the other domestic, with the state of each board depending on what is going on the other, NCR holds that the first move is made with the international board in mind.

This outside-in framework stands liberal theory on its head. Liberalism starts by looking inside the state at the interests and beliefs of powerful domestic groups which compete over controlling government. For liberals, what states do is a consequence of what domestic actors prefer. It is only in a second step that international considerations enter the picture, since every state has its own set of preferences, and must consider the interdependence between its preferences and those of other states. Accordingly, states sell a grand strategy based on domestic foundations to an international audience (Moravcsik 1997, 517–21). Therefore, NCR's theory of grand strategy differs from liberalism in two respects. First, the order of the steps in formulating grand strategy is reversed. States seek support for their chosen course of action from a domestic audience, not an international one. Second, NCR emphasizes the importance of strategic interactions. Meanwhile, liberalism "focuses on the consequences for state behavior of shifts in fundamental preferences, not shifts in the international strategic circumstances under which states pursue them" (Moravcsik 1997, 518–19). While the NCR model can be contrasted with the *innenpolitik* model, it is not the same thing as *aussenpolitik* or 'second-image reversed'. NCR elucidates the role of international factors in shaping a state's grand strategy; for *aussenpolitik*, it is about their salience in affecting its domestic politics and institutions (Gourevitch 1978; Lobell 2003; Zakaria 1992, 179).

NCR was, is, and will remain a family of diverse theories. But there is strength in diversity. If NCR adds value compared to its competitors, this comes from its willingness to accept that one gains more insight by combining diverse variables rather than considering them separately and exclusively. NCR scholars, as the forum contributions suggest, have different ideas about which variables are necessary, in which precise combination, and to which puzzles the theory should be applied. But they agree on the need for (some form of) eclecticism and pragmatism in their research. In so doing, they reaffirm mid-range theory's cardinal principle, which it shares with realism: take the world as it is, with practice creating theory, not the other way around (Sil and Katzenstein 2010, 211–18).

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Neoclassical Realism as a Theory of International Politics

From its origins as a “theory of mistakes” (Schweller 2006, 10), NCR has constructed itself as a theory of foreign policy, seeking to explain states’ strategic choices. Its initial insight, that domestic-level factors intervene between external drivers and strategic response, highlights the limits of choice faced by the foreign policy executive when reacting to structural incentives. Largely driven by historical inquiry in its early (Type I) iterations – a reality that leads some, including Reichwein (forum), to view NCR less as a theory *per se* than as an analytical framework – NCR has been most interested in the failure of domestic processes to translate structural signals into adequate policy responses.

Attempts to construct a neoclassical realist theory of foreign policy are therefore grounded in the desire to fill a gap within structural realism. Whilst Waltzian realists understand that policy results from complex political processes (James 1989), structural realism says nothing about how states go about processing the pressures and incentives structure creates, or varying their strategic responses. Unless the structural environment is highly constrained, i.e. threats are clear and significant, it is difficult to deduce strategic postures directly from the balance of material capabilities (Goldman 2001, 54; Press-Barnathan 2006).

NCR provides a means of analyzing why states respond to particular pressures in particular ways. Waltz’s central claim for structural realism is that under self-help conditions of anarchy “the pressures of competition weight more heavily than ideological preferences or internal political pressures” (Waltz 1986, 329). As a theory of international politics concerned with macro outcomes at the structural level, this makes sense: in the long run, states that ignore requirements of competition will lose out. NCR emphasizes – consistent with Waltz’s counterpoint that “in the absence of counterweights, a country’s internal impulses prevail” (Waltz 2000, 24) – the degree of permissiveness of the structural environment. By turning Waltz’s points into a sliding scale of structural determination, NCR can make claims on the circumstances in which unit-level intervening variables are likely to impact on foreign policy outcomes (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 52–56). Consistent with Waltz’s position, NCR constructs a theory of foreign policy wherein the structural environment provides the starting point, but domestic variables play a significant role, in determining foreign policy outcomes.

From Type I to Type III NCR

Type I NCR explained historical ‘mistakes’ in which structural drivers failed to generate appropriate policies. As this body of work grew, neoclassical realists started developing more abstract and generalizable theoretical statements about foreign policy (Type II NCR). Type III NCR, however, is a different order of theory. Here, NCR departs from augmenting structural realism through a theory of foreign policy, to challenging structural realism as a theory of international politics.

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Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell have shifted their position on the desirability of such a move. In 2009, they quoted Waltz approvingly to the effect that “one cannot (...) arrive at an understanding of international politics by summing the foreign policies and external behavior of states” (cited in Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009, 21; Waltz 1979, 64). By 2016, the authors regarded that distinction as “largely overdrawn” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 81). This is not as new an insight within NCR as the authors' conversion might imply: earlier Type II work had argued that “the structure that informs and constrains states' grand strategic choices is itself constituted by the grand strategic choices of states” (Kitchen 2010, 143). Drawing on a critique of Waltz's rendering of the structural level of analysis, this view sees structure as an emergent property generated by the “interaction and arrangement of the units” (Buzan, Jones, and Little 1993, 11).

Importantly, Type III NCR rejects Waltz's insistence that structural realism is not a theory of foreign policy (Waltz 1996). This departure contrasts with the majority of NCR that uses Waltz's vision of realism as a starting point. This has always been problematic because Waltz's is a highly specific – indeed, unusual – version of realism. It is an enduring difficulty for neorealism that its most cited theorist articulates a theory that is an outlier in comparison to how most other variants proceed. Waltz regards international structure as a constraint on states that, over time, explains international outcomes – in terms of structure. In that sense, his structural realism is tautological – it tells us that in a system characterized by anarchy, international structure is produced by the constraining effects of structure on the units within that system. Most contemporary neorealists ignore this feature of Waltz's theory, and instead regard international structure as more or less determining of the units' *behavior*.

Good reasons exist for doing this, but as a matter of theory what this sort of realism does differs fundamentally from Waltzian realism. There can undoubtedly be *neorealist* theories of foreign policy; what there perhaps cannot be are *structural* realist theories of foreign policy. This is not an issue for NCR if Waltz's theory does not flow deductively from his premises, as some critics suggest. However, it highlights that exploring Type III NCR will necessarily stimulate discussion of NCR's underpinning relationships to (whichever formulation of) neorealism.

[Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics](#)

Those foundations aside, NCR as a theory of international politics must first clarify which international outcomes it seeks to explain. Structural realism has long faced the criticism that without taking into account long-term foreign policy behavior – that is, the grand strategies of great powers – it is a theory of international politics that is static, and cannot account for change (Ruggie 1986, 152). Conceptualizing systemic outcomes as an emergent property of the behavior of the system's units

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allows Type III NCR to retain a structural focus whilst integrating a dynamic mechanism in the strategic choices of major states.

Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell define systemic outcomes as “observable political phenomena resulting from the coaction and interaction of the strategies pursued by two or more actors in the international arena” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 85). However, an inductive reading of their work suggests an understanding that is more restrictive, focused on the balance of power and the presence or absence of systemic war. Whilst this focus may root the authors within the mainstream concerns of realism, the notion of systemic outcomes as observable political phenomena points to a wider theoretical sense of the international system's *character*. At one point the authors make this suggestion, in passing, by distinguishing between a system with an international economy characterized by openness and one that is autarkic, and explain those different outcomes in terms of the balance of sectoral interests within leading states. This type of ‘systemic outcome’ differs from one associated with the balance of power, and one that Type III NCR could – and perhaps should – embrace.

Type III NCR's second crucial task is to articulate how systemic outcomes are produced. Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell's characterization of Type III NCR builds on the typology of intervening variables within Type I and Type II NCR. This generates a model for Type III NCR in which multiple intervening variables – leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutions – all act on multiple processes of perception, decision-making and implementation which translate systemic stimuli into policy responses. The interaction of these various policy responses then produces systemic outcomes, which become the stimuli to which states seek to respond and the whole process restarts.

[Theory Development: Critiques and Routes Forward](#)

This approach tends to affirm Walt's critique, that in its search for explanations of outliers NCR permitted intervening variables to proliferate, thereby undermining its claims to general theory (Walt 2002, 211). Support for this view can be found in the desire of some self-identified neoclassical realists to use NCR as a vehicle for revitalizing the more diffuse insights of classical realism rather than a grand theoretic undertaking (Reichwein, forum). These questions of theoretical purpose and utility are far more significant than the semantic debate about what it means to be “realist” some critics have engaged in (Narizny 2017). Certainly, if IR is to sustain any commitment to macro-level theory development, those theories need a clear statement of which variables matter most. However, while the critics may find succor in Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell's particular elaboration of Type III NCR, this is not some fundamental problem internal to the development of a neoclassical realist theory of international politics.

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All theoretical enterprises are engaged in internal dialogues as they expand in scope and simultaneously seek to refine their conceptual underpinnings (Quinn 2013). While Type III NCR may lack parsimony, that does not imply that any neoclassical realist theory of international politics must. The task of grand theorizing – for that is what the construction of a neoclassical realist theory of international politics *is* – is to articulate the underlying order on which human affairs are based (Rosenau 1980, 24). This requires that we identify those things that are *most* important, and to specify their relations, thus providing a representation of a system that shows how its component parts are organized (Waltz 1990, 26).

A few principles may be articulated to inform the development of Type III NCR. Firstly, as Onea affirms (forum), theories of international politics should explain systemic phenomena rather than events. A neoclassical realist theory of international politics should therefore explain the international system's character, understood as the salient political phenomena that account for the balance of power and the mode of state interaction. Whilst this character is not static, nor does it change rapidly: theory development might therefore establish the relative impact of intervening variables over the short and longer-term. For example, individual leaders – who typically change regularly – might have less of an explanatory impact on systemic outcomes than variables which remain consistent over time.

Secondly, NCR should not proceed from the starting point of modifying any particular realist variant. Theorizing requires engagement at the level of first principles, rather than bolting on modifiers to existing attempts. This would be more in keeping with Waltz's insistence on the proper pursuit of the theoretical enterprise than NCR's current strategy of extending structural realism (Rathbun 2008). So neoclassical realists can and should carefully consider the criticisms of other approaches when developing their own theories, recognizing that – as per “integrative pluralism” – theories “may undergo substantial change and modification” (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013, 417). An example would be to clarify the distinction between the structure *of* the system and the system itself, which realist work often does not engage (Buzan, Jones, and Little 1993, 24).

Thirdly, NCR should clarify what it requires from intervening variables to produce a theory of international politics. If some realist baseline is in place, what exactly varies across states yet over time remains relatively consistent within them, and is powerful enough to mediate systemic incentives so as to produce policies that are different from those that can be deduced directly from power? This may not be a single variable, as Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell's Type III NCR suggests. Indeed, as Desmaele (forum) demonstrates, NCR may benefit from conceptualizing intervening variables as sufficient causal processes rather than as explanatory factors.

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Conclusion: Neoclassical Realism as Grand Theory

In recent years, grand theory in IR has suffered at the hands of 'rigorous' political science approaches which reify empirical data and hypothesis testing (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013), as well as postmodern and historical approaches which are suspicious of abstraction (Berenskötter 2018). At the same time, there has been a desire for theories to solve real-world problems rather merely describe the system in which they arise (Brown 2013; Lake 2013). Within NCR, a reluctance to move beyond theorizing 'mistakes' may be explained by the need to justify comparative historical case-study methodology that supplants the desire to contribute to theory.

Prioritizing 'richness' has its virtues, not least the development of a more global IR (Foulon and Meibauer, forum). But particularity must not undermine the task of theorizing. If we accept that international politics is an expression of both the states' behavior and the system in which they interact but reject that one feature can be reduced to the other, a grand theory of international politics that integrates system and unit-levels is desirable and possible. The challenge is to render the intuition that universal systemic principles apply in distinct ways useful as theory, providing a conceptually grounded explanation that can structure answers to causal questions and offer predictions and prescription. To achieve that, neoclassical realists will have to put aside the history books and embrace their roles as theorists.

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Neoclassical Realism and Global IR: Towards a Synthesis?

For the past twenty-five years, neoclassical realists have argued that they offer more complex analyses of state behavior than “parsimonious” neorealist accounts. And yet, one challenge to NCR lies in the Western-centric nature of its produced knowledge, which risks misrepresenting and misunderstanding world politics. The (re)discovery and development of a more global IR has been changing the dynamics of intellectual inquiry within the discipline. It opened avenues of inquiry into the dynamics of power, politics and the international. Ignoring this trend or foregoing an evaluation of NCR's position vis-à-vis Global IR is unsatisfactory: it sidelines behaviors of most members in the international system, problematizes NCR's relevance in a discipline increasingly critical of Western biases, and risks that NCR overlooks opportunities to contribute to a new body of research. Similarly, if Global IR leaves its relationship with NCR underdeveloped, it risks reproducing the dichotomies between Western and non-Western IR that it seeks to challenge.

In focusing on how NCR is positioned vis-à-vis Global IR, this contribution extends the debates touched upon in the forum's contributions to new fields of inquiry. Are Desmaele's or Onea's approaches to foreign policy and grand strategy limited to Western cases? If so, how would one find out? Can neoclassical realists analyze the particularities of Malaysian, Costa Rican or Namibian state behavior? Inevitably, such questions relate to the aspiration of generalization in, and the necessity of abstraction for, realist theory (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013; Waltz 1979, 72). To what extent is realist theory at odds with new theoretical developments towards, one, greater explanatory power and therefore mid-range theory, and two, more global and diverse IR theory, both in terms of theory building and testing (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013; Jackson and Nexon 2013)? Is the “end of IR theory” debate really about the end of *Western* IR theory (Acharya 2016; Tickner 2013)?

We make a case here for the continued relevance of key realist insights. But we also suggest that NCR is well placed to integrate global cases and questions, global thought and global contributors. This is because NCR relaxes neorealism's universalist, structural-materialist assumptions. We outline theoretical implications for NCR and suggest how creative research designs and scholarly collaboration can put NCR in fruitful conversation with the Global IR literature, and contribute to diversifying approaches to core IR concepts.

Global IR and the Critique of Realism

Scholars associated broadly with “Global International Relations” have formulated scathing critiques of realism (Acharya 2014; Acharya and Buzan 2007; Hobson 2012; Shilliam 2010). Realism is argued to be flawed because its claims to validity across time and space naturalize the West's historical

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experience. Hobson suggests that realists developed a framework “grounded within a Western parochial analysis of world politics, wherein intra-Western politics is presented as world politics” (Hobson 2012, 188). Neorealism in particular does not adequately contextualize the state, power, anarchy and conflict (Schmidt 2014, 468). It can be read, therefore, as an output of (neo)colonial modes of knowledge production. Moreover, its disciplinary dominance stifles the interrogation of alternative lenses (Acharya and Buzan 2007; Shilliam 2010; Tickner and Smith 2020; Tickner and Waeber 2009). The local scholar is reduced to a “technician”, tasked with correctly applying Western theory (Mamdani 2018). Some scholars therefore seek to dismantle what they perceive as a marginalizing system of thought (Sabaratnam 2011; Seth 2011).

Instead, we here embrace Acharya's understanding that Global IR “subsumes, rather than supplants, existing IR knowledge – including well-known theories, methods, and scientific claims” (Acharya 2014, 650; Hurrell 2016). We read Global IR as a call for the (re-)consideration of complementarity between Western and non-Western scholarship. We suggest that NCR offers avenues to do so. For reasons linked with imperialism as well as globalization, today's international system is and continues to be structured by anarchy, which means that the geostrategic environment and the relative distribution of capabilities are crucial drivers of state behavior. How exactly and to what degree anarchy is experienced and translated into state behavior, however, depends on contextual, unit-level factors. Neoclassical realists continue to investigate the structural and systemic drivers of state behavior all the while they acknowledge other sources of agency, for example culture or ideas (Acharya 2014, 650). Extending this work, we suggest that NCR can contribute to a more global IR through three different avenues: global questions and cases, global concepts, and global scholarship.

[Global Questions and Cases](#)

NCR suggests that the international system, structured by anarchy, is mediated through unit-level variables expressing elements of subjectivity, hierarchy, or cooperation. This allows for contextualized analysis regarding actors, time and cultures through the integration of factors like national culture, elite perceptions and party politics. The effect of domestic norms, ideas, and cultures depends on the specific state's historical background, institutions, and ideational landscape. For example, Iran's regime set-up and identity incentivized under-expansion (Juneau 2015). Perceptions of national interests and domestic support matter for Indonesian policy vis-à-vis foreign separatists (Sari 2018). NCR analyzes not only Western cases, great powers, or democracies; it can contribute to the study of non-Western cases, including smaller, postcolonial or authoritarian states (Becker et al. 2016; Gelot and Welz 2018; Gvalia, Lebanidze, and Siroky 2019; Ichihara 2017; Kropatcheva 2012; Romanova 2012; Sørensen 2013; Yoo 2012). Finally, because NCR focusses on decision-makers, it introduces subjectivity and lived

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experience that affect leader beliefs and decision-making styles. Knowledge drawn from the specific context of the case(s) under consideration complement existing theory, for example through providing specified variants of variables. This approach lends non-Western scholarship at least a “meaningful” role (Zhang 2017, 290).

Local dynamics cannot replace or predominate systemic stimuli in the neoclassical realist analysis of state behavior. Any neoclassical realist must pay attention to paradigmatic assumptions, including the causal primacy of systemic stimuli and “soft” positivism. As outlined by Kitchen (forum), the proliferation of intervening variables in NCR has already come under scrutiny. To avoid regressive theorizing, neoclassical realists must carefully justify and conceptualize any additional variables they employ in the search for better explanations.

Global Canon

NCR can broaden the canon of what is considered “realist”. It deliberately returns to classical realist contributions on power, morality and the role of the decision-maker in foreign policy (Reichwein, forum). Unlike classical realism, however, NCR prioritizes the causal primacy of the systemic (i.e. the structural rule of anarchy, and the distribution of capabilities) that provides the baseline interest for state. Intervening variables at the domestic level, variously borrowed from, e.g. cognitive approaches or constructivism, do not cause state behavior: instead, they intervene in the causal chain between external incentives and state action. Despite realism’s Western roots, much scholarship has considered foundational texts by non-Western thinkers and their contributions to conceptualizing power, statehood, anarchy, as well as innovative understandings of what may be considered “realist” theories. Islamic mirrors for sultans or Ibn Khaldun’s writings may be used to interrogate hegemony, sovereignty or balance of power as well as Islam’s influence on the ontological divide between the international and the domestic (Blaydes, Grimmer, and McQueen 2018; Kalpakian 2008). Themes associated with realism are evident in “third world” scholarship (Alagappa 2011; Ayoob 2002). A conscious return to a (wider) classical realist canon allows new perspectives on normativity and prescription (Reichwein, forum).

We do not contend that non-Western theories, including those compatible with realist reasoning, are a *new* phenomenon. Instead, NCR can embrace different foundational texts touching on realist themes because it understands paradigmatic boundaries and scientific inquiry less strictly. This does not mean that NCR sheds its soft positivism, or by necessity its aspirations to generalization (Hurrell 2016, 150). Rather, its willingness to integrate context-specific insights extends to re-considering its intellectual canon. This helps position non-Western knowledge at the core of the discipline.

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Global Scholarship

By bringing non-Western scholarship to bear in the disciplinary mainstream, NCR can (from within its paradigm) engage with non-Western perspectives and scholarship. Explaining global empirical questions and cases necessitates creative research designs and scholarly collaboration across disciplines and area studies. When the non-West is treated not simply as an object of study but as a source of knowledge, a line of enquiry can be opened for novel insights and better understandings of non-Western powers' responses to systemic incentives and constraints. This in turn encourages innovative research designs and scholarly collaboration, including between Western and non-Western institutions and scholars. Cooperation that thusly complements a (neoclassical) realist framework with detailed regional expertise has far-reaching consequences.

First, it is likely to be methodologically pluralist, based on collaborative and creative research designs as well as quantitative and qualitative methods. Second, it facilitates knowledge production that provides richer insights into non-Western states' foreign policies. Thus, NCR can address concerns about elitist modes of knowledge production, and of knowledge focusing on Western experiences of the international. Third, it incorporates localized perspectives into theory-building (not only theory-testing), and thus avoids a reproduction of Western theorizing. It may help reverse the one-way street of theorizing and application from the West to the local. This facilitates a more global conversation as "an evolving debate between scholars, within and across disciplines" in which geopolitical forces and contextual factors and knowledge can be appraised better (Mamdani 2018).

Conclusion

Responding and contributing to the growth of non-Western theories in IR and foreign policy enriches NCR. A close reading of the Global IR literatures points not to an end of IR theory but to an end of *Western* IR theory, and towards more global theory (Acharya 2016; Tickner and Smith 2020). NCR can integrate non-Western cases and questions, non-Western thought and non-Western contributors. Its richness of mediating variables, causalities and methodologies acknowledges insights about the importance of contextuality and positionality. NCR's bridging of structure and agency brings not only additional explanatory power and descriptive accuracy. It also broadens its scope of inquiry. This creates fruitful dialogue with the concomitant attempt to formulate a generalizable neoclassical realist theory of international politics.

NCR can incorporate the mediating effects of domestic norms, ideas, identities and cultures into system-level analyses. It can generate insights into non-Western states' responses to systemic incentives. Opening the (classical) realist canon to global thought can help explore the roots of these dynamics. Finally, putting into conversation realism and global approaches via the route of NCR

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encourages differently situated scholars to contribute to more global theories. Embracing new avenues of inquiry into state behavior brings possibilities for NCR to contribute to a growing body of Global IR literature. It improves NCR's relevance in a discipline increasingly critical of Western biases and helps broaden the scope as well as deepen the quality of analytical inquiry.

Neoclassical Realism and Statecraft: Towards a Normative Foreign Policy Theory

The debate among neoclassical realists on what kind of theory NCR is has led to theory development instead of solely theory testing within the realist camp. This camp has been dominated from the 1970s until the 2010s by neo- and structural realists. Since, two trajectories have emerged: one, commitments to mid-range theorizing in order to *explain* a state's foreign policy by those neoclassical realists striving for more explanatory power. Two, wider theoretical claims by those revisiting the classical realist roots of NCR, seeking to push it towards more reflexive and normative paths, and making NCR a *foreign policy guide*. Given both trajectories, NCR's continuously emerging theoretical enterprise is in line with Dunne, Hansen and Wight's criticism of the predominance of theory testing as the core aim in IR at the expense of theoretical innovation, as well as with their demand for more theory building (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013, 406; Mearsheimer and Walt 2013). Still, in its current state, NCR remains first and foremost an analytical framework to explain a state's foreign policy (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009; Reichwein 2012; Rose 1998; Sterling-Folker 1997). It lacks any *normative* strand (Guzzini 2013). I argue that bringing back classical realism's distinctive *duality* of analytical-descriptive and practical-prescriptive elements helps fill this gap.

Realists, including both theorists and practitioners, share three interacting and inseparable ambitions. First, they explain a state's foreign policy in a specific political and historical context (as it *is*). Second, they problematize policies not in line with *any* theoretical insights within the realist camp (Brooks 1997), like the United States' strategy vis-à-vis China (Kirshner 2012), or unnecessary strategies of over-balancing like the Iraq War (Mearsheimer and Walt 2003). The third – often overlooked or forgotten – and particularly *classical* realist ambition is to engage in public debates, to act as public intellectuals, and to advise policymakers on how foreign policy *should be*, on *how to make* interest-driven, rational foreign policy in line with power considerations, values such as prudence and moral principles, and the necessity of success (Morgenthau 1951, 1954; Rafshoon 2001; Wrightson 1995). In other words, realism is an analytical, problem-solving as well as reflexive and normative approach – or a “theory of (correcting) mistakes” (Schweller 2004, 168) analytically and *in practice*. NCR often lacks what classical realism includes: the focus on statecraft and how to correct foreign policy mistakes.

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Inspired by Hans J. Morgenthau's state-centered classical realism, and based on the self-understanding of realism as foreign policy theory and foreign policy *guide* (Barkin 2009, 241; Myers 1997, 256–57) I aim at refining NCR by going some steps back and suggesting a normative approach that entails a reflexive and reformist understanding of foreign policy.

Conventional Neoclassical Realism: *Rationalizing Foreign Policy*

Mainstream NCR is based mainly on the insights and assumptions of neorealism, and to a much lesser degree on classical realism. Most neoclassical realists identify observable patterns of a state's external behavior, analyze these patterns against the background of neorealist theoretical predictions, e.g. defensive power-balancing (Waltz 1979) or offensive hegemony-seeking (Mearsheimer 2003), and seek to explain foreign policy choice. To this end, they employ different intervening variables that translate systemic stimuli into foreign policy decisions and state behavior. These variables affect a state's choices and scope of action in a concrete situation. The aim is to systematically identify which intervening variables matter when, and how systemic, domestic and cognitive factors, which are linked in a causal chain, shape and drive foreign policy formation (Reichwein 2012, 35–36). Using these intervening variables, neoclassical realists can explain variations in a state's behavior.

In other words, NCR – conventionally understood – is a theory of deviation in state behavior, or what hinders the production of the type of rational foreign policy we might expect based on either power balancing or hegemony-seeking. Here, rationality is a matter of correspondence with a neorealist baseline, e.g. Waltz or Mearsheimer. The multi-level framework and a set of causal variables helps neoclassical realists overcome the theoretical shortcomings of neorealism regarding the explanation of foreign policy strategies and corresponding state behavior. In this sense, most of NCR is indeed the “logical and necessary extension” of neorealism (Rathbun 2008). Neoclassical realists explain why and how the state's internal configuration intervenes between systemic constraints or incentives, and how leaders are likely to respond to these pressures. The resulting response might be rational or irrational in a realist sense, and decision-makers may be aware of this or not. Widening the scope and taking supposedly irrational strategies seriously in a normative sense should be a primary task for NCR. Many neoclassical realists neither reflect nor problematize the resulting foreign policy choices of a state, nor do they discuss the political consequences of dangerous and irrational strategies, be they under-balancing or expansionism. They rarely present policy alternatives. Thus, what can NCR learn from classical realists to better theorize and explain, but also criticize and reform foreign policy?

Normative Neoclassical Realism: *The Classical Realist Legacy as a Source of Inspiration*

Today's neoclassical realists learned from classical realism about the role of state institutions and individuals as key decision-makers charged with making foreign policy. They use (rather pre-

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theoretically informed) classical realist models of national power resources and state power as a precondition and source of state strategic behavior and the implementation of policy decisions. And they draw upon classical realist insights into the *national interest* as the guideline of foreign policy, and the statesperson's role in defining these interests based on assessments of the external environment (Reichwein 2012, 34–37). I suggest advancing NCR by looking back to the realist tradition's history, to classical realism and, specifically, Morgenthau.

Classical realism's legacy can help NCR become (more) reflexive, (more) normative, and (more) political in three senses. Firstly, classical realism is “a theory of foreign policy, not a theory of systemic constraints” (Barkin 2009, 241). Classical realism does not assume deterministic objective forces pushing states into predefined directions. It focuses on the historical political contexts and challenges faced by the reflective decision-makers of a state who have to make strategic choices against the background of the concrete situation and in line with the virtues of prudence, circumspection and Weberian ethics of responsibility (Kirshner 2012, 54, 69–70). Simultaneously, they must anticipate and evaluate the outcomes and consequences of their subjective choices, and look for alternatives (Kirshner 2012, 70, 2015, 156).

Secondly, classical realists push decision-makers to do what they advise them to do, and warn them of their actions' consequences (Barkin 2009, 245). Thirdly, specifically Morgenthau's realist legacy is normative. Morgenthau exhorts leaders to make normative and political judgements (Williams 2004, 635, 657). The state's internal characteristics matter in foreign policy: “The traditional distinction between foreign and domestic policies tends to break down” (Morgenthau 1977, 155). Morgenthau believed in statecraft and leader qualities. He dealt with the pitfalls and danger of ideology in politics, and he judged crude and ruthless power politics. He introduced realism as a foreign policy theory and guide with a reformist agenda (Reichwein 2012, 38). Taking the theoretical and practical aspects of Morgenthau's work seriously would enable today's neoclassical realists to derive theoretical assumptions as well as imperatives for practitioners. This would make NCR a more normative (and political) theory.

[Realist Theory as a Reformist Project](#)

Professor and public intellectual Morgenthau claimed to do both: explaining foreign policy as well as being an engaged political activist, i.e. intervene in foreign policy debates; to criticize dangerous and wrong (from his viewpoint), imperial, interventionist or any other form of aggressive foreign policy; to advise decision-makers on what foreign policy is and should be about. This combination of a rational and a reformist, normative strand is Morgenthau's leitmotif. This becomes obvious in the second

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edition of *Politics Among Nations*, where Morgenthau develops his theoretical foundations in the "Six Principles". In the foreword, Morgenthau explains:

When this book was written in 1947, it (...) was an experience of lonely and seemingly ineffectual reflection on the nature of international politics and on the ways by which a false conception of foreign policy (...) led inevitably to the threat and the actuality of totalitarianism and war. (...) This book was indeed, and could be nothing else but, a frontal attack against that conception (Morgenthau 1954, viii).

In the context of America's beginning involvement in Vietnam, Morgenthau writes: "(T)he theoretician of foreign policy must perform the function of an intellectual conscience which reminds the policymakers as well as the public (...) of what the sound principles of foreign policy are and in what respects and to what extent actual policies have fallen short of those principles" (Morgenthau 1962, 77).

Morgenthau defines his "Six Principles" accordingly (Morgenthau 1954, 3–13). His combination of descriptive elements about the 'is', and prescriptive, normative hopes and beliefs about the 'ought' is striking. In the second principle, for example, Morgenthau states that realists "(...) assume that rational statesmen *always* think and act in terms of interest defined as power (...)", which implies that statespersons *should* do this according to the "evidence of history" (Morgenthau 1954, 5). Per his third principle, a state's foreign policy is (and should be) guided by interests. *What* is in a state's national interest is not fixed but a matter of the political, cultural and historical context in which policy is formulated. The fourth principle guarantees that realism will, and should, guard leaders against popular fallacies, namely seemingly good humanitarian motives ending up in ideology and moralism. Similarly, the fifth principle highlights that realism can help statespersons resist the temptation to "clothe their own particular aspirations and actions in the moral purpose of the universe" (Morgenthau 1954, 10).

Prudent leaders should be aware of Weber's ethics of responsibility and the necessity of political success, which shape a state's behavior as well as the judgement of the consequences of its actions (Morgenthau 1954, 6–9). Morgenthau does not only advocate the national interest as the guideline for foreign policy. He puts himself in the position of a responsible statesperson, highlights the practical wisdom of statecraft, the qualities of rational leaders, moral principles in international politics (e.g. sovereignty), and the state's legitimacy to pursue its own national interests (Morgenthau 1950, 1951). He warns against the dangers of naïve idealism and any political ideology leading to irrational behavior, ruthless foreign policy, and war (Morgenthau 1965, 1977). These principles are aimed at policymakers to prevent mistakes, or to correct false conceptions of foreign policy.

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Today's neoclassical realists can learn from Morgenthau to reflect about foreign policy from the state's perspective and build a politically relevant theory of preventing and correcting foreign policy mistakes. Firstly, they may formulate a prescriptive ideal-type of how a state should behave given systemic and intervening variables as well as rational and normative imperatives (e.g. to prevent an ideologically driven foreign policy of expansion or interventionism). Secondly, neoclassical realists can then describe a state's actual foreign policy, to identify deviations, and to explain why states made this or that move. Finally, neoclassical realists may want to discuss the policy's consequences, advise policymakers how to correct mistakes, and offer alternatives as to the direction the state should consider given the pre-defined realist ideal-type and imperatives.

Conclusion

Realism is characterized by a duality of theory and practice oft-forgotten within the neorealist camp: explaining, problematizing and critiquing wrong and dangerous foreign policy, as well as advising policymakers on good and successful foreign policy. Neoclassical realists must not make the same mistake as their neorealist colleagues. They should take this duality seriously as a theoretical and political source of inspiration. The three-step model briefly outlined above can help neoclassical realists evaluate foreign policy and explain deviations and pathologies, but also warn against the fatal consequences of crude foreign policy – in line with realist legacy. As a reformist project, such an NCR may help foreign policy practitioners to limit or overcome domestic pathologies and re-conceptualize policy in line with *a priori* criteria of realist statecraft and normative imperatives.

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Conclusion: Listening in on the NCR Conversation

It is a time-honored disciplinary activity to critique theories produced by other scholars. Having engaged in it myself, I can hardly cast stones (Sterling-Folker 2000). Calling any particular theoretical work out for internal inconsistency, inability to explain particular events or patterns, and divergence or overlap with other theoretical perspectives is a legitimate enterprise when such work explicitly aspires to address and overcome these issues. Critique is also an activity that is consistent with the American IR discipline's penchant for theoretical debates, and without critique there would be little to motivate theoretical innovation in that context. Indeed, it was critiques of Waltz's static portrayal of world politics, and its failure to anticipate the end of the Cold War, that encouraged early NCR scholars to examine and experiment analytically with the relationship between levels of analysis. As those under attack respond, critique also leads to higher citation counts – never a bad thing when tenure and promotions are on the line.

Yet critique can also misrepresent and obscure. The desire for theory that is determinate, coherent and consistent with prior like-theories reflects a particular epistemological stance about how theorizing should proceed and be assessed. As Steve Smith observed of American IR theorizing, it “tends to operate in the space defined by rationalism; epistemologically, it is empiricist and, methodologically, it is positivist” (S. Smith 2000, 383). This would not matter so much if the American discipline did not also “serve as the gatekeepers for what counts as legitimate scholarship” (S. Smith 2000, 383). In critiques of NCR, this gatekeeping results in a peculiar bias in citations, whereby scholars outside the American discipline are rarely included, and a narrowness in theoretical expectations, whereby analytical certainty is used to harangue the activity of theory-building itself. This latter attribute is consistent with positivism, in which the application and replicability of deductive logic should, when applied to empirical events by multiple scholars, gradually and additively begin to reveal the underlying laws and principles which govern political behavior (Sterling-Folker 2017).

The problem with this idealized vision of how we theorize the world is two-fold. First, it tends to lead to a bias for mid-range theorizing, involving hypothesis testing to address empirically driven puzzles often of most import to policymakers. This has been accompanied by a decline in meta-theorizing which, according to the “end of IR theory” special issue editors, “is a discipline-wide phenomenon” and “represents a change in attitudes towards theory” (Dunne, Hansen, and Wight 2013, 406). Contributors such as Lake applaud the decline of meta-theorizing and rise of mid-range theorizing, seeing in the latter “the most progressive research in our discipline” and “the future of International Relations” (Lake 2013, 572; also: Bennett 2013). Others find these developments deeply troubling because “bracketing metatheory does not free one's work of metatheoretical constraints” but instead

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“is simply a decision not to talk about or debate one’s choices and presuppositions” (Reus-Smit 2013, 605; also: Jackson and Nexon 2013; Mearsheimer and Walt 2013). The move to mid-range theorizing thus avoids deeper meta-theoretical considerations.

Second, the idealized vision does not capture how theory-building actually develops. It treats theory-building as if it springs from an *a priori* “thing” that is separate from what scholars do or how they produce it collectively. Typically, critics posit that this “thing” has discrete assumptions and coherent hypotheses against which scholarship may be compared. Legro and Moravcsik are explicit on this point: “Whether a paradigm is conceptually productive depends on at least two related criteria, coherence and distinctiveness” (Legro and Moravcsik 1999, 9). Similarly, Narizny argues that “paradigms become logically incoherent and methodologically flawed without close attention to their conceptual boundaries” (Narizny 2017, 161–62). Hence when a paradigm’s own scholars are not coherent or distinct relative to their posited *a priori* core and that of other perspectives, the scholarship they produce and the paradigm to which they subscribe can be labeled degenerative (Legro and Moravcsik 1999) or, in Narizny’s words, “less a scientific paradigm than an invitation to methodological error” (Narizny 2017, 188).

If, however, we move away from the notion of scientific paradigms and think instead of theorizing and theory-building as an ongoing practice and process (Sterling-Folker 2009), a different picture of scholarship emerges. So it is with this forum, which does not represent or constitute a “thing” which is coherent, distinctive, and hence stabilized and certain, but rather the practice of theory-building itself. As the forum contributions underscore, NCR is not a single perspective, but an analytical umbrella and its style of theorizing is interactive and emergent. In this regard NCR is less like American realism, in which scholarship coalesces around a single author or work, and more like theorizing in IR Feminism or the English School – not quite theorizing by committee but one in which multiple scholars share a general sensibility and engage simultaneously in both analytical collaboration and competition. Indeed, while the recent work of Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell is among the best-cited examples (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016), their first book was an edited volume which represented different perspectives on NCR and multiple voices engaged in a discussion of what NCR was and could offer (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009). This was also true for Rose’s piece (Rose 1998), which was not introducing his own perspective (a point which Narizny misreads; Narizny 2017, 155–56; 170–71) but defining the activity of multiple scholars engaged in similar sorts of theorizing at the time.

The forum contributions underscore that NCR is an on-going, unsettled and indeterminate dialogue between scholars over what realism is and can do. All contributions have been shaped by the

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disciplinary critic's desire for theoretical coherence and distinctness. Should our goal be theoretical unity or analytical diversity? If we embrace diversity, how should we evaluate one another's theoretical progress? Should we prioritize mid-range theorizing and empirically driven puzzles, or metatheory and grand debates? We thus find Foulon and Meibauer arguing that NCR scholars "must carefully justify and conceptualize any additional variables they employ" in order to "avoid regressive theorizing" (forum, 20); a common NCR critique that, Onea notes, is "not likely to go away anytime soon" and hence should be "taken seriously" (forum, 9). Alternatively, Desmaele believes that NCR already offers "a coherent theory of foreign policy that consists of a series of propositions with clearly defined relations to one another" (forum, 5), while Reichwein suggests that NCR "is an analytical, problem-solving as well as reflexive and normative approach" (forum, 23). For each of the forum's contributors, then, NCR constitutes different analytical possibilities and thus reflects their differing epistemological commitments.

Their ambitions for NCR differ as well. While Onea observes that "NCR is the poster child for mid-range theories" (forum, 9), the contributions, including Onea's, push NCR toward grand theory and, at times, meta-theoretical terrain. Foulon and Meibauer see NCR as a potential bridge between Western and non-Western ways of knowing and studying IR. Reichwein argues it can serve as a "reformist project" for foreign policy practice (forum, 27). Kitchen outlines the ways in which NCR could become "a grand theory of international politics that integrates system and unit-levels" (forum, 17). Desmaele and Onea offer socialization and grand strategy (respectively) as the basis for NCR as a grand theory. It is this multiplicity, and the conversation between these scholars about it, that constitutes the theory of NCR – not some imagined *a priori* coherent and distinct analytical core. That conversation reveals the same tensions we find within larger disciplinary discussions about the role and nature of theory and how to evaluate its progress (Freyberg-Inan, Harrison, and James 2016). Ultimately, as with these larger discussions, what NCR's future is depends on what you think theory is for in the first place.

Given this diversity within NCR, this forum will disappoint those seeking analytical certainty and clear boundaries. There is, as it turns out, no single text to which we can turn for NCR's roots, nor is there a single *a priori* NCR core which determines what does or does not count as its scholarship. Instead, as Onea highlights, "NCR was, is, and will remain a family of diverse theories" (forum, 12). And if multiple scholars are simultaneously engaged in theorizing it, why would we expect or desire the kind of settled analytical sameness and certainty that critics demand? As Kitchen observes, "all theoretical enterprises are engaged in ongoing internal dialogues as they expand in scope and simultaneously seek to refine their conceptual underpinnings" (forum, 15).

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Those, however, who are looking for analytical innovation and an example of how theory-building occurs in practice will find much to inspire. The portrait of NCR that emerges from this forum is one of multiple, layered perspectives and possibilities. Many of these perspectives have been generated from outside the American discipline and are sensitive to its critics but refuse to be contained by its gatekeepers. Indeed, the fluid yet recalcitrant nature of NCR's theorizing may well be its strength since it means that NCR entails an evolving conversation about what it is and can do. And as those of us in the business of theorizing IR can attest, no IR perspective ever suffered from too much conversation.

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