

## **A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism**

BRIAN RATHBUN

*Neoclassical realism is often criticized by non-realists for being an ad hoc and theoretically degenerative effort to explain away anomalies for neorealism. In this paper, I argue instead that neoclassical realism is a logical extension and necessary part of advancing neorealism. Structural realism argues that the system constrains but does not determine state action and where foreign policy departs from what would be ideal behavior given a state's structural position, domestic politics and ideas are generally the cause. This focus on mistakes and maladaptive behavior, seen in such neoclassical realist concepts as over- or under-balancing, is necessary to avoid falling into the trap of merely using domestic politics and ideas to make neorealism more determinate and explain residual variance in foreign policy choice unaccounted for by structure. The article attempts to correct the mistaken presumption that particular paradigms own domestic politics and ideas, asserting instead that each paradigm has access to these variables but must make them their own.*

Realism has come under siege lately, not only empirically, but also theoretically. Based on epistemological criteria drawn from the philosophy of science, opponents of realism claim that the approach is a “degenerative”

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Brian Rathbun is an assistant professor at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Partisan Interventions: European Party Politics and Peace Enforcement in the Balkans* (Cornell University Press, 2004) and has published articles in a number of journals, including *International Studies Quarterly* and *Journal of Conflict Resolution*.

The author thanks the editors and anonymous reviewers of *Security Studies* for their incisive comments and the participants at the conference on “Neoclassical Realism and the State” held May 2006 at Concordia University, Montreal, for the inspiration to write the piece.

research paradigm that has lost all distinctiveness vis-à-vis its traditional and more recently developed alternatives—liberalism and constructivism, respectively.<sup>1</sup> The brunt of this criticism is borne by what are now called “neoclassical” realists who have integrated domestic politics and ideational influences into their analyses. Critics accuse these realists of *post hoc* efforts to explain away the anomalies of neorealism, making use of whatever tools are necessary to plug the holes of a sinking ship. The result is paradigmatic incoherence and indistinctiveness.

There are a number of ways that realists of all varieties could and have responded to these charges. They can claim that paradigms in the social sciences cannot be held up to the same standards of those in the natural sciences.<sup>2</sup> A little incoherence and indistinctiveness, goes the argument, are not fatal and are the best that can be expected from political science. Other realists have approached the issue more pragmatically, arguing that the theoretical preservation of the structural realist core is less important than explaining crucial outcomes in world politics.<sup>3</sup> The implication is that we should stop acting like theologians and more like creative problem solvers.

The realist reaction to recent criticism of the alleged incoherence and indistinctiveness of the paradigm has been puzzling, particularly for a group that understands politics in such a combative way. Realists have not fought back by arguing that they are in fact bound by a certain logic in their approach to international relations. Sometimes they even imply they are not. Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder decline to take part in a debate about whether they are neorealists. They claim that they are not interested in reconciling “heterogeneous arguments.”<sup>4</sup> Stephen Walt denies that a paradigm must have an uncontested “hard core,” essentially implying realism fails on such a score.<sup>5</sup> Randall Schweller sees many realist theories, again focusing more on the differences than the similarities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Vasquez, “The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative Versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz’s Balancing Proposition,” *The American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997); Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, “Is Anybody Still a Realist?” *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen M. Walt, “The Progressive Power of Realism,” *The American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997).

<sup>3</sup> See Jeffrey Taliaferro’s contribution in Peter D. Feaver et al., “Brother Can You Spare a Paradigm? (or Was Anybody Ever a Realist?),” *International Security* 25, no. 1 (2000); Randall Schweller, “The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism,” in *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field*, ed. Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 314.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, “Progressive Research on Degenerate Alliances,” *The American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997): 919–19.

<sup>5</sup> Walt, “The Progressive Power of Realism.”

<sup>6</sup> Randall L. Schweller, “New Realist Research on Alliances: Refining, Not Refuting, Waltz’s Balancing Proposition,” *The American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997).

These are all valid responses, but realists are not forced into such a posture. Neoclassical realism and even neorealism do not claim that domestic politics and ideas do not play a role in international politics. Neoclassical realism in particular can be defended as having a coherent logic that incorporates ideas and domestic politics in the way we would expect structural realism to do so. This is the natural outgrowth of neorealism, serving it in two ways. First, ideas and domestic political variables are significant factors in a state's ability to harness latent material power. Neoclassical realists simply fill out Kenneth Waltz's sparse understanding of power through reference to nationalism or state-society relations. Second, on questions other than power, it is not that ideas and domestic politics do not play a role in structural realism, only that the system is biased against such influences, so that any effect is generally circumscribed to negatively affecting foreign policy. Neoclassical realism explains when states cannot properly adapt to systemic constraints and points out the serious consequences that result.

This does not amount to explaining away the anomalies of structural realism. This incorrect conclusion is only reached when neorealism is taken as a determinative theory of behavior rather than one of constraints. When states do not respond ideally to their structural situations, neorealism tells us we should find evidence of domestic politics and ideas distorting the decision-making process. Neoclassical realism demonstrates this empirically through analyses that generally use domestic politics and ideas in a very limited way. The state is still present, only overcome. Objective reality exists, but decision making is impaired by uncertainty and the complexity of the environment.

Nevertheless, if the system is weak enough to allow significant departures from the stylized neorealist depiction of unitary actors and objective perception, then neoclassical realism would be difficult if not impossible to distinguish from liberalism and constructivism, two approaches that place more emphasis than realism on agency. The other necessary component of neoclassical realism therefore is to demonstrate that when domestic politics and ideas interfere substantially in foreign policy decision making, the system punishes states. Stated differently, if leaders veer too much into the theoretical territory of liberalism and constructivism in which state interests are sacrificed for parochial interests and subjective ideas that distract from objective reality are internalized, there will be consequences. The more the state comes to be captured by parochial actors, and the more elites come to believe in alternative social constructions of reality different from the objective reality outlined by neorealism, the more severe the penalty. The result is actually to vindicate Waltz, not undermine him. We should understand neoclassical realism not as a distinct variety of realism but rather as the next generation of structural realism and reflective of a common and coherent logic.

Neoclassical realism, when understood in this way, serves several purposes. First, it becomes distinct from liberalism and constructivism even while it integrates variables generally associated with the latter paradigms. Second, it provides a rationale for the inclusion of domestic politics and ideas and avoids the accusation of either adding *ad hoc* variables to indeterminate structural explanations or providing *post hoc* justifications for the empirical “anomalies” of neorealism, something on which I believe existing understandings of neoclassical realism fall short. Third, it reveals the fact that despite all the different realisms with adjectives, realism shows a remarkably coherent logic. Neoclassical realism serves and vindicates structural realism. The two should not be considered opponents, rivals, or even distinct. At most, they represent a division of labor. At their core, all neoclassical realists are structural realists as well. It is not what neoclassical realism is called but what it does. A rose by any other name is still a rose.<sup>7</sup>

In the sections that follow, I make the case for the theoretical coherence, distinctiveness, and progressiveness of realist theory, arguing that neoclassical realism is the logical outgrowth of neorealism. I first review the claims of critics who argue that neoclassical realism creates problems of incoherence and indistinctiveness for neorealism by virtue of its departure from the systemic level of analysis and a materialist ontology. I make the case that domestic politics and ideas are part of the common property of all paradigms to be used in ways that match the logic of the approach. Having dispensed of the notion that structural realism is by definition incapable of making reference to domestic politics and ideas, I then review the often misunderstood logic of Waltz’s conception of the paradigm so as to develop an argument

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<sup>7</sup> I should stress that my point is not to identify a litmus test for all neoclassical realists. The aim of the article is to identify neoclassical realism with an effort to incorporate ideas and domestic politics into structural realism and defend it from the accusation that this is theoretically degenerative. Neoclassical realist works do this in one of two ways, but they need not do both. Nor is there a reason to expect that if one of an author’s pieces meets these standards, subsequent works must also. Neoclassical realism straddles the lines among offensive, defensive, and classical realism with prominent authors in all of the camps, as Taliaferro argues. To the extent that some neoclassical authors identify more with classical or offensive realism as opposed to Waltz’s defensive variant of realism on certain issues, they might not agree about what constitutes optimal foreign policy. Consequently, certain phenomena that other neoclassical authors try to explain, such as imperial overstretch, might not be regarded in fact as poor foreign policy strategies that need to be accounted for. For instance, Wohlforth’s argument that balances rarely form against rising hegemony, which reflects more of a classical realist premise, would imply this is not a theoretical anomaly; though for neoclassical realists who are also defensive realists, such as Christensen or Snyder, it is (see discussion below). However, even those neoclassical realists who associate more with classical realism still make contributions to structural realism as neoclassical realists, primarily for their insights into structural realism’s key factor of relative power. As a neoclassical realist, Wohlforth still makes a contribution to structural realism by problematizing the perception of relative power. There are also certain examples of maladaptive behavior, such as underbalancing, that all neoclassical realists would regard as anomalous and seek to explain regardless of subtype. Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, “Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited,” *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2000); William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24, no. 1 (1999).

about how it incorporates these factors while remaining within the bounds of the approach. I maintain that structural realism can, and in fact must, utilize domestic politics and ideas to explain why states do not heed the imperatives of the system, but I also show that the system punishes states as a result. The final section shows that this is precisely what neoclassical realism attempts to do. I review some of the most prominent works to show that they adopt a generally implicit, although sometimes explicit, notion of optimal foreign policy that an objective unitary state would pursue. Then they introduce domestic politics and ideas as explanations for why this is not the case.

My argument is therefore prescriptive and descriptive at the same time. I argue how structural realism must use domestic politics and ideas to be coherent but find that it already meets these demands. The exercise, however, is still needed because the true logic of neoclassical realism, how it serves neorealism, and what is necessary for it to do to make itself distinctive has not been systematically laid out. Even some of the self-understandings of neoclassical realists about what unites them are faulty. Without such an exercise, we are led toward much cruder theorizing, orienting ourselves along false lines as to whether certain factors in international politics “matter.” This is a sterile way of framing a much more interesting and ultimately productive debate about how and when this is the case. My aims are purely theoretical and epistemological. I do not offer conclusions on the empirical validity of realism. But understanding the logic of paradigms is still crucial, as these approaches serve as important tool kits from which to begin contemplating how to explain new phenomena of interest, help organize our thoughts about complex phenomena, and alert us to the meta-issues in our research.

#### INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY: PARADIGMS AND CONCEPTUAL APPROPRIATION

The most trenchant criticism of neoclassical realism has come from Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, whose critique focuses on the incorporation of domestic and ideational variables, which they claim rightfully belong to the “liberal” and “epistemic” paradigms, respectively.<sup>8</sup> These authors identify two key criteria for the health of a research paradigm: distinctiveness and coherence. Although it might make for more accurate explanations of important events, the use of domestic politics and various forms of ideas by realists, neoclassical realists in particular, is epistemologically degenerative, as it becomes more difficult for us to draw the lines between realism on

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<sup>8</sup> Legro and Moravcsik, “Is Anybody Still a Realist?”

the one hand and liberalism and constructivism on the other.<sup>9</sup> If realists can utilize variations in state-society relations as key explanatory factors, they are no longer realists but rather liberals. If realists can point to variations in the definition of state interests that result from ideological differences, they are constructivists. Moravcsik and Legro argue that realists do not have a theoretical rationale for the inclusion of these kinds of causal factors, making their use at best *ad hoc* as incorporating these variables does not build toward any generalizable theory. At worst, it is *post hoc*, an effort to cover over and explain away outcomes that do not meet theoretical expectations. Realists should return to their roots, which are defined, although not explicitly, as the structuralism and materialism of the Waltzian variant of realism. In this version of the paradigm, states are unitary actors who make decisions based on their position vis-à-vis others in the distribution of power. Reference to domestic politics and ideas contradict, the argument goes, violate core assumptions about the primacy of material power and the black-box nature of international politics.

The question about the incoherence and distinctiveness of realism is important, but Legro and Moravcsik miss the mark in many respects. The source of much of the confusion surrounding the status and progressiveness of realism is their mistaken notion that certain paradigms have exclusive rights to the building blocks of international relations and that we identify, develop, and classify arguments by virtue of the “stuff” those paradigms use. This is the underlying implicit principle driving the claims about both incoherence and indistinctiveness. If realism is equivalent to objectivity in perception, materialism in ontology, and the state as a unitary actor, then any departure from this baseline is *de facto* incoherent. Blending in variables that are rightly the property of other paradigms makes realism indistinct.

Legro and Moravcsik argue that realists cannot make reference to domestic politics without becoming indistinguishable from liberals. This strategy of appropriation is evident in another piece by Moravcsik defending the liberal paradigm.<sup>10</sup> He asserts that liberalism is the proper home and inspiration of any argument in which individuals (at whatever level of aggregation) are the key actors in world affairs, that domestic institutions determine who has access to the state, and that state preferences drive international relations. This is tantamount to claiming domestic politics for a single paradigm. Any reference to actors other than the state or to variety in state institutions disqualifies an argument or theory from being realist and makes it automatically

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. What Legro and Moravcsik call the “epistemic” paradigm could loosely be equated with constructivism, although the definition is broad enough to include cognitivist approaches as well.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997).

liberal. Realists are also chided for being constructivists when they utilize ideas in their analyses. For instance, Walt's balance-of-threat is often referred to as constructivist in inspiration due to its emphasis on the "perception of aggressive intentions."<sup>11</sup>

The strategy of appropriation is extremely shaky epistemologically. All paradigms of international relations have access to domestic politics and ideas, which are not owned by a particular paradigm. Each paradigm must use these factors in a way that serves and reflects the logic of its approach. The crucial difference is the "how," not so much the "what" of a paradigm. The utilization must be more than just additive, not just icing on the theoretical cake. It must be embedded in core assumptions and axioms, the starting points of the paradigm. Constructivism utilizes ideas because it stresses the social nature of international relations.<sup>12</sup> Social construction is a process in which groups create realities that are no more than the collectively held ideas of members of a group. The focus on ideas emerges from the logic of the paradigm, not by theoretical fiat. Constructivism uses ideas in a particular way and particular types of ideas—the social ideas of norms, values, and culture that are intersubjectively shared. This is how constructivism differs from other approaches that stress ideas in a less social sense, such as cognitivism in which ideas are tools for decision makers to help reduce the complexity of decision making. Rationalism understands ideas as private information used by strategic actors in interdependent situations.<sup>13</sup>

The same is true for domestic politics. Constructivists often stress the importance of socially constructed political and military cultures that guide nation-states in their foreign policies and distinguish them from others.<sup>14</sup> Systemic norms resonate due to ideological valences amongst particular domestic actors who engage in an intense domestic struggle over implementation.<sup>15</sup> Cognitivists argue that particular institutional systems are better or worse at correcting cognitive tendencies toward simplistic and erroneous decision

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<sup>11</sup> Legro and Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?"; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 36–38, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997); Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992); Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*.

<sup>13</sup> Brian C. Rathbun, "Uncertain About Uncertainty: Understanding the Multiple Meanings of a Crucial Concept in International Relations Theory," *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>14</sup> Thomas U. Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Peter J. Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New Directions in World Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998); Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

making. Accountability enhances cognitive complexity and rational decision making.<sup>16</sup> Just as constructivism does not own ideas, liberalism does not own domestic politics.

Domestic politics and ideas are fair game for realism, and neoclassical realists have taken up this mantle. Most obviously, neoclassical realism uses domestic politics and ideas to flesh out the concept of power, the central variable in neorealism. Drawing and improving on insights of classical realism, it shows how domestic politics and ideas are key elements in the process of self-help inherent to an anarchic system. Anarchy in structural realism provides strong incentives for states to accumulate power, but we cannot understand power without reference to what happens within states and how people think and what they believe.<sup>17</sup> Waltz argues that the distribution of power was the only element of the international system that varied and that a country's position in the hierarchy was a major constraint on that country's behavior.<sup>18</sup> However, in his elegant but sparse book, he did little to define power. A first generation of scholars sought to refine the notion of power in a way that matched the materialist focus of Waltz by adding "structural modifiers."<sup>19</sup> Walt and Stephen Van Evera argue that power was not just a function of aggregate economic and military capabilities but rather a reflection of other factors such as the offense-defense balance.<sup>20</sup> An adversary was not really powerful if its resources could not be used to inflict material harm in military missions whether due to geography or the military advantages of the defense.<sup>21</sup> Power is powerful only if it can be used.

These were all welcome contributions, but the constituent elements of power still remained incomplete. A second generation, the neoclassical realists, have continued in this path by drawing on Hans Morgenthau and other classical realists and stressing how domestic politics and ideas can contribute to (or detract from) power.<sup>22</sup> This is the first of two major contributions of

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<sup>16</sup> James M. Goldgeier and Philip E. Tetlock, "Psychology and International Relations Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001).

<sup>17</sup> Just how much power, however, is the source of dispute in the paradigm between offensive and defensive realists, a debate I do not engage in here. See Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy."

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1st ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

<sup>19</sup> Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy," 136-38. Taliaferro refers to these authors as neoclassical realists, but I would reserve this term for the next generation of scholars that incorporated domestic politics and ideas into its notions of power. We will see that this categorization reflects a mistaken view that all realist theories of foreign policy are neoclassical. Ultimately, however, my point is that all this work, regardless of label, builds in the same direction.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994).

<sup>22</sup> Hans Joachim Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Knopf, distributed by Random House, 1972), chaps. 8, 9.



neoclassical realism to neorealism. This should not be seen as a major break from previous research but rather the natural progression of the refinement begun by others. These scholars have continued to problematize power as an aggregate variable. Power can be used only if it can be mobilized. Two variables are particularly important for this: the state's extractive ability and inspirational capacity.<sup>23</sup>

States need to be able to reallocate societal resources otherwise spent on consumption to security and war-making functions. Variation on this dimension reflects institutional differences amongst countries. State strength is not a constant. When states grow in power vis-à-vis society, a country increases in power, even if its aggregate level of resources remains constant. This changes its relative power and affects its foreign policy behavior. Fareed Zakaria maintains that American foreign policy isolationist reluctance to expand foreign policy goals was the proper Realpolitik course for a country with a weak state; there was not enough power yet to do so. As America strengthened, its power increased, and its foreign policy changed.<sup>24</sup> It was able to extract wealth necessary for a more expansive agenda. Jeffrey Taliaferro argues that states that are more capable of extraction are better able to innovate militarily to meet security challenges by emulating the practices of the best performing states, but this is not equally the case due to variations in domestic institutional structures.<sup>25</sup> Much of this work owes a debt of gratitude to Robert Gilpin. While his pioneering work was dedicated to investigating the structural forces that lead seemingly inevitably to the recurrent cycles of rising powers and declining hegemons, Gilpin offered insights on the changing and complicated concept of power that were an inspiration to neoclassical realists who followed. Power is hard to maintain as technological diffusion erodes advantages and more resources are dedicated to consumption at home, altering the guns-butter balance.<sup>26</sup>

States can coerce society into spending these resources, but they can also try persuasion. With extractive capacity, a state can depend on its ability

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<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Taliaferro, "State Building for Future Wars: Neoclassical Realism and the Resource-Extractive State," *Security Studies* 15, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>24</sup> Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> Taliaferro, "State Building for Future Wars." It should be noted, however, that there are prominent authors who identify with neoclassical realism, who might argue that state extraction, while efficient in the short-term, is ultimately counterproductive. Friedberg argues that the freer economic system was the source of economic growth and technological dynamism that allowed the United States to sustain its efforts during the Cold War and ultimately overcome the more centralized and extractive Soviet state Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). It is possible that the optimal strategy varies for cold wars and potential "hot" wars. Regardless, as I am not applying a litmus test approach to neoclassical realism or presuming that all of an author's work take the path I have suggested, this is not a significant problem for the paradigm in my view.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

to inspire its public in its cause. Mobilization is served by the formation of a collective identity, particularly one juxtaposed negatively to potential adversaries. This explains the neoclassical realist interest in nationalism, which draws from classical insights.<sup>27</sup> States can use nationalism as a tool for increasing the power of the military. Barry Posen contends that nationalism was a result of the realization that soldiers imbued with collective solidarity were capable of military operations that other soldiers were not.<sup>28</sup> Nationalism is necessary to convince publics of the importance of military preparations for which they must bear the cost. A contrast with an “other” whose threatening policies are argued to be a reflection of its very nature are crucial, even if the conflict reflects structural circumstances. Adversaries are “useful,” as Christensen demonstrates. Other ideas that resonate with local culture are useful as well. Colin Dueck argues that liberal internationalism was necessary to convince the United States to depart from its isolationist past and engage fully in international politics to meet genuine security threats.<sup>29</sup> To the extent that democracies are more capable of instilling civic solidarity based on collective participation, they might have an advantage in war fighting, even while holding material resources constant.<sup>30</sup>

What is striking about these works is the very limited use of ideas. In these works, identity and ideology are used instrumentally as part of self-help. According to these scholars, these dynamics are driven by the structural force of anarchy. For Posen, states are encouraged to emulate the best practices of others or else find themselves at a disadvantage.<sup>31</sup> The existence of nationalism is not evidence that the world is socially constructed but rather that anarchy compels the utilization of social construction techniques to come to terms with objectively real systemic constraints. Schweller argues that this competitive dynamic continued to accelerate, reaching its zenith with fascism as the perfect mobilization strategy.<sup>32</sup> The power of ideas is confined nationally and is put in the service of material power mobilization and the will to use it. There is no notion of ideas being used to co-opt potential adversaries

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<sup>27</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 5th ed., chap. 8

<sup>28</sup> Barry R. Posen, “Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power,” *International Security* 18, no. 2 (1993).

<sup>29</sup> Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> On the relationship of regime type to war-fighting advantage, see Michael C. Desch, “Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters,” *International Security* 27, no. 2 (2002); Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State*; Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, III, “Democracy and Battlefield Military Effectiveness,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 3 (1998). Of course this is balanced by the fact that democracies might be more fickle, which is why their leaders must often resort to threat inflation in the first place. See the discussion below of Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> Posen, “Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power.”

<sup>32</sup> Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006), 117–25.

in the form of “soft power.”<sup>33</sup> This would go beyond the neorealist boundary. Nevertheless, ideas do not necessarily have to be used instrumentally in neoclassical realism, although putting them to work for any other purpose requires more delicate handling. This brings us to the second contribution of neoclassical realism and requires us to have a complete understanding of Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*.

#### WHAT NEOREALISM IS, WHAT NEOCLASSICAL REALISM ISN’T

Having argued that the very inclusion of domestic politics and ideas in realist analyses, even neorealist ones, is not *ipso facto* inappropriate, understanding how structural realism might do so without going beyond the bounds of the paradigm is still necessary.<sup>34</sup> Incorporating these phenomena in the mobilization of material power is one way but not the only one. In order to do so, it is necessary to clearly understand the logic of neorealism, as defined by the theory’s most rigorous and influential voice, Kenneth Waltz. Much of the confusion about the epistemological status of neorealism and its relationship to neoclassical realism surrounds the issue of how determinate the former is meant to be and what determinacy in fact means. Critics of neorealism miss the fact that the theory is one of constraints and incentives and therefore does not offer determinate expectations of state behavior. Neoclassical realists sometimes mistakenly argue that because of this, neorealism does not have any relevance for theories of foreign policy.

Structural realism maintains that the anarchic structure of world politics places all states under certain constraints.<sup>35</sup> States are forced to fend for themselves in a world in which no one can be counted on to protect them. Assuming states want to survive, the system therefore provides certain incentives to states. First, states need to accumulate power to realize their goals. This is the process of self-help. Second, domestic politics should not be allowed to intrude in decision making because of the stakes. This is what Waltz implies when he argues that the system provides an incentive for functional similarity, what is sometimes called the “black-box” or “billiard ball” assumption.<sup>36</sup> If domestic politics is anything more than the transmission belt for translating these systemic pressures into policy, domestic politics is a source of variation in foreign policy and contestation over its goals, of functional

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<sup>33</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> I am using “structural realism” and “neorealism” interchangeably. I should stress that I am primarily discussing Waltz’s version of neorealism, alleged departures from which have drawn the most criticism. Waltzian realism serves as the basis for the “true” realism, particularly for Legro and Moravcsik.

<sup>35</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, chaps. 5, 6.

<sup>36</sup> J. David Singer, “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,” *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (1961).

dissimilarity. The implication is that states must guard the interests of society, sometimes against the will of petty, parochial interests. A state should act as a unitary actor protecting a country's national interest, understood as more than just the aggregation of the preferences of individuals and groups in society. Third, states should judge and interpret their environment as objectively as possible, as mistakes can have serious consequences. The system provides incentives for rationality, understood as objectively understanding the implications of anarchy without illusions.

The second and third points are sometimes understood as stand-alone assumptions of realism, but this is not the case for two reasons. First, they flow logically from the importance placed on anarchy and its effects. If there were no structural force of anarchy, there would be no reason for realists to have these expectations. The second and third points therefore can only be considered assumptions if taken in tandem with the premise of anarchy. Not every argument that takes the state seriously as a unitary actor is neorealist, only those that contend the state is encouraged by the anarchic nature of international politics to act in a unitary fashion. Not every argument stressing the importance of objective perception is realist either. For instance, rationalist scholars have constructed a paradigm based on the process of signaling and screening that is not realist even though it does not problematize the interpretation of information.

Unitary actors and objective perception are not really assumptions, but incentives provided to states by the system. Assumptions imply neorealism must actually argue that states perceive objectively and rationally and act in a unitary fashion.<sup>37</sup> However, structural constraints are just that. The system offers incentives to states, but it does not determine a state's actions. Stacie Goddard and Daniel Nexon trace Waltz's debt to structural-functional approaches to politics.<sup>38</sup> Waltz writes continuously that structure "disposes" and "constrains" but does not determine.<sup>39</sup> Waltz uses the analogy of a firm being "pressed by market forces" but ultimately having the ability to choose.<sup>40</sup> The system encourages states to do certain things, though they might not. The system is not determinative in the sense that it does not do states' work for them.<sup>41</sup> Self-help is implemented through a policy process, as is any other

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<sup>37</sup> Articles that review the paradigm and list a number of its crucial propositions often make both these mistakes. This includes both realists and critics of realism. See, for instance, John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994). Legro and Moravcsik fall into this trap, which is the reason why they claim that realism is a strictly materialist and systemic paradigm Legro and Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?"

<sup>38</sup> Stacie E. Goddard and Daniel H. Nexon, "Paradigm Lost? Reassessing Theory of International Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 1 (2005). See also Schweller, "The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism," 319.

<sup>39</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 65, 69, 72.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>41</sup> Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998); Jennifer Sterling-Folker, "Realist Environment, Liberal Process, and Domestic-Level Variables,"

element of politics. States are responsible for mobilizing resources to respond to threats. States are encouraged to view their international situation objectively and draw the proper influences. The system will not do so. The anarchic environment is primarily but indirectly causal while the policy-making process is secondarily but directly causal.<sup>42</sup> Because structural forces do not determine but rather constrain, structural realism is just as much a prescriptive as an explanatory paradigm. Neorealism provides guidelines about what states should do given the nature of world politics. Of neorealism, Aaron Friedberg writes, "It aims to demonstrate how power *should* be evaluated by detached, rational observers rather than to determine how it has been or is being weighed by residents of the real political world."<sup>43</sup>

Because anarchy is the driving factor in realism from which unitary actor and rationalism "assumptions" flow, and because anarchy is not determinative, nothing in neorealism leads us to expect the absence of domestic politics or ideas. We would only expect structural realists to understand the state as an iron-clad unitary actor if they assume anarchy is determinative, which they do not. The same is true of objective perceptions. Waltz argues that states do not act with "perfect knowledge and wisdom" and may or may not perceive the structure in which they act.<sup>44</sup> States have an incentive to limit outside influence and perceive their environment objectively, but this will not necessarily happen. Neorealism is not a "rationalist" paradigm, even if the system rewards rationalism because there is an objective material reality.<sup>45</sup> Rose writes that in "the neoclassical realist world leaders can be constrained by both international and domestic politics," but the same was always true of neorealism.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the incorporation of domestic politics and ideas in neorealism is not automatically theoretically inappropriate.

If the system is not determinative, theoretical expectations about state behavior cannot be either. In Waltz's famous glib line, "We cannot know what state X will do on Tuesday."<sup>47</sup> This, however, has led many to the false conclusion that neorealism is not relevant for foreign policy and that neoclassical realism's role is to step into that gap. Taliaferro implies that neoclassical realism is any realist theory of foreign policy (as opposed to international relations), a definition which misses its distinctive and common

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*International Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1997); Taliaferro, "State Building for Future Wars." See also Peter Feaver, "Brother Can You Spare a Paradigm?"

<sup>42</sup> Sterling-Folker, "Realist Environment," 22.

<sup>43</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 12.

<sup>44</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 92.

<sup>45</sup> Schweller, "The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism"; Taliaferro, "State Building for Future Wars." Elman disagrees Colin Elman, "Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?" *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (1996): 7-53.

<sup>46</sup> Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," 152.

<sup>47</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 121.

interest in incorporating domestic politics and ideas.<sup>48</sup> Neoclassical realism often focuses on foreign policy but that is not what makes it neoclassical. Other understandings also fall short. Neoclassical realism, as it is sometimes argued, uses domestic politics and ideas to fill out the incomplete picture begun by structural realism. In this view, neoclassical realists agree with Waltz that the system should be the starting point of any analysis.<sup>49</sup> On this, they are on solid ground. Neoclassical realists all believe in the importance of structure. Neoclassical realism is more than just a more rigorous and scientific form of classical realism, as has sometimes been implied.<sup>50</sup>

The argument does go further, defining neoclassical realism as filling in for the indeterminacy of neorealism. Rose writes, “[S]ystemic pressures and incentives may shape the broad contours and general direction of foreign policy without being strong or precise enough to determine the specific details of state behavior.”<sup>51</sup> This quote implies that domestic politics and ideas explain the residual variance, as it were. Colin Elman makes a similar claim when he argues that domestic variables can be “layered in” to flush out and make neorealism more determinate.<sup>52</sup> Foreign policy is simply too micro-level for a structural theory. Often in this view, structure compels states to act as unitary, rational actors in situations of a high level of threat, but when these conditions are not present, other factors enter into the analysis.<sup>53</sup>

Neoclassical realism defined in this way creates problems about what it must do and what it actually does. If neoclassical realism were only about supplementing structural realism’s indeterminacy in instances in which structure is weak, then it truly would be *ad hoc*. There would be no rationale for the use of domestic politics and ideas except to fill in for the lack of expectations of neorealism nor would there be any limitation on their incorporation. It would be difficult if not impossible to distinguish from liberalism and constructivism, views of international politics that the system is indeterminate and does not place serious material constraints on state behavior. Both liberalism and constructivism define a world that is really for the making by the constituent actors. For liberalism, the character of international politics is a reflection of the interests of states. These state interests in turn are the aggregation of individual preferences through domestic institutions that privilege some over others. For constructivism, the nature of international relations is a product of social meanings that emerge from interaction among states. Both

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<sup>48</sup> Schweller, “The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism,” 313; Taliaferro, “Security Seeking under Anarchy:”

<sup>49</sup> Schweller, “The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism”; Taliaferro, “State Building for Future Wars,” 479-80; Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” 146.

<sup>50</sup> Schweller, “The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism,” 313; Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*.

<sup>51</sup> Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” 146. See also Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*; Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” 19.

<sup>52</sup> Elman, “Horses for Courses.”

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

are primarily agent-driven paradigms, even though they make reference to certain structural factors.<sup>54</sup>

We can understand the driving force of state actions along a continuum in which material structure is completely determinative at one hand and completely indeterminate at the other. At this latter end, state action would be a product of the pluralistic domestic politics described by liberalism or the social process described by constructivism. If neoclassical realism is just a matter of filling in for the indeterminacy of neorealism, it might be located at some point between these two poles.<sup>55</sup> Elman contends that the line may be difficult to find but can be drawn where the analysis is “based primarily on [states’] strategic situation and an assessment of the external environment.”<sup>56</sup> But the question remains: where does that point fall exactly (or even roughly)? When does an explanation go too far to be considered realism of any kind? There is no theoretical answer to this question.

I would argue, when Waltz writes that structural realism is not a theory of foreign policy, he does not mean that neorealism never has expectations of what the system prefers in terms of micro-level behavior, only that the system does not directly force a behavior’s implementation. The problem is not the precision of the paradigm’s expectations so much as the certainty that certain behaviors will occur given that the system cannot force anything. If this is not Waltz’s meaning, neoclassical realism opens itself up to the critique identified above—any use of domestic politics or ideas is by definition an *ad hoc* effort to explain residual variance, and distinguishing neoclassical realism from liberalism or constructivism is impossible.

Part of the problem lies with the ambivalence and ambiguity of some of Waltz’s writing and what is meant by indeterminacy. Waltz writes, “A theory of international politics bears on the foreign policies of nations while claiming to explain only certain aspects of them.”<sup>57</sup> This could mean either that his theory does not purport to explain any elements of foreign policy because the system does not offer such specific guidance or that structure does not force foreign policy outcomes because though incentives are offered, domestic politics and ideas interfere.<sup>58</sup> In some instances, Waltz seems to imply the former, such as when he identifies theories of foreign policy by definition

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<sup>54</sup> David Dessler, “What’s at Stake in the Agent-Structure Debate?” *International Organization* 43, no. 3 (1989); Ole Jacob Sending, “Constitution, Choice and Change: Problems with the ‘Logic of Appropriateness’ and Its Use in Constructivist Theory,” *European Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 4 (2002); Jennifer Sterling-Folker, “Competing Paradigms or Birds of a Feather? Constructivism and Neoliberal Institutionalism Compared,” *International Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2000).

<sup>55</sup> Rose implies this when he writes that “neoclassical realists occupy a middle ground between pure structural theorists and constructivists.” Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” 152.

<sup>56</sup> Elman, “Horses for Courses,” 38–39.

<sup>57</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 72.

<sup>58</sup> James D. Fearon, “Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Theories of International Relations,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998).

as theories at the national level.<sup>59</sup> In writing that if discontinuities in systems occur (that is, similarly situated states pursue different policies), the causes are to be found at the unit level, Waltz is endorsing the latter view. This is the argument he relies on when responding to Elman's criticism.<sup>60</sup> Neorealism often provides a baseline for what is the best choice given a particular structural situation.<sup>61</sup> There is a correct answer, as it were, for foreign policy. Structural realism does and indeed must provide a theory of foreign policy, albeit an optimal one that we do not necessarily expect to occur empirically. Waltz writes, "[C]lear perception of constraints provides many clues to the expected reaction of states, but by itself the theory cannot explain those reactions. They depend not only on the international constraints but also on the characteristics of states."<sup>62</sup> The clear implication is that if countries perceived objectively, we would have a very good idea about their foreign policy, but we cannot guarantee this.

Once we acknowledge that neorealism understands structure as not directly causal or completely constraining and that it is relevant to (even if not a determinative theory of) foreign policy, we are led logically to the conclusion that when domestic politics and ideas are found to have an impact in particular limited circumstances, the claims of neorealism are strengthened. Neorealism provides in many cases a baseline understanding of the behavior best suited to a state's systemic circumstances if the guidelines of the system are followed, but we only expect this to occur if states come together as unitary actors that perceive their situation objectively and accurately. If that is not the foreign policy chosen, Waltz advises us to look to domestic politics and ideas. In his firm analogy, whether and how well a firm responds to market pressures depends on "internal organization and management."<sup>63</sup> Ideas and subjectivity could have been just as equally included in this passage. Both are maladaptive. Jennifer Sterling-Folker argues that realism urges us to investigate domestic processes and vested interests when states do not adapt to their environment. States' "identities, interests and behaviors become tied to process and it then acts as an opaque filter through which assessments, choices, and judgments are being made regarding the international realm. Domestic process would inhibit actors from ever objectively judging choices, behaviors, and outcomes." Domestic politics explain why foreign policy choices

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<sup>59</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 72.

<sup>60</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "International Politics Is Not Foreign Policy," *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (1996).

<sup>61</sup> This is of course predicated on a characterization of just how dangerous the system is and the interests of the states in it. Here there exists a lot of variation in realism, a point stressed by neoclassical realists Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994); Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy." The valid question of whether realism requires a uniform theory of preferences or a common notion of how dangerous anarchy is not addressed in this article as I do not consider it part of the core logic that animates neoclassical realism.

<sup>62</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 22.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.



are “objectively inefficient.”<sup>64</sup> In situations of optimal responses, we should see states acting in a unitary and perspicacious fashion. In the instances of poor adjustment to the system, we should see domestic politics overcoming the state and ideas interrupting accurate readings of interests.<sup>65</sup> This recognition that the primary role of domestic politics and ideas was to distort was present in the very first works of neorealism, such as Posen’s explanation of military doctrine.<sup>66</sup> The state adjusted its strategy to the material constraints of the distribution of power, military technology, and geography, but it had to prevail over parochial interests such as a military that had other, more self-serving agendas.

This does not amount, however, to the *post hoc* use of domestic politics and ideas to explain away anomalies so as to save the paradigm. This is the conclusion reached by John Vasquez and Legro and Moravcsik because they mischaracterize neorealism.<sup>67</sup> Non-optimal response to systemic constraints is not an anomaly to neorealism because it does not have determinate expectations about which foreign policy will be chosen and whether it will be ideal. But choices not best suited to structural circumstances indicate of the presence of domestic politics and ideas. Neorealism therefore must make reference to these factors in its explanations in these instances so to stay true to the paradigm. Otherwise it would be inconsistent.<sup>68</sup>

Structural realism is still faced with a theoretical problem, however. Just how much room can domestic politics and ideas be given without indicating that material structural forces really do not play a role? Their influence, if extreme, seems to indicate that the system is not a constraint at all. To argue that structure is not determinative is not to say it is inconsequential or weak. States, like firms, still go out of business if they do not heed the incentives of the system.<sup>69</sup> This is why Waltz stresses the mechanisms of competition and socialization as the way by which systems exert their effects. If states do not obey the laws of structure, they are selected out.<sup>70</sup> As Sterling-Folker so wonderfully and pithily puts it, states are “free to act as they wish.” They

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<sup>64</sup> Sterling-Folker, “Realist Environment,” 19–20.

<sup>65</sup> Schweller, “The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism.”

<sup>66</sup> Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

<sup>67</sup> Legro and Moravcsik, “Is Anybody Still a Realist?”; Vasquez, “The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative Versus Progressive Research Programs.”

<sup>68</sup> Although I am not attempting to defend neoclassical realism on Lakatosian grounds, this does remove the objection that neoclassical realism is degenerative as it does not uncover new empirical facts but rather just solves theoretical anomalies. If we understand that these are not in fact anomalies for neorealism but rather expected behaviors when domestic politics and ideas intrude, then the problem of added empirical and predictive value does not arise.

<sup>69</sup> Monten uses the same argument to distinguish Thucydides from Waltz. Jonathan Monten, “Thucydides and Modern Realism,” *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>70</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 76–77.

are also “free to die.”<sup>71</sup> This selection provides observable lessons for others, which is what Waltz means by socialization. Neorealism cannot, as Elman advises, provide an account of when systemic variables alone suffice and when domestic-level variables need to be included, but it can point to the consequences when the latter are allowed too much influence.<sup>72</sup> Structural realism leads us to the assumption that if domestic politics are allowed to distract from genuine state interests, and if ideas are allowed to color objective perceptions to a significant degree, the system will discipline the state through these mechanisms in the form of foreign policy failure. The punishment will fit the crime so that we expect a direct relationship between the extent to which domestic politics and ideas come to play a role and the severity of the rebuke. As distractions, domestic politics and ideas could “even serve as a barrier to their survival during times of major external crisis.”<sup>73</sup>

## TWO PARTS OF A WHOLE: STRUCTURAL AND NEOCLASSICAL REALISM

For structural realists to make use of domestic politics and ideas, they have to serve the purposes of validating the central premises of structural realism: anarchy is a real force, not totally constraining, but one that cannot be ignored without severe consequences. This is in fact what neoclassical realism does. If it did anything less, we could not distinguish it from liberalism and, in many instances, constructivism. We, therefore, should understand neoclassical realism as playing a key role in theoretically advancing structural realism. Neoclassical realism is not a separate variety of realism nor is it degenerative. In fact, it is a natural and progressive next step. Neoclassical realism does more than refine neorealism’s notion of power or explore the transmission belt between structural forces and actual foreign policy through the intervening process of domestic politics.<sup>74</sup> It shows how domestic politics and ideas are generally to blame when the system’s imperatives are not met. Neoclassical realists offer, in Schweller’s words, a “theory of mistakes.” A passage from his book on “underbalancing” speaks more broadly to the general approach of neoclassical realism: “When a state underbalances it either misperceives the intentions of the rising power as more benign than they in fact are or, if it correctly perceives the threat, does not adopt prudent policies to protect itself for reasons of domestic politics.”<sup>75</sup> In what is arguably the first and

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<sup>71</sup> Sterling-Folker, “Realist Environment,” 19. Waltz writes similarly that states are free to “do any fool thing,” but “they are likely to be rewarded for behavior that is responsive to structural pressures and punished for behavior that is not.” Kenneth N. Waltz, “Evaluating Theories,” *The American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (1997): 915.

<sup>72</sup> Elman, “Horses for Courses.”

<sup>73</sup> Sterling-Folker, “Realist Environment,” 19.

<sup>74</sup> Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” 146–47.

<sup>75</sup> Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*, 10.

perhaps clearest statement of neoclassical realism, Friedberg explains how the foreign policy process of Great Britain was “fragmented, both intellectually and bureaucratically” with “many ‘eyes’ and with more (or perhaps less) than a single ‘brain.’” The two evils are domestic politics and subjectivity, implied by the brain and eyes, respectively.

In order for neoclassical realism to incorporate domestic variables and ideas in a way that is not *ad hoc*, these factors must be seen as distracting from ideal foreign policy as understood by neorealism, not as explaining the residual variance. Besides the refinement of the concept of power, this should be the primary rationale for the inclusion of domestic politics and ideas in neoclassical realism. Systemic forces push toward particular outcomes, but other factors intrude. Therefore, realism requires and neorealism provides a theory of foreign policy under particular, stylized circumstances of unitary, objective states. This provides a baseline to show that the impact of domestic politics and ideas is generally to distort the power of structural constraints and push toward misperception and errors. Although neoclassical realists often claim that neorealism is not relevant for foreign policy, they actually use it as an implicit (and increasingly explicit) basis for showing the generally negative influence of domestic politics and ideas. This is a good thing.

If we understand neoclassical realism in this way, we know an argument in this vein from a theoretical starting point along the continuum shown earlier, not from an ultimate placement. Neoclassical realism begins with the premise that ideal state behavior is that which conforms with the unitary actor and objectivity premises of neorealism but shows that when these conditions are not met empirically, domestic politics and ideas are the culprits. Neoclassical realism is not known by what it incorporates but rather where it begins. We should understand it in directional terms, not in positional terms as a halfway house between realism on the one hand and liberalism and constructivism on the other. Neoclassical realism without structural realism is just a mix of liberalism and constructivism. The former cannot exist without the latter given, ironically, the classical roots of the former.

A brief review of some prominent work shows the circumscribed and logical use of domestic politics and ideas as generally distracting from what would be the ideal rational response in the stylized view offered by structural realism. Friedberg was the first, it seems, to imply this model. His prerequisites for an “integrated national response” to changes in relative power are “internal consensus” and the “ability to implement” it. Countries with “concentrated power” are best able to do this.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Snyder maintains that unitary states are generally better able to avoid the perils of overexpansion through an objective evaluation of their environment, whereas those penetrated by parochial interest groups logroll interests in a way unsuited to the

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<sup>76</sup> Friedberg, *The Weary Titan*, 290.

system. He argues that particular constellations of domestic politics lead to “overbalancing” and “imperial overstretch.” This occurs when the interests of parochial groups interfere with a rational and farsighted view of society’s true interests, which are protected by the state.<sup>77</sup> Snyder draws extensively on Van Evera’s earlier work but explicitly connects it to poor foreign policy decision making. He mentions the lack of civilian control of the military as one of the six factors propelling European powers into the “war no one wanted.”<sup>78</sup>

Others also adopt a unitary actor baseline to show domestic politics can inhibit optimum decision making.<sup>79</sup> In his most recent book, Schweller uses the unitary actor “assumption” of neorealism to establish a baseline of an ideal policy given a particular structural circumstance and then to find domestic and ideational factors which explain departures from that guidance.<sup>80</sup> Schweller identifies the conditions associated with underbalancing in which threats are not inflated but rather underestimated and discounted. Social and elite cleavages inhibit group feeling and cohesion, which makes countries less of a unitary actor. These divisions reflect the prioritization of more parochial interests such as ethnic, cultural, ideological, religious, class, bureaucratic, regional, or party over the national interest. Governments presiding over fractured societies are weak and are unable to take the steps necessary to counter real threats. These factors interfere with the proper operation of self-help and the balance of power.<sup>81</sup> The use of the prepositions “over” and “under” is instructive as it demonstrates the assumption that domestic politics interfere with what would be the best policy in the circumstances. Taliaferro shows how states do not always emulate the best practices of leading powers in the system because they have different mobilization and extractive capabilities that are a function of state-society relations.<sup>82</sup> Norrin Ripsman argues that the ratification of peace treaties sometimes involves legislatures in addition to the executive branch. Legislatures provide an access point into foreign policy for narrow constituencies that pull the settlement away from an ideal point the state would otherwise prefer.<sup>83</sup>

In other works, ideas also interfere with a proper adaptation to structural incentives. They lead to mistakes. Van Evera pioneered the structural realist interest in how misperception leads to a failure to develop realistic policies, seizing on several as leading to avoidable conflicts. The “cult of the

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<sup>77</sup> Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 48.

<sup>78</sup> Stephen Van Evera, “Why Cooperation Failed in 1914,” *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (1985).

<sup>79</sup> Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*; Taliaferro, “State Building for Future Wars.”

<sup>80</sup> Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Taliaferro, “State Building for Future Wars.”

<sup>83</sup> Norrin M. Ripsman, *Peacemaking by Democracies: The Effect of State Autonomy on the Post-World War Settlements* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

offensive” rests on an overstated belief in the power of seizing the initiative in warfare. Sometimes self-serving, but sometimes delusional, leaders and militaries overestimate the hostility of adversaries, exaggerate the potential gains from expansion, and mistakenly believe others will bandwagon with them in their conflicts. Snyder would package these “myths of empire” and link them explicitly to foreign policy mistakes.<sup>84</sup> The choice of the word “myth” is again revealing. Subjectivity and ideas lead toward errors and mistake. Anarchy is not what states make of it. Snyder argues that elites are sometimes taken with these myths that pull them away from the *Realpolitik* course of prudence and caution.

As nationalism leads to a charged decision making and political atmosphere that blurs perception, neoclassical realists demonstrate and warn of dangers. Van Evera develops a number of hypotheses about how nationalism can lead to unnecessary wars.<sup>85</sup> Christensen finds that even while nationalism and threat inflation are important if not necessary tools for mobilization and therefore can serve a positive function as opposed to the negative one generally stressed in neoclassical realism, they are difficult to control and lead to an escalation in hostilities beyond what states prefer.<sup>86</sup> Internationalism, however, has pitfalls as well; it is also a barrier to objective perception. Dueck shows how liberal ideology led the United States toward an exuberance in foreign policy that exceeded its material capacity.<sup>87</sup>

In all these neoclassical realist works, the basic elements of structural realism are still present but obscured and overcome by other forces. Domestic politics and ideas in use are generally quite limited. They begin with an anchor in realist assumptions about rational decision making and autonomous states. There are systemic pressures encouraging the state to act as a unitary actor and to objectively evaluate its position, but these forces are not determinate enough to eliminate domestic politics or subjective perception. For all realists, the state is a genuine entity with a life of its own that acts as the true representative of national interests, as Krasner argued long ago.<sup>88</sup> It serves as the perspicacious and sagacious agent of a country’s true interests, which are threatened by subjective biases and parochial interests. Society might be powerful enough to sometimes trump the state, but the latter is generally

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<sup>84</sup> Snyder, *Myths of Empire*. Snyder also contends that democracies are better suited to accurately judge the national interest than cartel regimes as they allow for what is sometimes called a “marketplace of ideas.” Public discussion prevents state capture. To neoclassical realists, what might be a weakness in other areas, the decentralization and incoherence generally attributed to democracies, might be a strength in regards to objective perception. A neoclassical realist might also note, however, the lack of expertise and shortsightedness of democratic regimes as Christensen tends to do Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*. There is no reason to believe both are not true, and democracy is a double-edged sword.

<sup>85</sup> Stephen Van Evera, “Hypotheses on Nationalism and War,” *International Security* 18, no. 4 (1994).

<sup>86</sup> Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*.

<sup>87</sup> Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*.

<sup>88</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investments and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

not merely the reflection of aggregation of the former's interests, as is the case with the more "pluralist" theory of the state adopted by liberals.<sup>89</sup> The state is more than a vessel. This notion is very evident in Christensen. The state has to mislead the public by trumping up ideological and nationalist reasons to mobilize support for what are inevitable confrontations driven by structural circumstances, but it does so because the public is more emotional, short-sighted, and uninformed and therefore not up to the task.<sup>90</sup>

This concept of the state separates the neoclassical realist literature from others that stress how state representatives are primarily motivated by their own egoistic and parochial interests in staying in office. H.E. Goemans contends that states of a particular type will continue wars beyond any reasonable chance of winning if they fear for their political survival after defeat. They "gamble for resurrection."<sup>91</sup> Bueno de Mesquita et al. explain the entire democratic peace phenomena on the basis of the office-seeking desires of politicians. Democratically elected politicians have a more fragile hold on office and therefore must be more selective about the wars they fight.<sup>92</sup> They also fight to win. Knowing a war with another democracy will be long given that the opponent faces the same electoral incentives, democracies spend more time negotiating to avoid war, thus explaining the relative absence of war among them.<sup>93</sup> There is a large literature arguing that major questions of war and crisis initiation are dictated by the electoral calendar or domestic popularity of the government.<sup>94</sup> These are all bottom-up approaches to interest aggregation that see government officials as private actors concerned with maintaining power and whose interests only sometimes coincide with the general interest: state actors think of themselves first. There is no real conception of the state as a living entity. For this reason, neoclassical realists explicitly juxtapose their approach to this work.<sup>95</sup> Neoclassical realists rarely argue that domestic politics interferes with decision making to this degree, and when it does, it has severely negative consequences, as demonstrated below.

Neoclassical realism also puts limits on its use of ideas. It problematizes perception but not the objective nature of reality. States must often fall back on perception not because reality is socially constructed but rather because they lack complete information. Walt is often alleged to have stepped beyond the bounds of realism toward constructivism by stressing perception of

<sup>89</sup> Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously"; Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*.

<sup>90</sup> Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*.

<sup>91</sup> H. E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>92</sup> Reiter and Stam, "Democracy and Battlefield Military Effectiveness."

<sup>93</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., "An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace," *The American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (1999).

<sup>94</sup> A good review is Kurt Taylor Gaubatz, "Election Cycles and War," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35, no. 2 (1991).

<sup>95</sup> Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*.

aggressive intentions as a key element of threat.<sup>96</sup> But intentions are never known for sure, so any attribution of intent must always be based on perception. If, however, similarly placed actors all regard the same behaviors as threatening, then this is not a major privileging of ideas. Walt is simply arguing that a state displaying provocative actions such as mobilizing forces or giving strident speeches makes it seem more threatening than if it did not. Realists and neoclassical realists are not arguing that the interpretation of such actions is a product of norms and identity.<sup>97</sup>

In addition, the importance of perception in realism tends to be driven by complexity of a very real world rather than the premise that the world lacks meaning without intersubjective understandings. In other words, neoclassical realism draws more on cognitivism than constructivism to make a point classical realists have long stressed.<sup>98</sup> Cognitivism points out the difficulty of decision making, which tends to lead all statesmen to make similar mistakes.<sup>99</sup> Friedberg demonstrates how British statesmen used crude and overly simplistic measures of power that did not capture the complicated nature of the variable or how bases change with technological and economic developments.<sup>100</sup> He cites cognitivist literature on how learning does not proceed smoothly in response to a changing environment but rather in a manner of fits and starts that does not directly track material reality. Wohlforth continues in this tradition, discussing how states act on the basis of their perceptions of power rather than the true distribution.<sup>101</sup> This is not because social reality has no meaning absent norms and identities but because power calculation is a complicated business. Nowhere does Wohlforth indicate that if other actors with a similar set of information but different norms and values had been in place, the balance would have been perceived differently, which is what a constructivist would maintain.<sup>102</sup> Legro and Moravcsik miss this because they lump cognitivism and constructivism together under a generic label of “epistemic” approaches.

Neoclassical realists go beyond this limited use of domestic politics and ideas by stressing the severe consequences that result. This is important. If neoclassical realism only consisted of explaining departures from a neorealist

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<sup>96</sup> Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. Walt considers ideology as a source of threat perception but is generally dismissive. Non-realists take ideology as sources of threats much more seriously. See Mark L. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789–1989* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>98</sup> Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy”; Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 5th ed., 225.

<sup>99</sup> Rathbun, “Uncertain About Uncertainty.”

<sup>100</sup> Friedberg, *The Weary Titan*, 284.

<sup>101</sup> William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>102</sup> William C. Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994).

baseline, this would not be enough to distinguish it from other approaches. Indeed, most other paradigms of international relations claim to offer such a contrast. The very fact that domestic politics and ideas sometimes trump the structural incentives toward unitary actors and objectivity seems to imply that liberals and constructivists are right to argue that structure is unimportant. Neoclassical realism therefore needs to show that when subjectivity and domestic politics are allowed too much influence in foreign policy, there are severe consequences. The system punishes. Neoclassical realism shows that when systemic constraints are ignored, foreign policy failure results. Gideon Rose implies this when he writes that foreign policy of states might not track objective material power trends over the short to medium term. Over the long-term, one infers, it will.<sup>103</sup>

Neoclassical realism also specifies to some degree the point at which the system is likely to have such an impact. The logical conclusion is that such effects will be felt (1) when the state no longer plays its role as the guardian of the national interest but becomes a vessel for narrower interests or (2) when ideas constitute an alternative socially constructed reality that differs fundamentally from the one neorealists describe. When politics begins to resemble liberalism and constructivism empirically, the forces defined theoretically by structural realism rear their ugly head most forcefully. Liberalism or constructivism would not have such an expectation. After all, for liberalism, international politics is a function of state interests, not systemic constraints. For constructivism, such practices would simply reconstitute the principles on which the system is based.

For instance, Snyder argues that when the state is co-opted by cartel politics, utter failure results. In these instances, the state loses all ability to direct policy, approximating the situation described in most liberal analyses. Snyder's use of the words "hijacking," "penetrating," and "capturing" the state is extremely important. Such words imply that the state exists as more than just a vessel, was formerly autonomous, but is now being driven by groups with completely different interests. This disaster is only averted if the general interest of the nation can prevail, which is the case in some institutional settings but not others.<sup>104</sup> Not coincidentally, Schweller chooses as case studies of "underbalancing," arguably the most disastrous and fateful mistakes of the twentieth century: France's and Britain's appeasement of Germany. When domestic politics are allowed too much reign, there are systemic consequences.

The situation is worsened if elites come to believe sets of ideas that violate the objective principles identified by neorealists. Snyder asserts that the "myths of empire" go against the systemic rules of international

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<sup>103</sup> Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," 147.

<sup>104</sup> Snyder, *Myths of Empire*.



politics, that expansion leads others to eventually balance against aggressors.<sup>105</sup> These myths provoke self-encirclement. Leaders might come to believe in alternative socially constructed reality, but the objective realities of the anarchic system nevertheless persist. Those countries whose politics become most infused with these beliefs all meet with total foreign policy failure, provoking and losing major wars. Similarly in Schweller, differing ideological beliefs lead elites toward different conceptions of threat and strategies for coping which paralyze states in the face of obvious danger.<sup>106</sup> The works of these scholars are not constructivist in that they identify certain objective features of the international system that reveal themselves when violated, even if those under study did not see them at first.

Legro and Moravcsik contend that much of this work is liberal because of its intellectual heritage.<sup>107</sup> Liberal scholars have pointed out the disastrous consequences for the masses in countries where a small elite makes foreign policy decisions based on narrow interests. They also discuss how illiberal leaders driven by illiberal beliefs—that conquest is easy, adversaries respond to threats of force, and the offense has an advantage—provoke wars in a way that would not be true if countries were led by liberal statesmen.<sup>108</sup> These arguments, however, are employed differently than those offered by Snyder and others. Liberal arguments have normative inspirations, even when they are empirical and positive. They are united by their stress on the unfortunate moral consequences for international society as a whole when liberal principles are not followed in foreign policy. Wars break out and harm the lives of many more than they serve to protect. Realists chastise states for allowing parochialism and nationalism not because they are immoral but because they are imprudent for the particular state that chose them.<sup>109</sup> They violate key rules of *raison d'état* and cold, calculated deliberation in decision making. Realists and liberals often form a kind of baptist-bootlegger coalition against nationalist foreign policy, even while the sources of their objection are different. This is true among theorists as well as practitioners. Liberals and realists both lament the failure of nationalist and militarist foreign policy but for different reasons.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*.

<sup>107</sup> Legro and Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" 24. Zakaria, sometimes considered a neoclassical realist, laments the similarity as well and pleads for the embrace of classical realism, which he argues is not as liberal as defensive realism Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, 31.

<sup>108</sup> Doyle provides a nice review of the classic works Michael W. Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *The American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (1986).

<sup>109</sup> Van Evera provides the most systematic application, but classical realists make these arguments as well Morgenthau and Thompson, *Politics among Nations*, 6th ed.; Van Evera, "Why Cooperation Failed in 1914."

## ROSES ARE RED, VIOLETS ARE BLUE: WHAT'S LEFT TO ARGUE ABOUT?

A natural reaction to the conclusion that neoclassical realism can successfully integrate domestic politics and ideas into realism in a way consistent with structural realism is that there is little left to disagree about. Are international relations debates not framed around the issue of whether domestic politics and ideas matter? Often they are, but this is unfortunate, inappropriate, and does not do justice to the richness of the various traditions. If these are the terms of the disagreement, we are encouraged to understand one paradigm as claiming ideas and domestic politics play no role and another claiming they do. This not only mischaracterizes the paradigms, it belies empirical reality. The question is not whether but how these factors are important.

Even if accepted, my argument still leaves in place major disagreements between realism and constructivism.<sup>110</sup> Realism might argue that ideas matter, but if they matter too much, states will misjudge invariant elements of an objective material reality. A major portion of neoclassical realist work is dedicated to showing that these constraints are real, even if they are not determinate. Constructivists do not believe in this. Anarchy is what states make of it, after all. The difference amounts, as Jackson and Nexon assert, to a view of international politics as “natural necessity” versus one of “contingent social interactions.”<sup>111</sup> While constructivism is often overly structuralist, structuralism is based on a social understanding of constraints. Even those constructivists who believe powerful forces of reification lead states toward the constant reproduction of processes that they come to believe as natural necessities, ultimately believe in the possibility of change.<sup>112</sup> This is primary difference between realisms of all kind and constructivisms of all kind. We must be careful, however, not to fall into new simplistic dichotomies. Realism might be a materialist paradigm and constructivism an ideational one, but not all materialists are realists or idealists constructivist.

Showing constraints exist—demonstrating the power of anarchy—is neoclassical realism’s greatest challenge. I have argued that it depends first on a baseline of what an ideal-typical rational unitary state would do. It is not difficult to assert that Hitler’s Germany went far beyond what the objective evaluation of the balance of power would allow or that Britain should have acted before the balance of power shifted against it, but the strategy ideally

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<sup>110</sup> There are also, of course, potential synergies that should not be ignored. Neoclassical work often relies on the force of nationalism in its explanations. Yet it does not offer us an understanding of how individuals come to identify with the broader nation, something constructivists might help clarify.

<sup>111</sup> Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, “Constructivist Realism or Realist-Constructivism?” *International Studies Review* 6, no. 2 (2004): 335. It is on this basis of differences of emphasis on structure and agency that they reject the promise of a “constructivist realism” suggested by J. Samuel Barkin, “Realist Constructivism,” *International Studies Review* 5, no. 3 (2003).

<sup>112</sup> Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It.”

suited to a particular state's goal is often difficult to identify, particularly when we throw in complicating factors such as variation in system polarity or issue area. Even when we can identify proper policy, we still face the problem of knowing when a state has been punished for not following it or identifying how swift and powerful the sanction will be. As I suggest, one imagines that in keeping with the crime, a variation in punishment would reflect the degree to which a state did not follow systemic dictates, which in turn is a function of the degree to which domestic politics interfere and ideologies blind. More precise theories, however, are still needed.

There is also plenty left to debate with liberalism of the Moravcsik variety. Liberals and realists disagree about the very nature of the state. For realists, a state always exists, even if it is not autonomous. It persists beyond the tenure of those who inhabit it. It acts as a sense of responsibility that hovers over those who occupy its key positions. For liberals, a state is little more than a set of levers for those who gain power, a transmission belt between society and government policy. Once we admit, as neoclassical realism helps us to do, that a truly unitary actor is a relative rarity, we are left with interesting questions as to whether and, if so, how a state is distinct from society. One interesting way of leveraging this debate is the transition process from opposition into government. How does the act of governing change leaders' sense of purpose? How do leaders change their views when they sit in the chair? Realists would maintain there would be a shift in role conception, whereas liberals would likely not. This is something eminently testable but has not been to date systematically explored. Assumptions are implicit and as yet untested.

As hard as this might be, this is the inescapable research agenda for neoclassical realism. Even while the task seems daunting, it is hard to deny the immediate relevance of neoclassical realism for explaining some of today's most important foreign policy events. Prominent neorealists such as Mearsheimer led a vigorous media campaign against the American invasion of Iraq from the beginning, asserting that it distracted the United States from more important, strategic interests in the flow of Middle East oil and regional stability.<sup>113</sup> The diagnosis of America's mistake was textbook neoclassical realism. The U.S. government's policy was dictated not objectively by considerations of power and material interests but by ideological myths promulgated by neoconservatives whose views differed markedly from the sober realism practiced by the first Bush administration.<sup>114</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt's recent book supplements this explanation and critique of recent American foreign

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<sup>113</sup> Rodger A. Payne, "Neorealists as Critical Theorists: The Purpose of Foreign Policy Debate," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>114</sup> Brian Rathbun, "Does One Right Make a Realist: Conservatism, Neoconservatism and Isolationism in the Foreign Policy Ideology of American Elites," *Political Science Quarterly* (forthcoming). We should again note the similarity of the realist and the liberal internationalist critique.

policy with the diagnosis that the Israeli lobby plays a far too influential role in U.S. policy making such as to distract the United States away from its true interests, which often do not coincide with Israel's. This is effectively a variant of the "state capture" argument made by prominent neoclassical realists.<sup>115</sup>

As Mearsheimer and Walt are prominent neorealists, their recent work provides yet another example that neoclassical realism and structural realism are two sides of the same coin and that no particular paradigm owns ideas and domestic politics but rather uses them in their own unique way. If we frame our debates along the lines suggested above, rather than along somewhat artificial ones about whether ideas and domestic politics matter, we will all come out smelling like roses.

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<sup>115</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).