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# Systemic pressures and domestic ideas: a neoclassical realist model of grand strategy formation

NICHOLAS KITCHEN

**Abstract.** Scholars in international relations have long known that ideas matter in matters of international politics, yet theories of the discipline have failed to capture their impact either in the making of foreign policy or the nature of the international system. Recent reengagement with the insights of classical realists has pointed to the possibility of a neoclassical realist approach that can take into account the impact of ideas. This article will suggest that the study of grand strategy can enlighten the intervening ideational variables between the distribution of power in the international system and the foreign policy behaviour of states, and thus constitute the key element in a neoclassical realist research agenda.

## Introduction

The term ‘neoclassical realism’, was coined by Gideon Rose in a 1998 *World Politics* review article, which argued that neoclassical realism

explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought. Its adherents argue that the scope and ambition of a country’s foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities. This is why they are realist. They argue further, however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. This is why they are neoclassical.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gideon Rose, ‘Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy’, *World Politics*, 51:1 (1998). The best current overview of neoclassical realism is Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M Ripsman, *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). Examples of neoclassical realist works include Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958*, *Princeton Studies in International History and Politics*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press, 2006); Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler’s Strategy of World Conquest* (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1998); William Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions During the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America’s World Role*, *Princeton Studies in International History and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

Yet despite a decade of progress since Rose's article, neoclassical realism remains an immature and undeveloped child in the discipline of International Relations (IR). In many cases the neo- prefix indicates a work of classical realism done again, a revival of that particular brand of approach to diplomatic history that had been consigned to a footnote in IR textbooks by the promise of a clean, predictive social science offered by realism's structural progeny.

What makes neoclassical realist theory 'new' is its ongoing attempt to systematise the wide and varied insights of classical realists within parsimonious theory, or to put it in reverse, to identify the appropriate intervening variables that can imbue realism's structural variant with a greater explanatory richness. In this sense, 'post-structural realism' could be as apt a designation for this area of IR that values theory and seeks at least some kind of predictive capacity, while at the same time recognising that the world is complex, and that events in international politics reflect the interaction of multifarious factors.<sup>2</sup> The task for neoclassical realism has been to attempt to integrate the 'rich but scattered ideas and untested assertions of early realist works' within a more systemic theoretical structure.<sup>3</sup> Whilst 'there is no evidence, and it is hard to imagine that any might exist, that any remotely respectable Realist does not understand that policy is the outcome of a complex political process,'<sup>4</sup> the challenge for neoclassical realist explanations is to emphasise structural factors whilst allowing for their mediation through domestic political processes, to 'move beyond the relatively spare world of neorealist theory and incorporate unit-level factors as well.'<sup>5</sup> In this endeavour, neoclassical realists are prepared to examine questions of *innenpolitik*, those 'first and second-image variables' including domestic politics, state power and processes, leaders' perceptions and the impact of ideas to explain how states react to the international environment.<sup>6</sup> In line with its realist heritage however, such variables are considered analytically subordinate to systemic factors, the limits and opportunities of which states cannot escape in the long run. However, to understand how states respond to an attempt to shape their external environment, IR scholars need to analyse how system pressures are translated through intervening unit-level variables.<sup>7</sup>

Stephen Walt complains that neoclassical realism's particular suitability (and tendency) towards the construction of historical narratives means that the discipline's 'open-minded eclecticism is also its chief limitation [...] where neorealism sacrificed precision in order to gain parsimony and generality, neoclassical realism has given up generality and predictive power in an attempt to gain descriptive accuracy and policy relevance.'<sup>8</sup> It is true that to date 'neoclassical

<sup>2</sup> Brian Rathbun, 'A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism', *Security Studies*, 17:2 (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Randall L. Schweller, 'The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism', in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius (eds), *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 316.

<sup>4</sup> Alan James, 'The Realism of Realism: The State in the Study of International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 15 (1989), p. 221.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Schweller, 'The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism', p. 317.

<sup>7</sup> Rose, 'Neoclassical Realism', pp. 51–2.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen M. Walt, 'The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition', in Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner (eds), *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (New York, N.Y.; London: W.W. Norton, 2002), p. 211.

realism' has referred more to works whose focus is essentially diplomatic history than it has to any established theoretical structure. Furthermore, the range of intervening unit-level variables that neoclassical realists have been prepared to consider have varied with the historical case in hand.<sup>9</sup>

This article is an attempt to establish a common intervening variable – the role of strategic ideas – which can describe how the structural pressures of power in the international system are translated into foreign policy outcomes by states. It proceeds by first establishing the scope of grand strategy, neoclassical realism's object of study. It then assesses the failure of neorealism and social constructivism to integrate both ideational and material factors, and highlights how classical realists were prepared to admit the impact of both, before introducing a positivist conception that shows how ideas may operate at the unit level within states. A neoclassical realist model of grand strategy is then proposed and the implications of the approach drawn out.

### **Grand strategy**

In order for a theoretical approach to be both rigorous and parsimonious, it needs to be clear about exactly what the insights of the approach should be applied to; that is to say, what is being analysed using the tools of theory? Neoclassical realism, an approach which combines elements of system, structure and domestic politics, of material and ideational factors, needs to analyse international relations from a plural perspective. Like many of the key notions of International Relations, 'grand strategy' is both commonly used and instinctively understood, yet at the same time the concept evades unanimous agreement as to its precise meaning. Indeed, it often appears that there are as many differing definitions as there are authors on the subject, each incorporating for their own purposes various nuances.<sup>10</sup> What follows is a brief overview of the historical progress of the concept, from which we may derive some general insights about the nature of grand strategy and its suitability as the object of analysis for neoclassical realism.

Statesmen have always used certain principles to guide their actions in the uncertain and anarchic world of the international system, developing identities and postures for their nations in often violent competition with others. These strategies, rather than setting out day-to-day operational matters, governed the overall course to which those operations were directed. The early history of strategy is therefore concerned solely with military campaigns, and was distinguished by Clausewitz from tactics, which 'is the art of using troops in battle; strategy is the art of using battles to win the war'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The plethora of intervening variables addressed by neoclassical realist is detailed in Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman, *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy*, pp. 1–41. The authors argue that there is no single neoclassical realist theory of foreign policy, but rather a diversity of neoclassical realist theories.

<sup>10</sup> Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>11</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret, *On War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 127–32.

Yet just as international politics is not solely about waging war, strategy is not just the art of winning wars, but is a more complex and multilayered undertaking.<sup>12</sup> Grand strategy therefore encompasses not only military means and ends, but the means and ends of politics, economics and ideology, in short all the aspects of power and influence at a nation's – and therefore, a statesman's – disposal.<sup>13</sup> Following Basil Liddell Hart's observation that since 'the object in war is a better state of peace [...] it is essential to conduct war with constant regard to the peace you desire', grand strategy required assessment and consideration of the political context both before and during conflict.<sup>14</sup> To be successful, grand strategy therefore needed to integrate 'the politics and armaments of the nation that resort to war is either rendered unnecessary or is undertaken with the maximum chance of victory.'<sup>15</sup>

Grand strategy was therefore to involve 'the evolution and integration of policies that should operate for decades, or even centuries' in order to balance means and ends both in peacetime and wartime. Such a broad remit for grand strategy required it to take into consideration factors as diverse as managing national resources; diplomacy; national morale and political culture.<sup>16</sup>

The crux of grand strategy lies therefore in *policy*, that is, in the capacity of the nation's leaders to bring together all of the elements, both military and non-military, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation's long-term (that is, in wartime and peacetime) best interests.<sup>17</sup>

The extension of the concept reflected a trend in IR more generally that condemned neorealism's definition of security as too narrow and its characterisation of those elements of power with which security could be achieved as too capabilities-centred. Since realist thought, by focusing on the systemic level, 'tended to neglect patterns of domestic support and economic strength that might affect long term commitment to a deterrent, containment, or balance of power strategy', the theoretical understanding of grand strategy needed to be modified to take account of those factors.<sup>18</sup>

Inevitably, some realist authors countered that if the concept was to retain its analytical usefulness, it needed to focus on specific threats to the survival of the state and the military means to counter them.<sup>19</sup> Yet in the post-Cold War world it had become clear that both the range of threats and interests and the variety of strategic tools used to meet them were far broader than such restrictive definitions. Indeed, realist accounts focused solely on what Posen instead described as military

<sup>12</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, 'American Grand Strategy, Today and Tomorrow: Learning from the European Experience', in Paul M. Kennedy (ed.), *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Basil Henry Liddell Hart (eds), *Strategy*, 2nd rev. (New York, N.Y., U. S. A.: Meridian, 1991), p. 321.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 338.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Mead Earle, Gordon Alexander Craig, and Felix Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), p. viii.

<sup>16</sup> Paul M. Kennedy, 'Grand Strategy in War and Peace: Toward a Broader Definition', in Paul M. Kennedy (ed.), *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Newton Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein, 'Beyond Realism: The Study of Grand Strategy', in Richard Newton Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein (eds), *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 17.

doctrine, which in his view represented just one subset of grand strategy that sets priorities among military forces and prescribes how they should be structured to achieve the ends in view. Traditional realism's narrow focus on military threats, hard power and systemic imperatives failed to understand the extent to which a state's grand strategy represents 'a political-military means-ends chain, a state's theory about how it can best "cause" security for itself.'<sup>20</sup>

Grand strategy is therefore the level at which systemic and unit level factors converge, where matters of national security are mediated through public diplomacy.<sup>21</sup> When we speak of grand strategy as an analytical concept, we are speaking of that considered set of national policies in peace and war that both set out the goals of the state in international politics and prescribe how a broad range of national resources should be utilised in pursuit of those goals. The study of grand strategy is therefore the study of states' attitudes to the international environment – of how they mobilise which elements of their power in pursuit of which causes in global politics. It is in this way that grand strategy may fulfil neoclassical realists' requirement for a coherent analytical subject that integrates both the systemic realist elements and the domestic level factors that neoclassical realists have revived from classical insights. How neoclassical realism should understand the role of ideas within the process of grand strategy formation is therefore the focus of the next sections.

### Theorising ideas: the reductionism of neorealism and social constructivism

Neorealist theory or structural realism attributes security competition to the absence of any overarching authority in the international system. For neorealists, international politics consists of 'like units' – states – duplicating one another's activities – their functional similarity rendering variations between states at the unit level irrelevant to explaining the international outcomes of interaction between them. It is solely the nature and structure of the system within which those units coexist that determines their behaviour and mediates outcomes.<sup>22</sup> Dismissing 'ideology, form of government, peacefulness, bellicosity or whatever', what makes international relations tick is nothing more than the 'distribution of capabilities'.<sup>23</sup>

Such a rigid identification of state motivation with the material national interest coincided neatly with the apparently zero-sum nature of Cold War bipolarity. Indeed, the logic of this pure form of realism is so highly determined that it entails that policy choice can only ever arise in two scenarios. First, in situations where calculations of particular considerations balance equally, presenting alternatives with identical impacts on the security of the state, in which case the choice is arbitrary; and second where imperfect information creates gaps in the assessment

<sup>20</sup> Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ben D. Mor, 'Public Diplomacy in Grand Strategy', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2:2 (2006), pp. 158–9.

<sup>22</sup> Security Dilemma' *World Politics*, 30:2 (1978); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, London: W.W. Norton, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 98.

of the national interest which are filled by competing sets of conjecture and supposition, in which case the choice is unwelcome, being a function of ignorance rather than knowledge.

Realism's approach to historical anomalies in which ideas seemed to override strategic interest in decision-making was to dismiss these cases as outliers which could be accounted for by their failure to account with the rational actor model.<sup>24</sup> However, this type of analysis begs the question. At what point do actors cease to be non-rational, and just start being different? The danger is that rational action is defined as political realism, so that foreign policy that does not conform to realist tenets is *a priori* non-rational. Realism can't explain ideological foreign policy because it is not realism.

Moreover, neorealism's attitude towards the force of ideas is condemned by aspects of the self-image of the doctrine itself, which 'contains not only a theoretical but also a normative element [ . . . ] [it] considers a rational foreign policy to be a good foreign policy [ . . . ] [it] wants the photographic picture of the political world to resemble as much as possible its painted portrait.'<sup>25</sup> Realism then, is both an explanatory theory and a normative theory. The ideas contained within realism not only explain international politics, but should also inform the decision-making of policymakers.

The paradox of neorealism's treatment of ideas is that as an explanatory theory cannot account for the normative influence of its own doctrine on the actions of states. This is the crux of Krasner's complaint that social scientists were offering policy advice to decision-makers 'when there was nothing in their theories that would [lead them to believe they could] do any good'.<sup>26</sup> If ideas are merely for rhetorical purposes, then why urge statesmen to adhere to the ideas of realism? If, on the other hand, the ideas contained in realism's foreign policy prescriptions can shape the world so that it more perfectly resembles the theoretical image, how can those ideas be dismissed as lacking the power to affect international affairs? Thus the explicit expression of a normative element in realism necessarily undermines its explanatory power so long as the influence of ideas is denied.

An alternative structural approach suffered the same difficulty in reverse. Social constructivism discards the rationalist, materialist philosophical assumptions of international relations altogether to conclude that the very meaning of power and the content of interests are functions of ideas.<sup>27</sup> Although this approach has been useful in establishing the importance of identities alongside interests in establishing durable expectations of behaviour between states,<sup>28</sup> the epistemological basis of the constructivist approach is a form of structural idealism or 'idea-ism' that stands in direct opposition to the core claims of realism and many of the most basic

<sup>24</sup> On US foreign policy's 'non-logical' character see Stephen D. Krasner, *Defending the National Interest: Raw Materials Investments and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 337–45. John Lewis Gaddis relates Hitler's and Stalin's foreign policies in terms of the 'quixotic illusions' that exist in authoritarian systems. John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 291.

<sup>25</sup> Hans Joachim Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Krasner, *Defending the National Interest*, p. xi.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 94–5.

<sup>28</sup> Ted Hopf, 'The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory' *International Security*, 23:1 (1998), pp. 174–5.

assumptions of historical and political scholarship.<sup>29</sup> This rejection of the rationalist ‘conceptual tool kit’<sup>30</sup> leads to the same problem of reductionism of ideas and interests as realism suffers in mirror-image. Wendt’s claim that when IR scholars explain ‘state action by reference to interests, they are actually explaining it by reference to a certain kind of idea’ appears to deny that there are empirically knowable material facts *per se*. Similarly, if material interests are actually explained by ideas, it is difficult to comprehend exactly how “the true ‘material base’ can still have independent effects’.<sup>31</sup> If, as constructivism contends, ideas are ‘inextricably involved in the production of interests’<sup>32</sup> it is futile to distinguish between the two.

So although constructivism can help us understand that identities, norms and rules are endogenous to system structure, in doing so the distribution of material capabilities is regarded as an essentially exogenous factor. Where neorealism states that ideas don’t matter, constructivism tells us that material capabilities aren’t important. The unavoidable conclusion is that where structural realism reduced ideas to interests, social constructivism reduces interests to ideas. Neither can capture the sense in which both ideas and interests play roles – sometimes competing, sometimes complementary – in formulating the direction of states’ foreign policy and the structure of the international system.

### *Classical realism*

That classical realism was less constrained by the epistemological rigidities that characterise neorealism and social constructivism accounts for both its explanatory strengths and theoretical weaknesses. Whilst prioritising power, classical realists admitted a role for ideas alongside material considerations. First and foremost a philosophical position, modern variants of realist theory can trace their lineage from the writings of Thucydides through to Hobbes and Machiavelli. This philosophy is pessimistic about the human condition, rejects teleological notions of political progress and regards ethics and morality as products of power. From its assessment of humans in the state of nature realism identifies competition for resources among tribal groups as the most basic feature of social organisation, which is therefore defined by the facts of power.<sup>33</sup> Classical realists therefore build upon the foundations of this attitude towards human nature to derive a set of principles about the nature of international politics, to argue that ‘politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Wendt, ‘Collective Identity Formation and the International State’ *American Political Science Review*, 88:2 (1994), pp. 385. For an overview of the extent to which the two approaches represent incommensurable epistemologies, see John Mearsheimer, ‘The False Promise of International Institutions’ *International Security*, 19:3 (1994/5). and Alexander Wendt, ‘Constructing International Politics’ *International Security*, 20: 1 (1995), p. 75.

<sup>30</sup> Wendt, ‘Collective Identity Formation’ p. 394.

<sup>31</sup> Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, pp. 111–3.

<sup>32</sup> Mark Laffey and Jutta Weldes, ‘Beyond Belief: Ideas and Symbolic Technologies in the Study of International Relations’ *European Journal of International Relations*, 3: 2 (1997), p. 195.

<sup>33</sup> Taliaferro, Lobell and Ripsman, *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy*, p. 14. The clearest statements of modern realism’s attitude to human nature are Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946); Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).



nature.<sup>34</sup> The state in the international system is analogous to man in the state of nature; thus international politics is most fundamentally about power, which is accrued, defended and wielded only in pursuit of the national interest defined as national security, the nature of which can be identified and assessed in terms of material capabilities. The international system has no sovereign and is therefore anarchic, and so state action within it can be reduced to the national interest: thus the security of the nation-state is the sole determinant of foreign policy.<sup>35</sup>

Classical realist works are therefore not in any sense congested with enthusiastic championing of the ability of ideas to shape international politics. Indeed, the original title for EH Carr's *Twenty Years Crisis* was *Utopia and Reality*, and Carr's project was to demolish the notion that international politics could be subjugated to the force of human reason.<sup>36</sup> Yet at the same time classical realists see realism as a necessary corrective to the dangerous naivety of idealism, not as a replacement for it; indeed classical realists cautioned statesmen to abide by the more stable maxims of power because they realised that ideas and culture could have 'a profound effect on the strategic behaviour of states.'<sup>37</sup>

At the individual level, Morgenthau identifies ideas as sources of change, since 'when people see things in a new light, they may act in a new way.'<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Morgenthau's Aristotelian conception of human agency and his emphasis on both the virtue of prudence and diplomacy suggests a more complex picture of the role of ideas in international politics than he is often credited with having held.<sup>39</sup> *Politics Among Nations* offers numerous examples of states with incongruous political power and material capabilities, a gap deriving from the abilities of their leaders, for whom the strategies and tactics used to convert the potential attributes power into influence are as important as the attributes themselves.<sup>40</sup> The role of the statesmen was therefore to mitigate the more turbulent forces of anarchy through wise leadership, to moderate power and pursue peace. As Morgenthau writes, diplomacy is the instrument of peace through accommodation:

<sup>34</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, W. David Clinton, and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), p. 4. Morgenthau was the most influential of all the classical realists, and his arguments remain the most systematic exposition of classical realist thought. Other examples of classical realist theory include Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966); Edward Hallett Carr and Michael Cox, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); John Hermann Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theory and Realities* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1951).

<sup>35</sup> For Morgenthau, 'national security must be defined as integrity of the national territory and its institutions.' Morgenthau and Thompson, *Politics among Nations*, p. 586.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Cox, 'Introduction' in Edward Hallett Carr and Michael Cox (eds), *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. xxi–xxii.

<sup>37</sup> Colin Dueck, 'New Perspectives on American Grand Strategy' *International Security*, 28:4 (2004), p. 215. Kennan and Morgenthau, for example, were concerned by the impact of idealist liberal ideas on American foreign policy. George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 65–90; Morgenthau and Thompson, *Politics among Nations*, pp. 155–64.

<sup>38</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Science: Servant or Master?, Perspectives in Humanism* (New York, New American Library; distributed by Norton, 1972), p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> Anthony F. Lang Jr., 'Morgenthau, Agency and Aristotle' in Michael C. Williams (ed.), *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans Morgenthau in International Relations* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 231.

(EXT) Of all the factors which make for the power of a nation, the most important, and the more unstable, is the quality of diplomacy. All the other factors which determine national power are, as it were, the raw material out of which the power of a nation is fashioned. The quality of a nation's diplomacy combines those different factors into an integrated whole, gives them direction and weight, and awakens their slumbering potentialities by giving them the breadth of actual power. The conduct of a nation's foreign affairs by its diplomats is for national power in peace what military strategy and tactics are for national power in war. It is the art of bringing the different elements of the national power to bear with the maximum effect upon those points in the international situation that concern that national interest most directly.<sup>41</sup>

EH Carr too, saw that rhetoric, 'the art of persuasion', has always been 'part of the equipment of a political leader' in mobilising the minds of men alongside the material elements of military and economic might.<sup>42</sup> Carr therefore offers the hope that not only is 'there is something which man ought to think and do, but that there is something which he can think and do, and that his thought and action are neither mechanical nor meaningless.'<sup>43</sup> Carr sees a role for ideas at the domestic level in the use of propaganda and the education of the nation: 'the state which provides the education necessarily determines its content. No state will allow its future citizens to imbibe in its schools teaching subversive of the principles on which it is based.'<sup>44</sup> Ideas, classical realists knew, are powerful things, and power over them is one of the greatest assets a state can procure for itself. Indeed, the basic moral ideas that statesmen themselves hold precludes them from even considering certain means and ends, a process which could 'tame' the national interest and moderate self-interest and conflict.<sup>45</sup> Morgenthau therefore argues that beyond the irreducible minimum of the survival of the state, statesmen would take into account the cultural and moral ideas of their people to pursue goals which could 'run the whole gamut of objectives any nation has ever pursued or might possibly pursue.'<sup>46</sup>

Carr's analysis that the most influential ideas have been based on professedly universal principles also allows that ideas may operate at the international level, moving across borders as tools or effects of foreign policy, but only successfully when backed in some way by national political power.<sup>47</sup> In addition, Carr identifies a 'general sense of obligation', a norm that operates between states, thus rendering treaties and agreements useful elements of international politics.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, both Kissinger and Morgenthau grant a role to the generation of legitimacy, and wrote approvingly of the international society of the European royal families, whose aristocratic ideals moderated competition.<sup>49</sup> So conceptions of justice do matter in international politics, and the production of peaceful change in that arena involves a compromise between utopian ideas of common right and realist adjustments to

<sup>41</sup> Morgenthau, Clinton, and Thompson, *Politics among Nations*, p. 152. See also pp. 539–68.

<sup>42</sup> Carr and Cox, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, p. 120.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>45</sup> W. David Clinton and Kenneth W. Thompson, 'Foreword' in Hans J. Morgenthau (ed.), *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), pp. xxii–xxvii.

<sup>46</sup> Morgenthau, Clinton, and Thompson, *Politics among Nations*, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> Carr and Cox, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, pp. 125–6.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 62.

shifts in the balance of power.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, the international environment is composed not just of the distribution of power but also a climate of ideas, which contains certain moral values with enough force to delimit 'the sphere of possible political interests itself'.<sup>51</sup>

Thus even the most strident classical realists do not regard the accumulation of power for the purposes of national survival as the only logic of realism. Machiavelli for example is emphatically not a determinist who views power as impelling action, instead insisting that necessity narrows the range of alternatives to which statesmen may apply their wisdom and exercise choice.<sup>52</sup> Niebuhr also admits the possibility that states may 'do justice to wider interests than their own, while they pursue their own.'<sup>53</sup> Although in the international order 'the role of power is greater and that of morality less', Carr accepts that in some cases ideas of morality can trump concerns of power to result in 'self-sacrifice' on the part of the state.<sup>54</sup> As Barkin notes:

The classical realists argued quite explicitly that moral ideals are a necessary part of the practice of international politics and that political realism in the absence of morality, in the absence of a vision of utopia, is both sterile and pointless.<sup>55</sup>

For classical realists then, what happens at the levels of the state and the individual, what Waltz called the first and second images, matters.<sup>56</sup> It is for this reason that classical realists are political advocates, whose critical role is to 'speak truth to power' and unmask relations of domination that are concealed by the moral rhetoric of statesmen.<sup>57</sup>

There is therefore the theoretical space within classical realism for the integration of ideas, first at the unit level as part of its stress on political judgement, and secondarily between states as a product of the interactions of those judgements. Michael Williams has attempted to emphasise the impact of ideas within Morgenthau's writings, with particular focus on the role of ideas in identity formation and the construction of the national interest.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Smith notes that how a statesman 'defines the national interest depends on the values he espouses and the way he ranks them.'<sup>59</sup> Yet Williams stretches the point when he regards the role of ideas in classical realist thought as 'crucial'.<sup>60</sup> Morgenthau repeatedly argued against the 'sentimental illusion' that America's Cold War

<sup>50</sup> Carr and Cox, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, pp. 199–202.

<sup>51</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, 'The Problem of Neutrality' *University of Kansas City Law Review* VII (1939), pp. 125–6.

<sup>52</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, Bernard R. Crick, and Leslie Walker, *The Discourses, The Penguin Classics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 62–3.

<sup>53</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner, 1949), p. 71.

<sup>54</sup> Carr and Cox, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, p. 151.

<sup>55</sup> J Samuel Barkin, 'Realist Constructivism' *International Studies Review*, 5:3 (2003), p. 336.

<sup>56</sup> Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*.

<sup>57</sup> Muriele Cozette, 'Reclaiming the Critical Dimension of Realism: Hans J. Morgenthau on the Ethics of Scholarship' *Review of International Studies*, 34:1 (2008). On the contemporary role of prominent realists speaking truth to power see Rodger A. Payne, 'Neorealists as Critical Theorists: The Purpose of Foreign Policy Debate' *Perspectives on Politics*, 5:3 (2007).

<sup>58</sup> Michael C. Williams, 'What Is the National Interest? The Neoconservative Challenge in IR Theory' *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:3 (2005).

<sup>59</sup> Michael Joseph Smith, *Realist Thought from Weber to Kissinger, Political Traditions in Foreign Policy Series* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), p. 160.

<sup>60</sup> Michael C. Williams, 'Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical

rivalry was a struggle between good and evil, and regarded such ideologising of the national interest as potentially hazardous to its effective construction and pursuit. Whilst Morgenthau doesn't regard the national interest as a fixed, impenetrable entity and requires political actors to make difficult choices in order to identify and pursue it, he like other classical realists is concerned to make the point that the task of the statesman is to discover and act upon the national interest defined as material power.<sup>61</sup> That ideas may impact upon international relations is not in doubt, but the extent that they do, Aron notes, creates dangerous utopias that serve 'as an excuse, not an inspiration' for wilful leaders who 'desired power as an instrument of their own glory.'<sup>62</sup> Morgenthau's rejoinder that 'all politics is power politics'<sup>63</sup> therefore remains an accurate summary of classical realist thought, affirming that the object of all politics is power whilst nevertheless implying that power is not the only feature of politics.

### *A positivist conception of ideas*

Classical realists' limited admission of the impact of ideas requires an epistemological approach to ideas that allows their influence to be assessed alongside the force of material capabilities. Neoclassical realism thus places the impact of ideas alongside the imperatives of material power in the making of foreign policy, rejecting the notion that either ideas or material factors are somehow 'most fundamental' and therefore deserving of analytic focus to the exclusion of the other.<sup>64</sup> However, both the definitional status and conceptual implications of the term 'idea' are, to put it mildly, the subject of some debate. To date, no single definition has emerged, nor is there agreement on the causal roles ideas play in political processes.<sup>65</sup> Unfortunately, in much of the literature the necessity of clear definition is either ignored and the assumption of definitional transparency erroneously made; or the term is confusingly equated and used interchangeably with, variously, 'belief', 'ideology', 'theory', 'models', 'schools of thought' and even 'intellectual idiosyncrasies'.<sup>66</sup> In order to integrate ideas into a neoclassical approach that focuses on grand strategy we need to construct a positivist approach that is both clear about how it defines its terms and rigorous about the accuracy of their application.

First, and contrary to what some have suggested, it is important that ideas and interests are maintained as conceptually distinct phenomena.<sup>67</sup> Although many

Realism, and the Moral Construction of Power Politics' *International Organization*, 58: 3 (2004), p. 634.

<sup>61</sup> William E. Scheuerman, *Hans Morgenthau: Realism and Beyond, Key Contemporary Thinkers* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), pp. 70–100.

<sup>62</sup> Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 77.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Williams, 'Why Ideas Matter', p. 634.

<sup>64</sup> As Keohane puts it, 'creating this dichotomy is a bit like arguing whether the heart or the brain is most fundamental to life.' Robert O. Keohane, 'Ideas Part-Way Down' *Review of International Studies*, 26 (2000), p. 127.

<sup>65</sup> Michael P. Marks, *The Formation of European Policy in Post-Franco Spain: The Role of Ideas, Interests and Knowledge* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1997), p. 27.

<sup>66</sup> Laffey and Weldes, 'Beyond Belief' p. 197.

<sup>67</sup> Keohane and Goldstein undermine their theoretical construction that posits a null hypothesis that

ideas that people hold reflect their interests, and it may even be the case that an individual holds an idea because it is in their interest to do so, these are not reasons to logically conflate ideas with interests. There is no logical impediment to our holding ideas that directly contradict our interests, and that therefore the two should remain conceptually distinct.<sup>68</sup> Against Waltz's assertion that Neoclassical realists require that interests, in contrast to ideas, are those things that we can know as material facts about the world and which constitute power relations between states. They are those things that a state must secure if it is to maintain its place in the balance-of-power.

The idea that there is an independent reality directly available to state officials and analysts is not an uncontroversial one. It has been suggested that even the identification of a state's material interests is a process that requires 'significant interpretive labour'.<sup>69</sup> Certainly there is something to this criticism, yet even were this always the case, and it is by no means clear that it is, we should not derive the conclusion that material interests are unknowable, that the concept is not a useful one. Instead we should seek to isolate the material from the ideational, to identify how particular ideas provide context within which states' pursue their paramount objective of securing those things they identify as key material interests.

The second mistake that rationalist approaches have tended to make to date is that they identify ideas with beliefs, a definition that confuses far more than it clarifies.<sup>70</sup> The same authors that define ideas as 'beliefs held by individuals' claim that 'ideas can have an impact even when no one genuinely believes in them.'<sup>71</sup> Such thinking invites the criticism that for this to be the case, 'ideas' must be distinct from the 'beliefs' without which they can still have impact.<sup>72</sup> This critique erroneously assumes that for something to be a belief, at least someone needs to believe in it. This is transparently not the case. To say that one does not believe *x* is to say that one does believe *x*'s negation. Yet it makes little sense to say, even on the basis of universal disbelief, that a statement is not a belief but its negation is. Despite the failure of this critique however, the shared belief characterisation is fundamentally weakened by the fact that by defining ideas as beliefs we remove their power. A rationalist approach to ideas envisages ideas as having force alongside material interests, but by defining ideas as mere beliefs it becomes difficult to see them as (effective) weapons in policy debates.<sup>73</sup>

Insisting on the distinctions between ideas and interests on the one hand and ideas and beliefs on the other does not however entail that each may not interact

'variation in policy across countries, or over time, is entirely accounted for by changes in factors other than ideas' with their belief that 'ideas and interests are not phenomenologically separate'. See Kathryn Sikkink, 'The Power of Principled Ideas: Human Rights Policies in the United States and Western Europe' in Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane (eds), *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 26–7.

<sup>68</sup> The philosophy of human altruism makes this case. See Samir Okasha, 'Biological Altruism' in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2003).

<sup>69</sup> Jutta Weldes, *Constructing National Interests: The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> Judith Goldstein, *Ideas, Interests, and American Trade Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 11.

<sup>71</sup> Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, 'Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework' in *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 3, 20.

<sup>72</sup> Laffey and Weldes, 'Beyond Belief' p. 206.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

with or influence the others. Ideas may fill gaps in policymakers' knowledge of interests.<sup>74</sup> Ideas can establish the framework within which interests are pursued and resolve uncertainty about how to pursue them. Thus, for Weber, 'not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the "world images" that have been created by ideas have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest.'<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Goldstein and Keohane's 'typology of belief' provides us with an indication of how individuals' worldviews and ethical ideas may prioritise certain ideas over others or lead them to particular ideas.<sup>76</sup>

Phenomenological separation of ideas, beliefs and interests allows us to isolate three very specific types of ideas involved in policy formulation. The first, scientific ideas, tell us about how the world works. Scientific ideas establish the relations between things in the international environment. Examples might include the stopping power of water, or the idea that liberal democracies will not go to war with each other. These ideas establish the boundaries of possibility for state strategies by describing and interpreting the relations of empirical realities in the international system.

Second, what one might call intentional ideas, are normative suggestions that seek to establish goals for foreign policy. These types of ideas reflect ethical prejudices on the part of their proponents. They articulate in the realm of foreign policy what the nation should seek to do, simply because it is the right thing to do. For example, a state may seek to use its foreign policy to advance the cause of human rights. It should be noted that this is not the same as it being in that state's interests to promote human rights. Whilst intentional ideas that run counter to the national interest are less likely to gain support among either elites, bureaucracies or the national public, there is nothing inherent in the concept that says that they may not – the separation of ideas and interests renders this a contingent rather than logical relation. So rather than seeing, for example, financial aid to impoverished countries in terms of powerful countries wielding economic power for their own ends, or alternatively as part of a process that constitutes the social identities of rich and poor countries, a neoclassical realist approach allows us to view aid as an intentional idea translated into policy because it is simply considered by a state's foreign policy executive as the right thing to do.

Third are what one might call operational ideas. These may be scientific or normative statements that recommend the means by which a certain end should be pursued. As in the case of intentional ideas they may be based on ethical judgements, but they more often arise from the holding of a particular causal belief about how which policies produce which outcomes. A neoclassical realist account might therefore explain the differing approaches of states towards similar threat by reference to differing operational ideas as much as differing coercive capabilities.

Apart from creating a typology of what ideas are, the other question that neoclassical realism must address if it is to properly integrate ideas is how ideas

<sup>74</sup> Marks, *The Formation of European Policy in Post-Franco Spain*, p. 28.

<sup>75</sup> Max Weber, 'The Social Psychology of the World Religions' in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1948), p. 280.

<sup>76</sup> Goldstein and Keohane, 'Ideas and Foreign Policy' pp. 8–10.

work in the process of foreign policy to mediate structural pressures. Why are some ideas adopted as policy where others founder? What precipitates changes in prevailing ideas?

*The intervening variable: ideas within nations*

A neoclassical realist approach might usefully require that ideas are treated as objects with force, that is, as elements of power. However, it should be obvious that the relationship between ideas and power is rather different from the relationship between, say, money and power, or military hardware and power. Whereas material capabilities' power is largely intrinsic and fixed, the power of an idea is both dependent and variable. Therefore I suggest locations at which ideas may intervene at the unit level: through the specific individuals that hold them; through institutions in which they may become embedded; and through the broader culture of the state.

Fundamentally the state is made up of individuals. Individuals construct systems, institutions and bureaucracies; individuals lead and follow; individuals make decisions. On what basis do individuals decide which ideas to hold? The first is the quality of the idea itself – its internal coherence, its congruence with known realities. The second key to success resides in the speaker himself – his intellectual status, his eloquence of advocacy. Thus the power of an idea to persuade others at any one moment in history resides both in itself, and in the power of those who hold it. The causal effect of ideas on policies has tended to be displaced onto the political effects of individuals in IR theory, so that the persuasiveness of ideas is assumed rather than examined, and treated as constant.<sup>77</sup> It is however, important to recognise that some ideas are 'better' than others, and are more likely to progress into the policymaking arena, where institutional factors may then come into play.

This is not to deny the crucial role of forces exogenous to them that push certain ideas to heart of policymaking. Whilst the degree to which ideas generate popular support may provide them with power mediated through public opinion, ideas can take a shortcut to policy success if they have the backing of individuals and institutions that themselves have power. The character of these 'couriers' of ideas that may be as important, if not more so, than anything intrinsic to the idea itself.<sup>78</sup> At the individual level then, neoclassical realism understands that the ideas held by powerful actors within the state matter. Whilst the intrinsic power of a particular idea makes its progress into such positions more likely, the ideas that will impact most upon foreign policy are those held by those in decision-making positions in the state and those who directly advise them. Thus as Mead notes, 'It

<sup>77</sup> Albert S. Yee, 'The Causal Effects of Ideas on Policies' *International Organization*, 50:1 (1996), p. 86. For psychological approaches to the role of ideas in policy see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976); Jeffrey Legro, 'The Transformation of Policy Ideas' *American Journal of Political Science*, 44: 3 (2000); David O. Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis, *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>78</sup> Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty*, p. 68.

matters who the President is. If Theodore Roosevelt and not Woodrow Wilson had been President when World War I broke out, American and world history might have taken a very different turn.<sup>79</sup>

The second location at which ideas may impact at the unit level occurs when individuals with shared ideas coalesce into groups, organisations, and common practices within the state to form institutions that operate in both formal and informal sectors of the policymaking process. The formation of institutions reflects the fact that ideas that are somehow embedded in particular structures are possessed of greater power. Institutions can act as couriers for ideas in three ways.<sup>80</sup> ‘Epistemic communities’ of experts have the policy-relevant knowledge to exert influence on the positions adopted by a wide range of actors. The extent of the influence of such groups is dependent on their ability to occupy influential positions within bureaucracies from where they may consolidate their power, thereby institutionalising the influence of the community.<sup>81</sup> However, their ability to infiltrate bureaucratic posts will depend – at least in part – on the receptiveness of the existing bureaucratic order to their ideas.<sup>82</sup>

A second means by which institutions act as couriers is by the encasing of ideas in formal rules and procedures at the creation of the institution itself. Once they have become embedded in this way, those ideas with which the institution was founded can continue to influence policy even though the interests or ideas of their creators may have changed. Thus, ‘when institutions intervene, the impact of ideas can be prolonged for decades or even generations.’<sup>83</sup>

In both of these ways, ‘ideas acquire force when they find organizational means of expression’.<sup>84</sup> The third way in which ideas can impact is through the structural arrangements institutions create. These structures set up road-blocks and through-routes which determine the ease with which ideas can gain access to the policy process. Indeed, the structure of the institutional framework may determine the political and administrative ‘viability’ of particular ideas, that is, their ability to appeal to current conditions. Institutional structure therefore ensures that policy-makers only have access to a limited set of ideas, whether those are percolated up to them or searched for by them.<sup>85</sup> In this way, the ideas that form what some refer to as ‘strategic culture’ may provide a reliable guide to a state’s likely reaction to shifts in the structure of the international system.<sup>86</sup>

Underlying both individuals and institutions are the ideas contained in the broader cultural context within which the state is located. Ideas that are embedded in social norms, patterns of discourse and collective identities become accepted, ‘instinctual’ parts of the social world and are experienced as part of a natural

<sup>79</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America’s Grand Strategy in a World at Risk*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 2004), pp. 18–9.

<sup>80</sup> Yee, ‘Causal Effects of Ideas’ pp. 86–94.

<sup>81</sup> Peter M. Haas, ‘Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination’ *International Organization*, 46:1 (1992), pp. 2–4.

<sup>82</sup> For a more detailed overview of how ‘idea-infused’ institutions operate within the bureaucratic order, see Daniel W. Drezner, ‘Ideas, Bureaucratic Politics and the Crafting of Foreign Policy’ *American Journal of Political Science*, 44:4 (2000).

<sup>83</sup> Goldstein and Keohane, ‘Ideas and Foreign Policy’ p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> Peter A. Hall, *Governing the Economy: The Politics of State Intervention in Britain and France, Europe and the International Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 1986), p. 280.

<sup>85</sup> Yee, ‘Causal Effects of Ideas’ p. 92.

<sup>86</sup> Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*, pp. 21–30.



objective reality.<sup>87</sup> In this way cultural variables subconsciously set the limits and terms of debate for both individuals and institutions, and so have ‘a profound effect on the strategic behaviour of states.’<sup>88</sup> Mediated through institutions and individuals who are blinded to potential alternatives, ideas embedded in national culture therefore have the potential to explain ‘why some states act contrary to the structural imperatives of the international system.’<sup>89</sup>

The power of ideas therefore rests on ‘the ability of believers in ideas to alter the costs and benefits facing those who are in a position to promote or hinder the policies that the ideas demand.’<sup>90</sup> In the process of foreign policy ‘engineering’, organisations and the ideas they espouse or represent vie with one another for dominance and autonomy.<sup>91</sup> Decisions taken reflect the process of formulating the choices to be presented.<sup>92</sup> Throughout the process of making foreign policy powerful ideas – whether that power resides in their couriers or is internal to the ideas themselves – are prevailing over weaker ideas.<sup>93</sup>

This conception fits with other neoclassical works that focus on the machinations of domestic politics as the intervening variable between systemic pressures and the production of unit-level responses. Randall Schweller has been prominent in identifying the constraints that domestic political processes impose on states that cause them to ‘underbalance’ in the face of external threats.<sup>94</sup> Schweller’s argument, although arguably more sophisticated, is similar to Zakaria’s concept of ‘state power’ and Taliaferro’s resource extraction model, in that they focus on the way in which domestic political processes affect the *ability* of the state to act in international politics.<sup>95</sup> The implication of these types of account is that states with similar internal bureaucratic structures will address similar threats in similar ways. A theory of ideas however, whilst incorporating these insights about the character of domestic politics, focuses on how prevailing ideas influence the *type* of foreign policy response to structural imperatives. It can therefore explain how similarly structured states may respond in different ways to similar threats by reference to differing prevailing ideas within the state, whether that be as a result of the particular individuals advocating the ideas, broader cultural preferences, national

<sup>87</sup> Sheri Berman, ‘Ideas, Norms and Culture in Political Analysis’ *Comparative Politics*, 33:2 (2001), pp. 238–9.

<sup>88</sup> Dueck, ‘New Perspectives’ p. 215.

<sup>89</sup> Michael C. Desch, ‘Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies’ *International Security*, 23:1 (1998), p. 167.

<sup>90</sup> Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty*, p. 58.

<sup>91</sup> Philip Zelikow, ‘Foreign Policy Engineering: From Theory to Practice and Back Again’ *International Security*, 18:4 (1994), p. 153.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>93</sup> A classic and controversial example of powerful ideas affecting foreign policy processes is the Israel lobby in the United States. Here democratic and religious ideas both have strong congruence with prevailing American ideology, and powerful couriers in think-tanks, academia and the media enhance the influence of those ideas. See John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

<sup>94</sup> Randall L. Schweller, ‘Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing’ *International Security*, 29:2 (2004); Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*, *Princeton Studies in International History and Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 2006).

<sup>95</sup> Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, ‘State Building for Future Wars: Neoclassical Realism and the Resource-Extractive State’ *Security Studies*, 15:3 (2006); Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*.

history or whatever. The response as understood through the prism of ideas can then account for both overreaction and underreaction, as well as for the pursuit of goals unrelated to the notion of threat.

*A neoclassical realist model of grand strategy formation*

We have now set out both the scope of grand strategy and the way neoclassical realism should conceptualise the role of ideas in policymaking. What follows is an analysis of the making of grand strategy. How does grand strategy operate? What's involved in the process of its formulation? What determines the outcome of that process? Why does it change? These questions and the answers to them may serve to constitute the beginnings of a defined, systematic neoclassical realist approach that views states' grand strategies as its primary analysis and is able to specify the domestic ideational variables that intervene between system structure and foreign policy outcomes.

Grand strategy involves a number of processes that take place within states, 'defined as the central decision-making institutions and roles [that] can be treated as unified actors pursuing aims understood in terms of the national interest.'<sup>96</sup> Neoclassical realists do admit that the identities and scope of those central decision-making actors depends on the specific characteristics of a country's political system, but retains a 'top-down' conception of the state in which systemic forces are mediated by a national security or foreign policy executive.<sup>97</sup> That executive may however be influenced in their thinking by the cumulative actions of actors as diverse as policy makers, lobbyists, citizens' groups and businesses, and by the process of bargaining with them.<sup>98</sup> Thus 'leaders define the 'national interests' and conduct foreign policy based on their assessment of relative power and other states' intentions, but always subject to domestic constraints.'<sup>99</sup> By using a plural definition of the state neoclassical realism recognises that processes within states are influenced not only by exogenous systemic factors and considerations of power and security, but also by cultural and ideological bias, domestic political considerations and prevailing ideas.

<sup>96</sup> Krasner, *Defending the National Interest*, pp. 12–3. This definition can be developed by disaggregating the democratic 'state' into two elements, the representative (legislative) element and the foreign policy executive (composed of high-ranking bureaucrats and elected executive officials charged with the overall conduct of foreign affairs). Strategy derives from the balance of the necessary tensions between the societal pressure of the representative element which acts in the interests of society, and the strategic pressures of the executive which acts in the interests for society. David A. Lake, 'The State and American Trade Strategy in the Pre-Hegemonic Era' *International Organization*, 42:1 (1988).

<sup>97</sup> Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman, *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy*, p. 25.

<sup>98</sup> Mead, *Power Terror Peace and War*, p. 17. See also Norrin M Ripsman, 'Neoclassical Realism and Domestic Interest Groups' in Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell and Norrin M. Ripsman (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>99</sup> Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman, *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy*, pp. 25–6.

*The strategic assessment – defining national security threats*

The first, and most significant task of grand strategy formation involves the identification of threats to the security of the state.<sup>100</sup> Neoclassical realism begins with a traditionally realist assessment of the strategic context of the state, that considers the geopolitical structure of the international system and identifies the material balance of power that defines and prioritises national interests and the threats to those interests.<sup>101</sup> It should be remembered that such an assessment is by no means a *fait accompli*, and that different assessments may follow from particular historical, ideological, political or ideational biases.<sup>102</sup> Clausewitz recognised that perfect information was rarely a feature of war and therefore required that officers ‘possess a standard of judgement’ and be ‘guided by the laws of probability’.<sup>103</sup> Morgenthau too, noted that:

uncertainty of power calculations is inherent in the nature of national power itself. It will therefore come into play even in the most simple pattern of balance of power; that is, when one nation opposes another. This uncertainty is, however, immeasurably magnified when [the balance of power] is composed not of single units but of alliances.<sup>104</sup>

Thus uncertainty deriving from imperfect intelligence and the machinations of structure, plus the sheer volume of information involved, may create an imbalance between complexity and the analytic capacity of individuals involved in strategic planning.<sup>105</sup> Such an imbalance creates a void that can only be filled by the scientific ideas held by decision-makers, so that ‘the greater the ambiguity, the greater the impact of preconceptions.’<sup>106</sup> Having said all that, it should be clear that many features of the international system can be known with a satisfactory degree of certainty, and therefore a consensus on a strategic assessment is more likely to derive from clear facts than any collective cognitive bias. Still, it remains important to recognise that ideas may intervene to fill the knowledge gaps between the actual strategic situation and the conclusions of a strategic assessment.<sup>107</sup>

A consideration of the empirical facts of the balance of power is not on its own enough to identify a threat to a state.<sup>108</sup> Threats come to be identified on the basis

<sup>100</sup> Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, p. 13.

<sup>101</sup> Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*; Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*; Rose, ‘Neoclassical Realism’.

<sup>102</sup> Steven E. Lobell, ‘Threat Assessment, the State and Foreign Policy’ in Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell, and Norrin M Ripsman (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 46–56, 61–68.

<sup>103</sup> Clausewitz, Howard, and Paret, *On War*, p. 117.

<sup>104</sup> Morgenthau and Thompson, *Politics among Nations*, p. 225.

<sup>105</sup> Michael Fitzsimmons, ‘The Problem of Uncertainty in Strategic Planning’ *Survival*, 48:4 (Winter 2006–7), p. 135.

<sup>106</sup> Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1982), p. 103.

<sup>107</sup> A number of studies have identified cases where misperception of the strategic situation by opinion formers and leaders within states was instrumental in policy outcomes. See Thomas J. Christensen, ‘Perceptions and Alliances in Europe, 1865–1940’ *International Organization*, 51:1 (1997); Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance*. Morgenthau specified three ‘typical errors of evaluation’: 1) disregarding the relativity of power by regarding the power of one particular nation as absolute; 2) assuming permanency of a certain factor of power when in fact most are subject to dynamic change; and 3) attributing to a single factor decisive importance. Morgenthau and Thompson, *Politics among Nations*, p. 174.

<sup>108</sup> Stephen M. Walt, ‘Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power’ *International Security*, 9:4 (1985), pp. 8–9.

of both capability and intent, and in this latter category assessments are more vulnerable to be profoundly affected by perceptions of other states' strategy, culture, ideology and history.<sup>109</sup> Even where threats are agreed upon, different operational ideas may contest the ranking of those threats in terms of imminence and scale. More profoundly, particular scientific or intentional ideas may consider some features of individual states or of the international system itself as simply threatening *per se*, even in the absence of targeted capability or intent.<sup>110</sup>

### *The means of strategy – power and appropriateness*

The second element in the formulation of grand strategy is the selection of means to address identified threats. This process involves consideration of both what means are available, which will work most effectively, and whether their use can be justified. States have a choice of means with which they may pursue strategic goals, and access to differing aspects of power which they can mobilise against threats, from the soft power of cultural norms to the hard power of military coercion.<sup>111</sup>

Actors within states may hold competing operational ideas about which means are most appropriate to address particular threats. For example, within militaries the different forces tend to hold competing ideas about the effectiveness of their respective methods. Elsewhere within the state, some actors may consider that particular goals require the use of economic sanctions and military 'sticks', whereas other actors prefer to rely on the 'carrots' of trade and softer elements of power. Not only do actors hold different ideas about which means will work, there exists a competition of ideas concerning which means are ethically acceptable. Correspondingly, actors will have different ideas about which means are appropriate, which may reflect both long-standing cultural factors and prevailing domestic political attitudes. Should condom distribution or abstinence programs form the basis of aid to address HIV epidemics? Are sanctions justifiable if they hurt the people as well as their despotic government?

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., pp. 12–3. Henry Nau goes further, to plausibly argue that power can only really threaten when national identities diverge, and that we should therefore usefully think of the international system in terms of a 'distribution of identity', alongside the distribution of power. Henry R. Nau, *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy*, Cornell Studies in Political Economy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>110</sup> For example, internal instability may be seen as a threat (UN Resolution 1556 describes genocide in Darfur as 'a threat to international peace and security'). Some argue that dictatorships, irrespective of their particular character, are necessarily threatening. Robert D. Kaplan, 'Old States, New Threats', *Washington Post* (23 April 2006).

<sup>111</sup> Walter Russell Mead disaggregates this spectrum to isolate four tools of strategy: 'sharp power', 'sticky power', 'sweet power' and 'hegemonic power'. See Mead, *Power Terror Peace and War*, pp. 26–58.

*Auxiliary goals – strategy beyond the national interest*

Once threats have been identified, ranked and the means to address them decided, the third, tertiary element of grand strategy identifies auxiliary goals and selects the appropriate means to attain them. In an anarchic system with uncertainty of intentions, the primary purpose of the state is to ensure its own survival using the resources available to it. Therefore the scope of a state's auxiliary goals will be constrained by the availability of resources, and so some states in the system may not have auxiliary goals at all, preferring instead to engage all their available resources in the pursuit of security. On the other hand, some states may not have enough resources to provide for security and, considering the attempt fruitless, may therefore instead devote the resources they have entirely towards auxiliary goals. Strong states have excess resources that will allow them to both guarantee their security and pursue auxiliary international goals. Auxiliary goals may be expansionist in terms of territory or economic power; they may create interests for a state based on historic or cultural ties; they may seek to further ethical concerns or political ideas; they may be directed towards 'global' interests. The choice of which auxiliary goals to pursue and with which resources to pursue them will always be the result of ideational debate within the state, since systemic imperatives have already been addressed in one form or another.

It could be countered that any free resources are illusory, as security needs grow with states' disposable power. However, in order for power to be disposable it must by definition be a free resource. The logic of this critique is that at all times the resources of a state are equal to or less than that state's security requirements, which seems empirically dubious. Rather than new threats instantaneously appearing to occupy resources as states expand it seems more likely that states use 'national security' rhetoric as a justification for auxiliary goals selected for those increased capabilities.

As this section has shown, grand strategy emerges through these processes of empirical assessment and ideational competition within the state. Although in most cases the primary requirement is for security from threats, placing a systemic analysis of the distribution of power at the heart of grand-strategic decision-making, grand strategy involves much more than simply the identification of, and response to, threats. At the heart of the process, strategic ideas provide policymakers with guidance in conditions of uncertainty, reflecting the considerable autonomy and scope for creativity on the part of the state to use ideas to shape grand strategy in response to external pressures.<sup>112</sup>

The conceptual framework of neorealism can therefore only have a constraining, rather than determining, effect on grand strategic outcomes. Conversely, the insights of neoclassical realism fit well with a process of grand strategy formation that is plural, constrained by systemic imperatives and yet determined by ideational factors at unit level. Neoclassical realism allows us to understand the choices made between the wide range of grand-strategic options that typically remain following the strategic assessment, choices that are determined by the ideas and positions of individuals and groups that comprise the state.

<sup>112</sup> Colin Dueck, 'Ideas and Alternatives in American Grand Strategy, 2000–2004' *Review of International Studies*, 30 (2004), pp. 521–23.

*Accounting for grand strategic change*

Neoclassical realism therefore points us towards the processes by which grand strategy comes to be made. However, it is equally important to be able to trace how shifting factors affect strategic thinking, and to understand what is sufficient for that to be significant, that is to say, what is required for grand strategy to change? How and why does strategic adjustment take place?

The first question here is what constitutes 'change'. Efforts to create typologies of strategy have had mixed success. Although we may recognise and contrast 'expansionist' and 'status quo' strategies;<sup>113</sup> or 'compellent', 'deterrent' and 'accommodationist' strategies,<sup>114</sup> it seems unlikely that states' grand strategies fit neatly into these few typologies, or that significant change in grand strategy would necessarily be reflected by a move from one typology to another.

Rather than seeking to identify strategic adjustment in terms of moves from one defined typology to another, Dueck has suggested that we measure change by reference to the policy instruments typically associated with strategic decision-making. Thus we should look for shifts in areas such as military deployments and spending; alliance commitments; foreign aid; and willingness to commit to diplomatic initiatives, as well as considering the overall tone of a state's stance towards its adversaries and the international system in general.<sup>115</sup>

Of course, minor alterations of policy need not indicate strategic adjustment. Strategy is idealised in nature, and contingencies and compromises will impel minor changes in foreign policy as a state is faced with the realities of international politics and picks where and when to fight its battles. Dueck therefore rightly identifies that 'tinkering' takes place within a strategic approach without constituting strategic adjustment. He identifies two levels of strategic adjustment – first-order changes entail a 'massive shift in the extent of strategic commitments' and second-order changes are 'less fundamental'.<sup>116</sup> Dueck rightly points us in the direction of policy instruments as our variable factors, and we might look for rhetorical shifts to indicate whether a shift is 'massive' or 'less fundamental'. So whilst foreign policy tinkering will be justified by both the pre-existing ends in sight and the means to achieve them, strategic adjustment means a shift in the goals and/or the methods of the state in international relations.

Thus we might propose that a first-order change should involve a significant shift in the goals of the state, that is, the identification of a new threat; a change in the ranking of serious threats; or the addition or removal of a significant

<sup>113</sup> Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, Rev. and enl. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 182. The author mistakenly excludes the possibility of declinist grand strategies, perhaps because of an underlying assumption that strategy refers to a state's purposeful interactions with others, rendering a minimally activist strategy almost a contradiction in terms. Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton, N.J.; Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 8. On declinist grand strategies see Paul M. Kennedy, 'Grand Strategies and Less-Than-Grand Strategies: A Twentieth Century Critique' in Michael Howard et al (eds), *War, Strategy, and International Politics: Essays in Honour of Sir Michael Howard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 239–40; Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500–2000* (London: Fontana, 1988), pp. 534–5.

<sup>114</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 67–8.

<sup>115</sup> Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*, p. 12.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12–3.

auxiliary goal. It may also involve, though need not involve, a shift in the means used to pursue those goals. By contrast, a second-order change should involve only a significant shift in the primary means by which to pursue existing goals, that is to say, a shift from a focus on one form of power to another.

It is noted that this distinction may be over-simplistic, and that it is by no means certain that first order changes will have greater systemic impact than second order changes. A state which moves from a grand strategy of democratic enlargement by economic and diplomatic means to the same strategy achieved through the use of military force will clearly have a greater impact on the grand-strategic reactions of others than a state that gives up an auxiliary goal that was supported by little power. If one were able to specify the relation between different elements of power in terms of their coercive impact, one could rank the goals of the state in terms of the power allocated to them and so better specify the impact of a grand strategic shift. But for our purposes here it is enough to distinguish between shifts in goals and shifts in means.

What factors can account for a grand strategic change in ends or means on the part of a state? The neorealist position focuses on shifts in international system, that is, shifts in national security doctrine stem from shifts in the international distribution of power that alter the state's relative position.<sup>117</sup> Patterns of strategic adjustment are determined by structural pressures at the systemic level, and the pressure of competition is such that states become 'undifferentiated' in their strategic behaviour.<sup>118</sup> However, neorealist approaches are unspecific regarding the causal processes that turn systemic change into unit-level strategic shifts. Unless the international environment is especially highly constrained, that is, external threats to national interests and values are particularly high; it is difficult to deduce security postures directly from the balance of material capabilities.<sup>119</sup>

Waltz himself admits that 'in the absence of counterweights, a country's internal impulses prevail'.<sup>120</sup> The neoclassical realist position takes that admission further, arguing that variables at the unit-level – in the ideas and perceptions of actors within the state – play a 'pivotal' role in the selection of a grand strategy.<sup>121</sup> Thus grand strategic change can result from shifts at either the unit or the systemic level. Since the most important element in international relations remains the balance of power between states, changes in the international distribution of power encourage strategic adjustment. At the same time, it is essential to understand the nature of the states in that balance of power in order to understand the structure of relations between them. States do not necessarily regard power as threatening; it is the combination of power and nature that defines enmity in the international environment. It is shifts in the level of external *threat* that are the most likely cause of strategic adjustment.<sup>122</sup>

Of secondary importance, the introduction of intervening ideational variables means that neoclassical realism is able to account for grand strategic change in an

<sup>117</sup> Emily O. Goldman, 'New Threats, New Identities, and New Ways of War: The Sources of Change in National Security Doctrine' *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 24:2 (2001), p. 54.

<sup>118</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 74–7, 93–7, 127–8.

<sup>119</sup> Goldman, 'New Threats' p. 54.

<sup>120</sup> Kenneth Waltz, 'Structural Realism after the Cold War' *International Security*, 25:1 (2000), p. 24.

<sup>121</sup> Rosecrance and Stein, 'Beyond Realism' p. 5.

<sup>122</sup> Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*, p. 18.

unchanging systemic environment, by observing shifts at the unit that drive strategic adjustment. These shifts may occur within the state, or in the wider populous.<sup>123</sup> Shifts in personnel, institutional power, or the popularity of particular ideas may precipitate changes in goals or encourage reassessment of the means by which to pursue them. Such shifts may be driven from the bottom up, by electoral results or by the use of bureaucratic leverage; or from the top down, in the form of the executive's power of patronage and final decision.

### Whither realism?

A neoclassical realist theory that recognises ideas as the key intervening variable between the pressures of system structure and the resulting grand strategy of states both has predictive capacity and the ability to provide rigorous historical explanations. However, a critical tension exists in the approach: in admitting that ideas can have genuine impact, how is that a genuinely realist approach? Indeed, if the ideas in question reject realism, how can a realist theory account for them: would it not be better to simply say that realism tells us little about state behaviour in these situations?<sup>124</sup>

Whilst it might be argued that this argument rests on an overly narrow understanding of realism that doesn't reflect its intellectual history, this is more than a semantic criticism about what we call 'realism' and what we don't.<sup>125</sup> There are essentially two critiques here: first, how does neoclassical realism account for and understand contra-realist ideas; and second, in what sense does the theory remain distinctly realist. In the first case, it should be remembered that this is a descriptive theory and not a prescriptive one – it does not suggest a course of action on the part of states, rather it accepts that different states will react to the international environment in different ways because of the different ideas in play within the state itself. It therefore need not, and does not, deny that contra-realist ideas exist, and that they may be in play within states.

In principle then, this neoclassical realist theory does not deny that a state might place such at ideas at the very heart of its policymaking and so choose to pursue a contra-realist grand strategy. However, it does contend that the likelihood of that strategy being either maintained or successfully implemented is exceptionally unlikely. Because system structure is the preeminent variable, a state would require a near-monopoly of power in the international system to pursue a grand strategy that went against its interests as defined by that structure. In such a situation, the very structure of the system would be defined by a single unit that used its power in pursuit of particular contra-realist ideas. The closest potential example in the Westphalian era would be the United States' institutionalisation of

<sup>123</sup> For example, Peter Trubowitz argues that significant American strategic adjustment coincided with and grew out of shifts in the underlying regional structure of political and economic power within the United States. Peter Trubowitz, *Defining the National Interest: Conflict and Change in American Foreign Policy, American Politics and Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>124</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for *Review of International Studies* for this point.

<sup>125</sup> For a critique of over-simplistic understandings of realism see Cozette, 'Reclaiming the Critical Dimension of Realism'.



its abundant power after the Second World War, although the extent to which this was genuinely contra-realist is highly debatable.<sup>126</sup> So the point here is that although there is no *logical* reason – despite the primacy of systemic imperatives and realist factors – that contra-realist ideas may define the strategies of states, in practice this is extremely unlikely. Contra-realist ideas are likely to be confined to the margins of strategy, either as poorly resourced auxiliary goals or as sops to legitimise more realist means and ends, standing ready to be jettisoned when the system starts to bite.

The second issue is the extent to which a theory that admits to even just the logical possibility of contra-realist outcomes can be considered realist. Yet the ideas that might produce such outcomes are very much secondary variables in the theory. Systemic and material factors remain the primary determinants of grand strategy, and the realist tools of material power the preeminent modes of action in international politics. Indeed, we can identify a number of core realist principles to which this argument subscribes.

First, the state is the most appropriate unit of analysis in international relations. Whilst the definition of the state represented here is somewhat looser than some earlier realist work, the central organising principle remains that of humans arranging themselves into self-interested political groups whose primary aim is the survival of that group. Second, the nature of the international system is anarchic. Even though states take the edge off anarchy through institution-building, fundamentally their relations revolve around the competition for scarce resources in the absence of an external arbiter of disputes. Third, power is the essential tool that those states have at their disposal in that competition, and the most effective types of power are material capabilities.<sup>127</sup>

Where the neoclassical approach departs from neorealist theories – but not from classical approaches – is that it does not posit a direct logical connection between the nature of the system and the way states will behave. Instead that connection is indirect, mediated through the ideas present in grand strategy selection. What states identify as their security interests and goals of strategy is determined by the nature of their analysis of the structure of the system and the power of the ideas that are present in the policymaking process. It is because neoclassical realism relies on knowledge of both the material structure of the international system *and* the ideational situation within the state that it is equipped to illuminate when and why relations between states will deviate from bald neorealist theory; but that does not mean that its outcomes are somehow non-realist, it is just that they will form richer explanations and more specific predictions.

<sup>126</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, *Princeton Studies in International History and Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>127</sup> This section draws on the lists of realism's core tenets in Stephen G. Brooks, 'Dueling Realisms' *International Organization*, 51:3 (1997); Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, 'Is Anybody Still a Realist?' *International Security*, 24:2 (1999); Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman, *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy*.

### Conclusion: implications of a neoclassical realist model of grand strategy

Neoclassical realism remains a structural realist theory of international relations. It prioritises and stresses ‘power, interests and coalition making as the central elements in a theory of politics’ but seeks to recapture classical realists’ appreciation that we need to look within societies as well as between them, to deny that states are simple, ‘irreducible atoms whose power and interests are to be assessed.’<sup>128</sup> Understanding how and when ideas may intervene in the unit-level processes of grand strategy formation allows us to posit three hypothetical scenarios where states are likely to be more influenced by their ideas than their interests in the international environment.

First, states that are very powerful are the most likely to pursue ideas-based policies. We see this in the tendency of great powers with a surfeit of material capabilities to attempt visionary world-making. With their territorial and political integrity secured, interests offer few constraints to check the progress of grand ideas in the policymaking process, and the international system poses few constraints on a state whose material power and ideational dominance largely defines international structure. The question ‘what must we do?’ is replaced by ‘what shall we do?’ Hegemonic or imperial states therefore have power that can be used for objectives that are not associated with clearly definable needs, and in such situations, a foreign policy based on intentional ideas is the likely course, in which ideological goals become ends in themselves.<sup>129</sup> As Jeffrey Legro notes, ‘great power ideas matter because they guide foreign policy and are a building block of international life’ and when they change they do so with ‘earthquake-like effects’ that make as well as unmake the prevailing international order.<sup>130</sup> A neoclassical realist theory of the role of ideas in grand strategy understands that the more power is centralised within the international system, the more we should expect the grand strategy of the dominant states to be defined by their strategic ideas, and can account for the fact that those great power strategies may change for internal as well as external reasons.

The second scenario involves states where particular ideas are highly institutionalised or culturally embedded. In this scenario the impact of ideas is likely to be strong and consistent throughout the policy process. Ideas that form a strong component of national identity or strategic culture are likely to be almost unconsciously shared among ruling elites and foreign policy institutions. These ideas filter and limit options, ruling out policies that fail to resonate with the national political culture.<sup>131</sup>

Third, in states where decision-making power is highly concentrated in one, or a few individuals, or in a particular institution in which particular ideas are embedded, the rationality of numbers does not have a chance to operate, and so

<sup>128</sup> Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 19.

<sup>129</sup> Krasner, *Defending the National Interest* p. 346.

<sup>130</sup> Jeffrey Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 1.

<sup>131</sup> Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders*.

the potential for particular ideas to be placed centrally within the state's policy is increased. It is this that accounts for the unpredictability of dictatorial regimes.<sup>132</sup>

Furthermore, neoclassical realism as a structural theory provides us with a number of insights about the composition of the international system. In this sense neoclassical realism can be viewed as a logical extension of neorealism.<sup>133</sup> First, neoclassical realism should be able to recognise that most of what are described by realists as system changes are actually shifts in the grand strategies of the units that make up that system. The balance of the system itself is made up of, in the main, the alignments of the grand strategies of states: not a balance of power by itself, but a balance of power and posture, a balance of goals and the means that have been placed in pursuit of them. A purely structural realist explanation cannot offer a comprehensive account of why a state's capabilities may decline in relation to a strategic competitor.<sup>134</sup> To do so, we must take into account both the grand-strategic choices of the state, and the strength of the state, that is its ability to bring those choices to bear.<sup>135</sup>

It follows that neoclassical realism considers the occurrence of structural change that is unrelated to one or more states' grand-strategic behaviour to be very rare. Important change can of course derive from long term changes in geography, resource availability and the availability of technology.<sup>136</sup> But such change is systemic rather than structural, in that it defines the rules by which interaction takes place. Most structural change should actually be understood as a reflection of a grand-strategic choice by one or more states that changes the pattern of interaction between them. Although neorealist theory defines a system as composed of structure and of interacting units, as Barry Buzan has pointed out, Waltz's emphatic distinction between unit-level theories and systemic theories 'and his usage of terms such as "systems theory" and "systems level" makes the term system effectively a synonym for structure.'<sup>137</sup> Neoclassical realism, on the other hand, recognises as classical realism did before it that the international system is composed of units, their interactions, and structure. The system has structure, but the system defines structure only in as much as its logic informs the interactions of states that constitute structure. Interaction, therefore, 'is crucial to the concept of system, for without it, the term system has no meaning'.<sup>138</sup>

Since the structure of the system creates constraints for states' grand strategies, then in a very fundamental way, states' grand strategies and the international system are mutually constituted. The nature of the units and the character of their

<sup>132</sup> Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p. 291.

<sup>133</sup> Rathbun, 'A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism'.

<sup>134</sup> William C. Wohlforth, 'Realism and the End of the Cold War' *International Security*, 19:3 (1995), p. 107.

<sup>135</sup> For example, Christensen discusses the 'political hurdles to mobilisation' Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, p. 14. Similarly, Zakaria defines state power as the government's ability to put national resources to the ends of its choice. Therefore, societies with weak states are unable to exploit their resources fully, so that only strong states can successfully pursue expansionist grand strategies. Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power*, pp. 38–9.

<sup>136</sup> For example, Goldman notes that air power, nuclear weapons and the information age have all reduced the 'space' between states, effectively altering the nature of their environment. Goldman, 'New Threats' p. 48.

<sup>137</sup> Barry Buzan, Charles A. Jones, and Richard Little, *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism, New Directions in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 28.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

interactions both create and are informed by structure. That is to say, the structure that informs and constrains states' grand strategic choices is itself constituted by the grand strategic choices of states.

Thus, in this vision of the international system, and true to the primacy neoclassical realism places on the imperatives of power, the most important states remain those that have the greatest resources or that hold the balance of power. However, it is not only the amount of power resources that determines structure, but the purpose to which the strongest states put their resources. Thus by reviving classical realism's insights about the state, neoclassical realism is better able to explain first and second order changes in grand strategy that are not wholly derived from a shift in international structure.

The recognition of intervening ideational variables in neoclassical realism is particularly important when considering their impact on the strongest states. Since the interaction of states' grand strategies constitutes structure, the grand strategic choices of the strongest states are crucial to an understanding of the international system at any given moment. A neoclassical realist approach is all the more appropriate given that the strongest states have the greatest degree of strategic choice because they possess more power than is required to meet their basic security requirements. Looking inside the strongest states to understand the mechanisms driving their choices of auxiliary goals is necessary to provide a proper understanding of the nature of the international system itself.

To date, most neoclassical realist approaches have attempted to explain deviations from the expectations of structural realism with reference to the limited authority of the state to conduct foreign policy.<sup>139</sup> An approach that assesses the role of ideas at the unit level in grand strategy formation explains why states *choose* to act in ways which structural realism would not expect. Neoclassical realism then has the potential to defuse a number of key areas of conflict in the study of international relations. Whilst it is a positivist theory, it does not secure its rationalism on a rejection of immaterial factors such as ideas, instead it attempts to incorporate them, giving them weight as material factors have weight, and understanding the interaction between the two within the individuals and institutions that combine them. With a focus on grand strategy, neoclassical realist analysis can provide important insights about the nature of international structure and how processes both endogenous and exogenous to states can change it.

For neoclassical realists then, the international system is not the determining monolith that neorealism envisioned, a vision coloured by the admittedly highly restrictive bipolarity of the Cold War. Rather, neoclassical realists regard the structure of the international system as providing states with information about the costs and benefits of particular courses of action, but how that information is processed and weighed depends on the way states understand the world, their preferences, their ideas and their ethics. It is in this sense that neoclassical realism resuscitates the 'political' element of political realism, and in doing so revives the role of realism in fulfilling Morgenthau's dictum that the role of political scientists is to 'speak truth to power'.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>139</sup> Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman, *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy*, p. 281.

<sup>140</sup> Morgenthau, *Science: Servant or Master?*, p. 15.