

Abstract

Neoclassical realism entered the fields of International Relations and Security Studies in the late 1990s as a powerful new approach to explaining foreign policy. Building on the combination of structural and classical realism, it promised to offer better explanations than other existing approaches, such as liberalism or offensive and defensive realism. As such, it quickly became a popular and an arguably potent choice for many a scholar, progressively growing into prominence that continues to hold even as it enters its third decade. That said, there exists something of a paradox surrounding neoclassical realism: despite its popularity and scores of sound empirical works under its banner, the school appears dramatically ill-defined to the extent that nobody seems to be sure what it is and what it is about. This is where this thesis comes in to play: building on hitherto scattered and piecemeal critiques of neoclassical realism, it seeks to shed more light on the school's apparent success by providing the first truly comprehensive metatheoretical critique of neoclassical realism. Following the simple question of 'what is neoclassical realism', the thesis arrives at the conclusion that though it may be far from a uniform research program or a general theory, neoclassical realism exhibits a number of characteristics that help explain its attractiveness in the fields.