

Abstract

Neoclassical realism has the ability to advance our understanding of foreign policy responses through the recently designed neoclassical realist model. However as international relations have proven, a theory is not a concrete motionless design. Improvements can be made and the fluidity of theory allows social sciences to adapt and advance. This thesis introduces developments to neoclassical realism by stating that the individual factors and intervening variables hold varying degrees of importance that alter between each foreign policy decision. There is no overarching set of instructions for 'foreign policy', rather an adaptable model that takes into consideration the geopolitical arena, the state and the statesman. The case study chosen for this thesis is the Russian foreign policy response to annex Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. Analysis and comparisons of the variables resulted in three factors standing out as most significant. The most important influence within the *systemic stimuli* was the *nature of the strategic environment* and the window of opportunity that arose in Crimea due to Ukrainian political and military instability. The intervening variable *leader images* proved to be the decisive factor, as the consolidation of power by Vladimir Putin allowed the annexation to be completed successfully with little dispute within Russia. The intervening variable *strategic culture* also played a key role in the annexation as the strong sense of cohesion through nationalism took hold throughout Russian society. Russian foreign policy has been hijacked by the ruling elite, as was witnessed in Ukraine during 2014.