

# Rationalism and reflectivism in ir theory politics essay



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The origins of the third debate within IR theory between rationalism and reflectivism began with two initial 'great' debates. The first debate took place post-World War I, before IR had developed into a coherent academic discipline. It saw the decline of the dominant idealist or 'liberal' paradigm. Idealist theorists believed in a cooperative world where peace could be an achievable goal. A number of sceptics, including E. H. Carr, Reinhold Niebhur, Hans J. Morgenthau and Raymond Aron dismissed liberalism as 'utopian'. Their combined writings, whilst differing on many issues emphasized a 'tragic' nature of politics, where the lust for attaining power is the dominant influence on political decision making. This lust meant that war was an inevitable part of IR that could not be dismissed. This new 'realist' paradigm replaced liberalism as the dominant paradigm within international relations. It has arguably remained the primary school of thought in IR today, albeit in a different form which was developed in the second of the great debates.

In the second debate, realism was challenged internally. Realism began as collection of writings on common topics such as power, security and morality. It was not a theory per se at this point in time. Classical realists such as Niebhur, Morgenthau and Aron took historical and interpretive views of these issues, looking back at history to try and solve the dilemmas of the present. However the 1950s saw the rise of the 'behaviourist' revolution that attempted to inject scientific rigour into the social sciences. In response to this there were growing concerns that IR, and in particular realism were not 'scientific' enough as they did not conform to scientific theory and their methods of inquiry could not be quantified or tested. Kenneth Waltz's (1979)

Theory of International Politics attempted to change this by synthesizing earlier realist thought with the new methods being used within social sciences such as economics and psychology. This new theory was named 'structural realism' or 'neorealism'. Alongside neorealism came 'neoliberalism' inspired by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's (2001) book 'Power and Interdependence'. It combined earlier liberal principles with the same rationalist structural methodology as neorealism. It uses similar concepts to neorealism but showed how they could be used to explain how states cooperate rather than compete with each other. Both neorealism and neoliberalism make up the core of the 'rationalist' group of theories within IR today.

It has been hypothesized that the third debate began in the 1980s. By this point the rationalist paradigm had overtaken IR, particularly within the United States. However despite its near dominance of the discipline, a small but fierce backlash emerged against rationalist IR theory, particularly Waltzian neorealism. The initial discontent towards rationalism in IR was clearly shown within Keohane's (1988) edited volume 'Neorealism and its Critics'. It contained two chapters by the theorists Robert Cox and Richard Ashley that directly critiqued many central tenets of the rationalist paradigm, largely regarding methodology and epistemology. Around the same time, Alexander Wendt (1987) and Nicholas Onuf (2012) amongst others began to incorporate social constructivist ideas into elaborate critiques of neorealism. This would lay the foundations for the constructivist movement within IR theory. Constructivism differs from rationalist theories in that it concentrates on subjective social variables such as identity.

As the backlash against rationalism increased, neorealism and rationalist ideas began to be challenged from numerous standpoints. Taken together these dissenting views began to be named within academic circles as 'reflectivism'. It could be argued that unlike the second debate, there is no clear consensus between the dissenting reflectivist theorists over why rationalist approaches are flawed. Critical theorists such as Neo-Gramscians and feminists have attacked rationalist theorists over their refusal to consider certain factors such as class and gender in their analyses.

Meanwhile constructivist and post-modern theorists have focused on meta-theoretical questions surrounding rationalist epistemology and methodology. On the other hand, for many theorists writing on the third debate such as Lapid (1989) and George (1989), questions over meta-theory posed by constructivists and post-modernists have become the defining critique of rationalist theory within the third debate.

It is possible to broadly map out these meta-theoretical differences between rationalism and reflectivism outlined within the third debate. Rationalist theories embrace positivism to a certain extent which means they believe that the practice of IR can be reduced to simple and observable systemic rules and laws which their theories aim to document. This systemic approach attempts to mirror the natural sciences in dismissing non-observable and therefore non-testable factors. For rationalists, a state is a concrete entity and its behaviour can be observed. In contrast social factors such as identity, culture and ideology are deemed non-testable and rationalists usually ignore them. Rationalists believe that research in IR requires a detached, objective and strictly observational standpoint towards their chosen subjects of study.

In contrast, the majority of reflectivist theorists believe that positivism is an untenable epistemology for studying social science. For them, socially constructed variables rejected by rationalists are an integral part of the study of social sciences such as IR. Many also dismiss the existence of the belief in science like rules and laws as they believe that these perceived laws are socially constructed and their existence is not a given reality. Thus, most reflectivist theorists are categorized as post-positivist. Finally, reflectivist theorists argue that the subject and the researcher cannot be separated and therefore there is no such thing as pure objectivity in social scientific research.

## 2. 3 Rationalist IR theories – Neorealism and neoliberalism:

This dissertation will look at two rationalist theories within its case study sections; Neorealism and neoliberalism. Neorealism is the archetypical rationalist IR theory. It combines earlier realist thought with positivist epistemology and influence from rational choice theory. Developed by Waltz (1979), it focuses strictly on system level ‘top-down’ analysis of IR and concentrates on the systemic constraints upon actors within the system, namely states. The concept of ‘anarchy’ within neorealism posits that the conditions of the international system, where there is no governing hierarchy or global monopoly of violence is the only real influence on actor behaviour. This leads to an international order where conflict is always likely between states. As a theory, neorealism is somewhat useful for analysing state based conflicts. It can also provide some insight into state security issues and broad international strategic formations. For example, Waltz’s (1979) classic bipolar stability theory argues that the Cold War period was actually <https://assignbuster.com/rationalism-and-reflectivism-in-ir-theory-politics-essay/>

inherently stable due to the United States and USSR balancing each other's military capabilities out. In turn it can be criticized for many reasons. Its 'top-down' approach to IR and its allegiance to the state as the only important actor means that it omits many different actors that play a role in global affairs. The individual micro-characteristics of states are ignored as well as social and political factors that could also influence state behaviour. Therefore, it is often dangerously assumed that all states think and act the same in the same circumstances. As a rationalist theory, neorealism's adherence to positivism also means it dismisses important social variables such as identity, ideology and culture (Wendt, 1999). Ashley (1984) has criticized the tendency of neorealism to ignore the individual and domestic levels of analysis in favour of the international/systemic level. The systemic level excludes analysis of sub-state and civil conflicts as it is assumed that these conflicts are not important at the international level. Again this is a problematic conclusion as it could be argued that civil conflicts often have broad implications on the international stage. Ruggie (1988) has often criticized neorealism by asserting that it is unable to predict and adapt to systemic change. For instance, neorealism struggled to either predict or explain the end of the Cold War and the end of the bipolar world order towards a unipolar system. From these criticisms it is easy to be sceptical over neorealism's ability to provide decent explanations for a national based conflict revolving around social, economic and political factors such as the Egyptian revolution.

Neoliberalism is inherently similar to neorealism. It shares the same general systemic structure, retains the concept of 'anarchy' within that system and

also maintains that the state is the primary actor. On the other hand, unlike neorealism it argues that states are not always mistrustful of each other's actions and can cooperate on issues that are mutually beneficial. It also introduces the sub-theories of 'complex interdependence' and 'soft power' where channels of economic and political conflict and cooperation between states increase, whilst traditional military power declines at the same time (Keohane & Nye, 2001; Nye, 2004). It also introduces other actors apart from states into the neorealist structural framework such as transnational economic channels of influence and international governmental organizations (IGOs). Neoliberalism can be seen as an extension of neorealism and it explains certain issues such as economic and political based cooperation at the state level well. It incorporates a greater number of actors and therefore has greater explanatory potential than neorealism. For example, its emphasis on some non-state actors has allowed it to contribute towards institutional theory, in particular the ability of European states to work together in the framework of the European Union (Pollack, 2001). However, neoliberalism faces criticism from both sides of the theoretical spectrum. Neorealists argue that neoliberals are too optimistic about the ability for state cooperation. Mearsheimer (2002) believes that neoliberals overstate the importance of non-state actors such as institutions, as he argues that states only abide by institutional rules and norms when it suits their own egoistic needs. Reflectivists on the other hand criticize neoliberalism for many of the same reasons as they criticize neorealists. They would argue that despite the integration of non-state actors and institutions, neoliberalism maintains the trappings of rationalist structural

theories such as a lack of insight into social factors and limitations imposed by its strictly international level of analysis (Onuf, 2012).

## 2. 4 Reflectivist IR theories – Radical constructivism and post-modernism:

The two reflectivist theories that will be used within the case studies are radical constructivism and post-modernism. Radical or ‘consistent’ constructivism is part of the constructivist branch of IR theory.

Constructivists believe that traditional IR concepts such as anarchy and power are social constructions that are engineered by collective thought (Wendt, 1987). Hopf (1998) notes that constructivists believe actors and structures are ‘mutually constitutive’. This means that social interaction between actors creates structures which in turn influence actor behaviour. This can be contrasted with rationalists who argue that only structures can influence actor behaviour. Therefore, constructivists focus on social variables and their importance for understanding IR. Radical constructivists can be differentiated from their mainstream counterparts, ‘conventional’ constructivists who occupy a middle ground between rationalist and reflectivist approaches and do not abandon positivism entirely. Fierke (2002) who coined the term ‘consistent constructivism’ argues that rationalist theorists and conventional constructivists both ignore important social variables such as language. For Fierke (2002) and Hopf (1998), the study of language or ‘discourse’ is essential for understanding how social relations and interaction within IR is constituted. Radical constructivism is a potentially useful theoretical tool for studying the factors behind conflicts such as the Egyptian Revolution as unlike its rationalist rivals it has the ability to account for numerous different actors and social variables. It is also

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possible for radical constructivists to account for different levels of analysis including both the national and international levels. On the other hand, radical constructivists rarely discuss these issues in research papers. Much of the constructivist literature is steeped within meta-theoretical debate with little relevance to practical issues of IR. An example of some of this purely theoretical constructivist literature includes Onuf's (2009) 'Structure?, What Structure'. Whilst some research including Kratochwil's (1993) treatise on the end of the Cold War shows how radical constructivism can be used in practice, these articles are few and far between. As of yet, radical constructivism only has the potential to explain the rationale behind events such as the Egyptian revolution.

Post-modern or post-structuralist IR theory is possibly the most convoluted of the four theories explored within this thesis. Unlike other theories there is no real clear consensus on a coherent theory per se. At the same time there are some clear features that unite different post-modern theorists together. In general, post-modernism holds many similarities to radical constructivism in its post-positivist epistemology and its emphasis on discourse. Indeed, some writers such as Pouliot (2004) argue that the two are fundamentally similar. However, unlike many radical constructivists, post-modern IR theorists completely reject the idea of an 'objective reality' (Pouliot, 2004). They argue that subject and the author's views and biases are completely interlinked (Devetak, 1990). In debt to philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze, post-modernist IR theorists seek to 'deconstruct' traditional IR concepts such as the nation-state, power, anarchy and international system (Devetak, 1990). They argue that these concepts are

usually taken for granted by most IR theorists. Some post-modern IR theorists also argue that many actor's voices within conflicts are seldom documented in IR. They try to redress this situation by highlighting those 'without a voice' (Ashley & Walker, 1990: 260-261). In this way they can be compared to critical theorists such as feminists and post-colonialists by advocating a 'bottom up' approach to the study of IR. A good example of post-modernist bottom-up analysis is Chaloupkha's (1990) study on local anti-nuclear movements in the United States and their overall impact on US foreign policy practice. From these features it could be hypothesized that post-modernist IR theory would be very useful for studying the 2011 Egyptian revolution.

However, post-modern theorists have often been accused of style over substance. Spegele (2002) in his critique of postmodernist IR theory, 'Richard Ashley's Discourse of International Relations', argues that Ashley spends too much of his time criticizing rationalist approaches towards IR, whilst failing to provide a suitable theoretical insights himself. Also like radical constructivists, many post-modernist IR theorists do not attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice as they often become entangled in meta-theory. For instance, Ashley's (1981; 1990) work has arguably become more abstract and meta-theoretical over time. At the same time, there are certain theorists that do try to integrate both theory and practice through the use of empirical evidence such as Michael J. Shapiro's (2007) research into the image of warfare within the media and James Der Derian's virtual warfare and surveillance theories (1990).

#### 2. 4 Summary:

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From this chapter, evident differences between rationalist and reflectivist IR theories can be discerned. Rationalist theories are structural based systems level theories that have a commitment to positivist epistemology. In contrast, reflectivist theories de-emphasise structure in favour of social variables such as language, identity and culture and share a post-positivist epistemology. The two rationalist theories – neorealism and neoliberalism and two reflectivist theories – radical constructivism and post-modernism have been outlined in detail including their respective similarities, differences, strengths and weaknesses. Subsequent chapters will use case studies on the 2011 Egyptian revolution to test these theories. However, before this is undertaken, it is important to investigate some of the background factors behind the Egyptian revolution.

### **3. The Egyptian revolution of 2011 – A background contextual overview:**

#### 3. 1 Introduction:

Examining the Egyptian revolution in a broader context is imperative before investigating how current IR theories can account for its causes and implications. The revolution itself is part of a wider group of social movements that have occurred or are still occurring across the Middle East and North Africa. These movements have been collectively named in both the media and academia as the ‘ Arab Spring’. The term, ‘ Arab Spring’ itself is heavily contested. It has been criticized as Western terminology that does not understand or respect the cultural significance of the uprisings. The use of Arab can be seen as a misnomer as many non-Arabs were also involved in the protests (Alhassen, 2012). Furthermore, it is not the term that activists

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would use for themselves. Alternative names for the Arab Spring used by those involved include 'thawra' ('revolution') and intifada ('shaking off'/'rebellion'). The term intifada has previously been used to reference several other acts of resistance, most significantly the Palestinian Intifadas against Israel (Dabashi, 2011). Despite the controversy over the term Arab Spring, this dissertation will continue to use it throughout for continuity purposes. The uprisings are notable for numerous reasons. Firstly, the scope and breadth of the Arab Spring is unprecedented in recent history. It has caused seismic shifts throughout the Arab world in an arguably very short space of time. Secondly, the individual uprisings also seem to collectively share common goals and motives as well as individual ones pertaining to each country. Thirdly, it is an ongoing process in many affected countries and the precise effects of the Arab Spring are still unknown at this time.

To be able to examine the Egyptian revolution in a case study based environment it is useful to examine some of the historical, political and economic conditions unique to Egypt in the prelude to the 2011 revolution. Therefore, this chapter will look at some of the historical context and background causes behind the uprisings.

### 3. 2 Historical context:

In recent times, Egypt has become a regional power within both North Africa and the Middle East. Since its freedom from British rule in 1922, it has consolidated its position as a leading force amongst the Arab nations. Initially its involvement in Pan-Arabism where it sought to unite Arab countries together in the mid twentieth century, its alliance with the Soviet

Union as well as its opposition to Israel put it in direct opposition to the Western world. This culminated in the Suez Crisis of 1956 where Western and Israeli forces clashed militarily with a Soviet backed Egypt over the nationalization of the Suez Canal. However this reversed with the change in leadership from Gamal Abdel Nasser to Anwar Sadat. He rejected Pan-Arabism, severed ties with the Soviet Union and aligned the country closer to the West. This cooperation with the West would increase in time, to the extent that Egypt had become one of the Western world's closest allies within the region by the time of the Arab Spring. Sadat's foreign and economic policies were largely continued by his successor, Hosni Mubarak. However whilst Egypt may have developed positive external relations by the time of the 2011 revolution, there existed a myriad of internal problems and discord that would help to contribute towards the uprisings.

### 3. 3 Authoritarianism:

From the ascension of Nasser to the presidency to the onset of the Arab Spring, Egypt maintained an authoritarian political regime. This type of political system was a typical feature of many post-colonial Arab states including Iraq until the deposition of Saddam Hussein and Syria. Up until the revolution, Egypt was effectively a state headed by a president with unrivalled economic, social, military and political power. For much of his tenure as president, Mubarak used state of emergency laws to enforce his rule as he saw fit. The state explanation was that the state of emergency laws were being used to tackle Islamic militant groups within Egypt (Brownlee, 2002: 7). However, this excuse provided cover for Mubarak to ‘

deliberalize' the political system to systematically eliminate chances for opposition groups to gain any form of power within the country.

One notable aspect of the political system is that over time, the state did attempt to 'legitimize' authoritarianism through periodical liberalization measures such as the legalization of select opposition parties and groups (Blaydes, 2008). This allowed Mubarak to claim he was reforming the government towards what Brownlee (2002: 7) calls, 'democracy in doses.' In the late 1970s, Sadat introduced multi-party elections to Egypt that carried on into Hosni Mubarak's rule. However opposition parties had no real chance of taking power in these elections due to widespread electoral fraud and they also had little tangible power over legislative matters (Langhor, 2004).

Blaydes (2008) notes that Mubarak secured seats in parliament for political allies. These allies would then reap economic benefits from their new parliamentary positions. This 'patronage' system would further solidify the strength of the regime (Koehler, 2008). Furthermore, up until the late 1990s Egypt's electoral laws were drafted with the purpose of keeping the opposition out of power. Prior to the year 2000, elections were rigged so designated unsavoury opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood could not obtain seats despite their popular support (Brownlee, 2002: 8). Both Brownlee (2002: 9) and Blaydes (2008: 10) observe that voters for opposition candidates were often physically blocked from voting and intimidated by security forces. Even after elections were supposedly liberalized after 2000, Mubarak was still winning 88% of the votes in the 2005 presidential election on a 30% turnout.

Thus, whilst Mubarak and his predecessor Sadat may be seen as slightly more politically liberal than the uncompromising socialist dictatorship of Nasser, it is clear that dissatisfaction with the authoritarian political structure of Egypt was a defining factor in the tensions leading up to the revolution.

### 3. 4 State repression:

Alongside the lack of proper democratic representation, Egypt's people were systematically and brutally oppressed by Mubarak's state apparatus. The emergency laws mentioned above were the regime's ultimate tool in obtaining control of the citizens of Egypt. Al-Sayyid (1993: 235) noted that under Mubarak's emergency laws the state could undertake the '... suspension of the constitutional rights of citizens' at any time. This allowed Mubarak to detain any suspected dissenter without charge for an indefinite period of time (Hibbard & Layton, 2011). These laws were often used to arrest and charge opposition leaders and other individuals perceived as a threat to state control. For instance, Ayman Nour, the runner up in the 2005 presidential election was arrested and jailed for three years on trumped up electoral fraud charges after he dared to suggest the election was rigged by Mubarak and his National Democratic Party (Associated Press, 2012). Kienle (2001: 102) notes that press and media restrictions were also heavily enforced by the state of emergency laws, further reducing freedom of speech and reportage. Mubarak's security forces, the State Security Investigations (SSI) were the state instrument used to carry out his repression. The SSI was notoriously brutal and carried out much extrajudicial abuse of power, summary beatings and even executions (Amnesty

International, 2012). However, there is curiously little said about the security forces prior to the revolution in academic sources or the media.

### 3. 5 Socio-economic problems:

Wealth inequality was also a substantial motive behind the eventual revolution. Like many authoritarian Arab regimes, wealth in Egypt was concentrated in the hands of the political elites. With the turn towards the West during Sadat's rule, Egypt began a process of economic liberalization and turned away from the centralized economic management of the Nasser administration. This helped to increase economic growth within the country but did little to alleviate poverty. In many cases, the gap between rich and poor increased. For instance, in the boom period of the early 1990s, the Mubarak regime was persuaded to increase spending in the private sector to the detriment of social spending to reduce inequalities (Hibbard & Layton, 2011). Also, after the involvement of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to speed up liberalization of the Egyptian economy, the number of individuals living below the poverty line in Egypt jumped from 16 percent to 28 percent from 1981 to 1991 (Kienle, 2001: 144). From Egyptian economic statistics taken just before the revolution began, over half the population lived on less than \$2 a day (Reske, 2011). Thus, Egypt suffered from considerable economic injustice as a result of both authoritarian political rule and the expansion of Western style capitalism. Economic problems and mismanagement also contributed towards growing discontent. The country went through a number of different economic crises during its transition to a laissez-faire capitalist economy. In 1986, crises hit both the oil and tourism industries causing a slump in economic development (Jabber, <https://assignbuster.com/rationalism-and-reflectivism-in-ir-theory-politics-essay/>



1986). By the early nineties the economy had recovered but it was inherently unstable. Despite some increases in foreign investment during the later Mubarak administration, rising inflation caused massive spikes in food and goods prices that affected the poor (Hinnebusch, 1993: 160). Anderson (2011) argues that over-investment in the private sector led to a 'corroded' public sector featuring mass corruption, bribery of officials and underpaid public employees. The late 2000s global financial crisis also had a notable impact on the Egyptian economy and added to its already substantial problems. Reforms designed to bolster the economy were abandoned and foreign investment slowed down. Statistics taken before the revolution showed that unemployment in Egypt had risen to 9.7% (Reske, 2011). Combined with the previously mentioned social and political problems prevalent in Egyptian society, economic stagnation was yet another variable behind the impetus for revolution in 2011.

### 3.6 Summary:

From this contextual background analysis it can be seen that Egypt under Mubarak was heading for disaster. The regime pushed its citizens to breaking point through denial of representation, repression, abuse of power, corruption and wealth inequality. This, coupled with Egypt's awful economic situation can be observed as catalysts for the protests of early 2011 that ended with Mubarak's fall. Now that the background to the 2011 Egyptian revolution has been clarified, this dissertation can move on to examining the revolution in greater depth whilst assessing the suitability of rationalist and reflectivist IR theories for this purpose.

## **4. Case Study 1 -The end of Hosni Mubarak's political regime:**

### 4. 1 Introduction:

The 2011 Egyptian revolution came as a surprise to many. Viewed externally, the Egyptian state looked stable. Hosni Mubarak's rule had never been seriously challenged before the Arab Spring. By the time of the revolution his rule had lasted 30 years with no major power struggles or notable revolutionary attempts. However, a closer look into Egypt's history reveals many crucial factors that seemingly pointed to the eventuality of Mubarak's fall. Before the revolution economic, social, political and religious tensions were coming together to create a storm of discontent within Egypt. Many of these factors have already been discussed in the previous section. They are only now being examined very tentatively by researchers in IR. This case study is interested in testing current IR theories to observe if they are actually able to account for the different variables and actors involved in the fall of the Mubarak regime. So far there has been almost no commentary from IR theorists on the Arab Spring, let alone on the Egyptian revolution as an individual event. Thus, this case study will use prior research from both rationalist and reflectivist theorists to assess if they are capable of providing theoretical explanations of the end of Mubarak's rule using different subject areas. It will firstly look at neorealist and neoliberal theory to observe if they can lend insight into the 'top-down' internal and external political policies of the regime and if they contributed to Mubarak's downfall. It will then investigate potential radical constructivist and post-modernist contributions

towards investigating opposition groups and religion and their part in the uprisings.

#### 4. 2 Rationalist approaches towards the fall of the Mubarak regime:

##### 4. 2. 1 Internal political policy of the Mubarak regime:

Both neorealist and neoliberal IR theory would hypothetically struggle to explain or account for the internal political policies of Mubarak's regime and how these policies eventually encouraged revolution. Rationalist IR theories see states in wholly external terms and for all terms and purposes they regard the state as a single homogenous entity (Baldwin, 1993). For many rationalists, as long as the state has a nominally working military and system of law, internal discord should not be a problem (Zakaria, 1992). Viewed externally prior to the 2011 revolution, Egypt seemed to be a strong and stable regional power that possessed an overall benign foreign policy. Thus, Egypt's internal political and economic policies would be ignored by the majority of rationalist theorists. This is unsurprising as both neorealist and neoliberal IR theorists would suggest that understanding Egypt's domestic politics prior to revolution is unnecessary for understanding external causal factors and implications of the revolution. The problem with this approach is that it unrealistically separates domestic and international politics. In doing so, the rationalists only have an incomplete picture of the causes behind the revolution. In contrast, Rose (1999) has highlighted a new movement of 'neoclassical realists' who restate the primacy of the structural based international view of international politics but also incorporate state and domestic based politics into their world view. This harkens back to the

classical realism of Morgenthau and Aron that did not always readily discriminate between domestic and international politics (Hoffman, 1985). This means that both internal and external state based political and economic policies can be included in theoretical analysis, widening the neorealist perspective considerably. It is debatable whether neoclassical realists are actually neorealists at all given their debt to classical realism. However, neoclassical realism shows that by slightly breaking the rules of neorealism and neoliberalism to incorporate state level analyses and reduce the separation between domestic and international politics, so