



Explaining Contemporary US Foreign Policy Decision-Making Through a Realist Theoretical Framework: The Taiwan Strait Crisis and the Pivot to Asia as Case Studies

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Abstract. This article examines contemporary US foreign policy decision-making through the lens of realist theory, focusing on two pivotal cases: the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis and the Obama administration's Pivot to Asia strategy. By applying neorealism to the Taiwan Strait Crisis, the analysis demonstrates how systemic pressures and structural constraints shaped US military intervention and strategic ambiguity. In contrast, the Pivot to Asia is explained through neoclassical realism, highlighting the role of domestic politics, leadership perceptions, and institutional processes in shaping strategic adjustment under systemic pressures. The comparative study reveals the strengths and limitations of both theoretical variants: neorealism's predictive clarity versus neoclassical realism's nuanced explanatory capacity. Ultimately, the article underscores the evolving trajectory of realist theory in international relations and its continued relevance for understanding US foreign policy formation across different historical contexts.

Keywords: US foreign policy, realist theory, case study, systemic pressures, domestic politics

1 Introduction

Realism stands as one of the most mainstream and influential schools of thought in contemporary international relations, while US foreign policy constitutes a pivotal factor shaping modern international relations. Thus, the value of employing realist theory to examine the formation process of US foreign policy lies evident. This article employs both neorealist and neoclassical realist frameworks to respectively explain the US decision-making process during the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis and the formation and implementation of the Pivot to Asia strategy undertaken by the Obama administration [1, 4, 8, 10].

The Clinton administration's intervention and handling of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, along with the military deployment portion of Obama administration's Pivot to Asia strategy, are both highly representative foreign policy cases within their presidencies [3, 5]. They have been extensively analyzed by IR scholars, making these two

practices valuable cases for validating the currently dominant theories of Neorealism and Neoclassical Realism in the field of International Relations.

This article aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the application processes of two theories following a case study examination. By exploring the connection between the development of realist theory and foreign policy formulation, it seeks to enhance understanding of the formation process of US foreign policy. It also attempts to trace the developmental trajectory of realist theory, offering new perspectives for its future refinement.

2 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.1 Realist Theory in Foreign Policy

A Since the inception of modern international relations theory, realism has been one of the dominant schools of thought that cannot be disregarded. The establishment and refinement of realist international relations theory are closely intertwined with the policy practices of American scholars, particularly those holding diplomatic positions within the US government. A significant focus has been on matters concerning the Soviet Union, leading to extensive research and giving rise to realist scholars like E.H. Carr, who specialized in matters vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. As Stephen M. Walt noted in his article examining post-Cold War American grand strategy, Carr's research on Soviet history has stood the test of time [9]. As fellow realist scholars, Carr's work inspired Walt to build upon these foundations and further explore the trajectory of American grand strategy following the Cold War's demise. Whether Hans Morgenthau, E.H. Carr, Kenneth Waltz, or their successor Stephen Walt, these US (or from a client state collaborating with the US) IR scholars have applied realism as a theory in a consistent and institutionalized manner.

Following 1998, scholars of neoclassical realism in international relations, represented by G. Ross, incorporated Innenpolitik theory, further developing neorealism into a neoclassical realist framework encompassing individual, state, and international system levels. This trajectory reveals that the evolution of the realist school in international relations is intrinsically linked to US diplomatic and political practice, providing a solid foundation for employing realist theory to explain US foreign policy.

2.2 Methodological Considerations in Case Selection

This article employs neorealist and neoclassical realist theories of international relations to explain the US government's diplomatic decisions during the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis and the "Pivot to Asia" strategy. This approach aligns with the stages of realism's transformation. In 1996, when the Taiwan Strait Crisis erupted, the dominant realist school of thought remained structural determinism, epitomized by neorealism. This was due to the fact that less than five years had passed since the Cold War's demise, and the field of international relations had not developed new theories to accommodate or explain state behaviors within the emerging unipolar system. By the 21st century, when the Obama administration formulated and implemented the Pivot to Asia strategy,

the realist school of international relations had developed the neoclassical realism theoretical framework, better suited to the current historical period. This reflects the explanatory functions of the two theoretical frameworks at different historical junctures.

Additionally, considering the two case studies selected themselves, the theoretical frameworks chosen for each are also reasonable. The 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis represented an external and sudden military issue for the United States. Given this type of situation, the swiftness of the US foreign policy response was necessarily less influenced by domestic factors. In other words, when analyzing this incident, the focus can be placed more on the decisive role of the systemic structure in determining state behaviors. Therefore, it is reasonable to employ neorealism for the analysis. Obama's Pivot to Asia, however, represents a major strategic shift rather than a single decision-making issue. For this strategy, more attention should be paid to US domestic factors and the personal factors of Obama and his cabinet. Therefore, we can use the neoclassical realism framework for this analysis.

3 Case Study Analysis

3.1 Neorealism Analysis of the 3rd Taiwan Strait Crisis

Hickey, in his article on the connection between the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis and US foreign policy, highlighted the increasingly evident systemic pressures and power-balancing logic within post-Cold War US-China relations [6]. This aligns with the neorealist theory's assertion that systemic pressures determine state behavior. In 1996, China's missile tests and military exercises were ostensibly aimed at pressuring Taiwan's election process or, from China's perspective, asserting its national reunification. Yet this state action effectively challenged the regional power structure, as Taiwan had traditionally been within the US security sphere during the Cold War and its immediate aftermath. The deployment of the US aircraft carrier strike groups toward the Taiwan Strait represents a very typical power balancing maneuver, which can also be explained by neorealism as a response to structural threats in the region.

He notes that the deployment of two aircraft carrier strike groups to the Taiwan Strait by the United States represents a rare instance of large-scale military intervention since the end of the Cold War [6]. Also, Kurt Campbell's congressional testimony underscores the US as the dominant military power in the Western Pacific. These actions can be understood within the framework of neorealist theory as structural factors driving the US to maintain regional dominance, in other words, the power structure motivates state behavior of the US.

On the other hand, Hickey notes that the US has declined to make explicit commitments to defend Taiwan [6]. This reflects the neorealist interpretation of "limited commitments." Meanwhile, US policymakers repeatedly emphasized that actions would be "case-by-case" during this incident, demonstrating that state behavior is constrained by the structural features of the international system rather than solely determined by the preferences of decision-makers. Thus, US strategic intervention embodies the neorealist concepts of strategic ambiguity and structural constraints.

Hickey also highlighted the contradiction between the TRA (Taiwan Relations Act) and the Joint Communiqué [6]. More specifically, the TRA provides the United States with a defensive option for Taiwan, not a defensive commitment. This allows the United States to maintain strategic flexibility under the structural pressures of the international system, a flexibility within the international system that can be conceived by neorealists as structural ambiguity.

3.2 Neoclassical Realism Analysis of "Pivot to Asia" Strategy

The key argument of neoclassical realism is that state behavior, while influenced by structural pressures within the international system, is more decisively shaped by domestic politics, cognitive preferences, and institutional constraints. Strategy does not emerge automatically but results from a process of filtering, restructuring, and adjustment. Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" strategy aligns precisely with the explanatory framework of neoclassical realism.

Anderson and Cha provide a detailed discussion in their co-authored paper on the systemic implications of the Pivot to Asia strategy, as well as the policy's formation and origins [2]. They emphasize that the Pivot to Asia was not a strategy pre-planned by the Obama administration from the very beginning, but rather a midcourse correction. This aligns with neoclassical realism discourse, where the US generated the Pivot to Asia strategy through domestic political processes under structural pressures. More specifically, during his early presidency, Obama prioritized issues like the financial crisis, the governance over Iraq, and climate change. US Asia policy was relatively marginalized during this phase. This demonstrates how the priority of the US domestic agenda influenced the speed of response and orientation of its foreign strategy. This situation would be difficult to explain if it were analyzed through neorealism rather than neoclassical realism.

Meanwhile, they draw upon complex systems theory in their analysis, which emphasizes multiple effects and the decoupling of intentions from outcomes [2]. This framework also incorporates multi-layered nested interactions. This can indeed be paralleled with neoclassical realism's multi-dimensional analysis of state behavior. The description of various levels within system effects bears a strong resemblance to the three levels of neoclassical realism. For instance, they can similarly analyze the Pivot to Asia strategy at the state level. Obama's early China strategy reflected cooperative perceptions and conciliatory intentions, which did not reflect a structural response. Upon recognizing the structural pressures posed by China's rise (which contradicted his earlier expectations), he restructured and adjusted his China strategy toward a more assertive stance, thereby resulting in the Pivot to Asia strategy.

4 Comparative Analysis

Having examined the two cases through their respective realist lenses, a comparative exercise further enriches our understanding by probing the explanatory boundaries and potential synergies of the two frameworks. While the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis was

analyzed primarily through neorealism and the Pivot to Asia through neoclassical realism, this does not imply that each theory is exclusively applicable to its assigned case. Rather, a cross-theoretical reflection reveals that both systemic and domestic-level variables operate simultaneously in every foreign policy episode, albeit with varying degrees of salience depending on the nature and urgency of the issue.

If neoclassical realism is applied to the 1996 crisis, it becomes evident that domestic politics and leadership perceptions were not entirely sidelined. The Clinton administration's military response was not a mechanical reaction to systemic pressures alone; it was also mediated by electoral calculations, congressional behaviors on Taiwan-related legislation, and the President's own assessment of credibility in the post-Cold War order. These intervening factors help explain why the US response was calibrated to signal resolve without triggering a direct confrontation. Neorealism captures the structural imperative of balancing, but it is the neoclassical lens that illuminates the specific timing and amplitude of the operational decision.

Conversely, viewing the Pivot to Asia through a purely neorealist prism yields a compelling parsimonious account: China's sustained economic and military rise constituted a palpable shift in regional power distribution, compelling the United States to recalibrate its strategic posture irrespective of who occupied the White House. In this reading, the Pivot was less a product of Barack Obama's personal worldview and more an inevitable systemic adjustment [7]. The domestic debates and bureaucratic infighting that neoclassical realism foregrounds appear, from this angle, as secondary friction that affected implementation speed, not the ultimate result.

This comparative exercise does not discredit either framework; instead, it clarifies their complementary strengths. Neorealism offers a crisp, parsimonious explanation of why states must respond to power shifts, while neoclassical realism enriches the account by detailing how and when such responses materialize through domestic filters and perceptual prisms. The two cases, different in their temporal contexts and policy modalities, thus demonstrate not a rigid theoretical division but a layered analytical continuum. For sudden, high-stakes crises, the systemic logic dominates and the domestic mediation becomes less visible; for gradual, long-term strategic reorientations, the intervening domestic variables acquire greater explanatory weight. This nuanced understanding moves beyond a mere chronological matching of theory to case, offering a more flexible and context-sensitive application of realist thought in the study of US foreign policy.

5 Conclusion

This study employs two developmental variants of realism, neorealism and neoclassical realism, to explain the process of US foreign policy decision-making across different historical phases. The two selected cases, one situated in the immediate post-Cold War era and the other in the highly globalized early twenty-first century, are thus better aligned with the dominant realist theories prevailing in these distinct periods.

In terms of case analysis, the examination of the Taiwan Strait Crisis demonstrates that neorealism effectively explains state behavior under structural pressures, as well

as the logic of deterrence and power balance. Meanwhile, the analysis of Obama's Pivot to Asia strategy illustrates how neoclassical realism can account for how domestic politics and leaders' perceptions shape state behavior and foreign strategy.

Comparing these two distinct phases of realism theory reveals that neorealism offers clear structural frameworks and strong predictive power, though it tends to overlook variables at other levels. Neoclassical realism provides more nuanced explanations but suffers from blurred theoretical boundaries and relatively weaker operational applicability. Nevertheless, it remains evident that both approaches possess distinct strengths and weaknesses when explaining foreign policy and state behavior across different historical periods, international system configurations, and types of foreign policy.

The choice of theoretical framework is not merely an academic issue; it also shapes how we interpret a nation's strategic adjustments within different international environments. We can further note that the internal differentiation within realist international relations theory reflects the succession of historical phases and the complexity of state behavior.

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