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The Nexus of Power, Culture, and Elite Interactions: A Neoclassical Realist Framework for Foreign Policy Analysis

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Abstract

Neoclassical Realism (NCR) combines international and domestic factors, offering a multidimensional framework for analyzing foreign policy. While this integration of external and internal dynamics has advanced foreign policy analysis, NCR remains constrained by its reliance on static unit-level variables. This limitation impedes NCR's potential to fully bridge International Relations (IR) and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). In particular, NCR's treatment of ideational variables as fixed overlooks the dynamic role of elite interactions, which significantly shape a state's specific and fluid actions toward certain regions or actors—even under stable systemic pressures and enduring strategic-cultural ideas. This article addresses this gap by proposing the inclusion of inter-elite interactions as an intervening variable within the NCR framework. It argues that while the distribution of power sets the parameters for foreign policy, strategic culture and inter-elite interactions shape the specific foreign policy choices. By incorporating a socio-psychological focus on elite relations, the paper aims to enhance NCR's explanatory power and fully unlock its potential for FPA. This theoretical development offers a more comprehensive framework for analyzing the complexities of foreign policy, advancing a systematic and integrative approach that bridges the divide between agents and structures, and strengthens the theoretical link between IR and FPA.

Keywords: structure and agency, foreign policy behavior, relative power, strategic culture, elite decision-making

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Introduction

With more than two decades of progress, Neoclassical Realism (NCR), which combines both international structural and domestic variables, has provided a powerful explanatory framework for foreign policy analysis. NCR contends that states conduct their foreign policies by responding in large part to the constraints and opportunities of the international system (Ripsman 2011), but that their responses are shaped by unit-level determinants, especially strategic culture and domestic ideas (Dueck 2006; Kitchen 2012). Incorporation of domestic cultural-ideational variables into analyses have made this the latest theoretical branch of a rooted realist tradition able to consider historical contexts and particularity that provides

multi-dimensional explanatory framework for a state's complex grand strategy and foreign policy (Rose 1998).

This characteristic of NCR holds significant promise for bridging the gap between agency and structure, thereby addressing the long-standing debate over the division between International Relations (IR) and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) (Kaarbo 2015; Kubálková 2015; Breuning 2022). While it is often classified as an IR theory due to its focus on the international system (Kitchen 2010), NCR also represents a significant contribution to the "domestic political turn in IR" (Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman 2009; Kaarbo 2015). By borrowing key insights from FPA and incorporating them into a theory that also accounts for systemic factors, NCR not only enriches IR but also offers FPA new tools for analyzing the complex interactions between domestic and international forces. NCR's contribution is particularly notable given that realism has traditionally maintained an increasingly tenuous connection between FPA and IR (Kubálková 2015: 17). Thus, NCR is seen as an analytical template that represents "a marriage" between IR theory and FPA (Wivel 2024: 103).

However, while NCR integrates both external and internal factors, it requires further refinement, particularly in capturing elite dynamics and socio-psychological dimensions, which FPA has explored in various ways (Kaarbo 2015). More specifically, notwithstanding a robust growth in analyzing the interplay between power distribution and domestic strategic-cultural ideas (vertical interactions), NCR remains inadequate due to its lack of attention to the interactions between elites across states (horizontal interactions). This limitation makes NCR focus on broad and static aspects of foreign policy, failing to explain why states adjust their strategy toward different actors despite stable power distribution and strategic culture.

This study seeks to enhance NCR by introducing inter-elite interactions between states as a key intervening variable to address this gap. The proposed theory posits that while power distribution delineates the broad parameters of foreign policy, strategic culture and inter-elite interactions function as critical modifiers. Although the structural system and strategic culture establish overarching patterns of foreign policy behavior, elite interactions serve as an additional intervening factor, shaping the substance, form, and timing of specific foreign policy actions. Accordingly, incorporating elite interactions is essential not only for refining the theoretical framework of NCR but also for enhancing its promise for FPA, thereby fully realizing its potential to bridge IR and FPA.

The first part reviews the existing literature on NCR foreign policy analysis and examines the relationship between NCR and FPA, particularly in the context of the divide between IR and FPA. This section highlights how NCR has overlooked the significance of elite interactions between states, while arguing that NCR can fully realize its potential for FPA by incorporating a socio-psychological approach that emphasizes these interactions. The following section builds a neoclassical realist framework for foreign policy analysis by integrating relative power, strategic culture, and elite interactions.

Neoclassical Realism and Foreign Policy Analysis

NCR scholarship asserts that states primarily respond to the possibilities and limitations presented by the international system, but that these responses are shaped by factors at the unit-level. Scholars emphasize various unit-level determinants such as strategic ideas (Kitchen 2010), embedded ideology, strategic culture (Dueck 2006; Layne 2006), and policy paradigms (Mallett and Kitchen 2023). According to Rose (1998: 146), adherents of NCR "argue that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is first and foremost driven by its relative material power capabilities." For them, however, "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" (Rose 1998: 146). While the former shows why they are realist, the latter makes these scholars neoclassical (Kitchen 2010). Consequently, NCR puts forward "a causal chain with three steps: the independent variable (the state's relative power)", a common set of intervening variables (the domestic level "transmission belt"), and the dependent variable (grand strategy and foreign policy) (Rathbun 2008; Juneau 2015). This causal chain sacrifices structural (neo)realism's scientific rigor, parsimony and predictive capacity for richness and accuracy in explaining historical contexts (Layne 2006: 11; Juneau 2015). This is precisely what enables NCR to contribute to FPA, as it sacrifices the parsimony of neorealism "on the altar of FPA" (Morin and Paquin 2018: 330).

IR theory and FPA "have over the past decades become separate fields of study…in a state of mutual and more or less benign neglect" (Hellmann and Jørgensen 2015: 1). The split originated with the "scientific" or "behavioral" revolution in the social sciences (Kubálková 2015: 17). The scientific orthodoxy emphasized the need for rigor and simplicity in theorizing. As Kaarbo (2015: 194) notes, FPA has been criticized for its unparsimonious list of variables rather than a singular, cohesive theory, highlighting its "loose" positivist orientation in contrast to mainstream IR.

Realism lies at the center of this divide, with Kenneth Waltz's (1979) theoretical approach further accentuating it. Waltz's neorealism, as a systems theory, deliberately narrowed its focus to the forces at play at the international-systemic level, excluding the national level (Waltz 1979). He argues that a systemic theory cannot directly explain the foreign policies of individual states. As he states, a systems theory "can tell us what pressures are exerted and what possibilities are posed by systems," but "it cannot tell us just how, and how effectively, the units of a system will respond to those pressures and possibilities" (Waltz 1979: 71).

In contrast, FPA emphasizes agency as central to its analysis in understanding specific foreign policy behaviors (Ozkececi-Taner and Wehner 2025). Waltz (1979: 121) famously referred to this as explaining "why state X made a certain move last Tuesday." FPA scholars have traditionally emphasized the importance of empirically examining how decision-makers develop their understanding of a given situation (Simon 1985), operating on the premise

that interactions between states are "grounded in human decision-makers acting singly or in groups" (Hudson 2005: 1). Snyder and his colleagues argue that "if one wishes to probe the 'why' questions underlying the events, conditions, and interaction patterns that are rooted in state action, then decision-making analysis is certainly necessary. We would go so far as to say that the 'why' questions cannot be answered without an analysis of decision-making" (Snyder, Bruck, and Sapin 1954: 12). Therefore, scholars deemed it essential to investigate the "psycho-milieu" of the individuals involved in foreign policy decision-making (Hudson and Vore 1995: 213).

FPA's focus on decision-makers reveals the notion that human rationality is restricted by "the constraints imposed by both external conditions and the capacities of the decision-maker" (Simon 1985: 294). Consequently, many scholars suggest that FPA does not disregard external-systemic variables in their analyses (Hudson 2005; Bruening 2022). However, the integration of external systemic factors within FPA remains ambiguous and inadequately developed (Mallett and Kitchen 2023: 5). This stems from FPA's foundational premises, which often conflict with the assumptions of structuralist theories, particularly neorealism, at nearly every level (Ripley 1993: 406; Houghton 2007). Moreover, FPA's inward-focused orientation and its heavy reliance on political psychology resulted in missed opportunities for broader integration with IR theory (Kaarbo 2015: 193). Still, Simon's (1985) emphasis on situating decision-makers at the intersection of structures and agents highlights the potential for IR to both benefit from and contribute to FPA (Bruening 2022).

NCR represents a concerted effort to incorporate decision-making factors of agency, particularly reflecting the "domestic politics turn in IR theory" (Kaarbo 2015). Zakaria (1992: 198) articulates the NCR perspective, stating: "the parsimony of systemic theory is useful for some purposes," yet domestic politics "explanations can be most useful in explaining events, trends, and policies that are too specific to be addressed by a grand theory of international politics." This perspective aligns NCR more closely with FPA, where "parsimony for its own sake is not revered" (Hudson 2005: 5). NCR offers distinct value over FPA by integrating both systemic and domestic variables in a unified framework. While FPA excels at providing detailed insights into the decision-making processes of individual actors and elites, NCR bridges these micro-level factors with the broader structural conditions of the international system. Consequently, NCR enhances FPA by offering a more comprehensive explanation of foreign policy outcomes, linking individual-level analyses to structural imperatives.

Accordingly, NCR is regarded as a significant effort to bridge IR and FPA (Kaarbo 2015; Hudson 2016; Kozub-Karkut 2019). However, NCR has notable shortcomings in this endeavor. In the following section, I argue that the primary limitation of NCR in bridging IR and FPA lies in its neglect of inter-elite interactions between states. While NCR emphasizes the role of elites and individual-level factors, it overlooks how these elites engage with their counterparts in other states—an oversight that limits its potential to fully realize its promise for FPA.

The Theoretical Puzzle

A key criticism of NCR is its underdeveloped treatment of elite dynamics, despite its focus on psycho-milieu, with IR scholars recognizing the importance of individual-level analysis often "largely ignoring" relevant work in FPA (Kaarbo 2015; Breuning 2022). Psycho-milieu, as defined by Hudson and Vore (1995), refers to how decision-makers' subjective interpretations shape their responses to the external environment. While NCR has made strides in exploring psycho-milieu, it has notably overlooked inter-elite relationships.

The two primary variants of NCR have made significant progress in applying psycho-milieu. Type I NCR, for example, explains anomalous state behavior through policymakers' "misperception" of structural imperatives (Layne 2006; Rathbun 2008). Despite clear signals from the international system, these signals can be misunderstood, or domestic political constraints can prevent proper responses (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016: 28). Consequently, domestic-level variables are used to analyze historical anomalies such as under-balancing (Schweller 2004) and under- or over-expansion (Snyder 1991). In Type II NCR, psycho-milieu is deemed even more significant, as it is believed to "regularly" influence foreign policy actions, rather than merely in pathological circumstances (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016: 28). Given that structural/systemic imperatives are often ambiguous, ideas act as intervening variables, helping to clarify them.

Both Type I and Type II NCR incorporate domestic-level variables, aligning it with many contemporary FPA studies, with some scholars building directly on FPA research (Ripsman 2009; Lobell 2009; Schweller 2009). However, NCR addresses ideas and domestic politics in a limited way (Rathbun 2008). For example, Kaarbo (2015: 205) observes that Lobell's "threat assessment" analysis "does not unpack the psychological underpinnings of threat perception." Similarly, Ripsman's (2009) focus on "domestic interest groups" and Schweller's (2009: 228) examination of ideology as a tool for "helping leaders mobilize domestic support" for expansive strategies do not sufficiently incorporate FPA's psychological research.

Kaarbo (2015: 205) argues that the psychological approach in FPA "can provide NCR with considerable theoretical and empirical leverage," highlighting the significance of beliefs about others' intentions in great-power relations and how states modify these beliefs. I concur with Kaarbo's assessment that research on motivations and belief system dynamics is a critical, yet missing, element in NCR's shift toward subjectivity.

This issue stems from NCR's tendency to interpret variables like perceptions, images, leadership effects, strategic ideas, and decision-making processes in terms of static, indigenous ideational commitments, such as strategic culture. This focus distances NCR from the dynamic (socio-)psychological milieu, limiting its capacity to fully explain the causes of specific behaviors, which are central to foreign policy analysis. While the international system and strategic culture shape broad foreign policy patterns, understanding a state's behavior toward others necessitates analyzing dynamic elite interactions. Kubálková's comprehensive definition of FPA underscores this necessity:

> "FPA refers to a complex, multilayered process, consisting of the objectives that governments pursue in their relations with other governments and their choice of means to attain these objectives…Thus foreign policy encompasses the complicated communications within governments and amongst its diverse agents, plus the perceptions and misperceptions, the images of other countries, and the ideologies and personal dispositions of everyone involved" (Kubálková 2015: 17-18).

This definition highlights FPA's tradition of exploring subjective understandings, emphasizing complex communications not only within but also between governments. As Sears (2017: 26) notes, the notion of a pure "objective optimal policy" is untenable, as each state's strategy depends on the fluid, simultaneous strategies of others, influenced by the relative power and intentions of all parties. This critical point reveals NCR's failure to systematically account for elite interactions among states, thus limiting its ability to transcend neorealism's abstract conception of state relations (Sears 2017: 25).

This gap is evident in both early and recent contributions to NCR (Dueck 2006; Layne 2006; Kitchen 2010; Onea 2012; Juneau 2015; Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). For example, Layne (2006) connects the United States' (US) pursuit of extraregional hegemony to the interaction of relative power and a domestic intervening variable, the "Open Door" ideology. According to Layne (2006: 10), this interaction led to "pathological" overexpansion. Likewise, Dueck (2006: 4) argues that certain cultural legacies, unique to the US, "have acted as a filter on potential policy options in the US, allowing certain strategic alternatives while rendering others unthinkable". Accordingly, the Clinton administration followed a broadly "liberal internationalist" strategy rather than adopting "strategic disengagement" or "balance of power" policies (Dueck 2004). This strategy was shaped by domestic strategic-cultural influences at the elite level as much as by responses to international structure.

These seminal works aim to provide comprehensive accounts of US grand strategy (Kilic 2025), despite NCR's emphasis on richness and accuracy over parsimony and generalizability (Juneau 2015: 29). While Layne's (2006) theory focuses on the US's persistent quest for extraregional hegemony, it overlooks variations in strategic choices within this pursuit. Dueck (2006: 135) acknowledges that American post-Cold War behavior varied across regions and states but fails to explain why these variations occur when there is no change in relative power or domestic strategic culture.

To overcome this theoretical limitation, Kitchen's (2010; 2012) and Juneau's (2015) refinements offer valuable insights. Kitchen (2010: 119) develops an NCR model of grand strategy formation by establishing a common intervening variable: prevailing strategic ideas. Nevertheless, he asserts that "the impact of ideas is likely to be strong and consistent" on the condition that they are highly institutionalized, culturally embedded, and unconsciously shared among the ruling elite as "a strong component of national identity or strategic culture" (Kitchen 2010: 141). This condition makes it difficult to distinguish from Dueck's and Layne's more static concepts of strategic culture or ideology. How, then, can we account for changing

characteristics of strategic ideas, even when they are part of more continuous elements like national identity and strategic culture? Kitchen neither provides a clear answer to this question nor emphasizes the effects of inter-state interactions.

On the other hand, Juneau (2015) introduces a "strategic analysis variant" aimed at increasing specifity and accuracy. He argues that despite a structurally favorable strategic environment between 2001-2009, Iran "failed to seize the opportunity to establish itself as the dominant regional power" due to domestic political factors such as status, regime identity, and factional politics (Juneau 2015: 42-49). In Sears's (2017: 25) words, although "Juneau's analysis describes the regional security environment and importance of other states (especially Iraq, Israel, and the US), it is an inside-out account from Iranian perspective, rather than a fluid account of how one state's moves are perceived and countered by another in a constantly shifting strategic environment."

In their effort to develop a more comprehensive NCR research program, Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016: 58) claim to offer "a clearer and better-organized set of intervening variables than neoclassical realists have hitherto articulated." Nevertheless, while they argue that intervening-level processes such as perceptions, decision-making, and policy implementation are influenced by domestic variable clusters like leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions, their framework overlooks the diplomatic exchanges between foreign policy elites and their counterparts in other states.

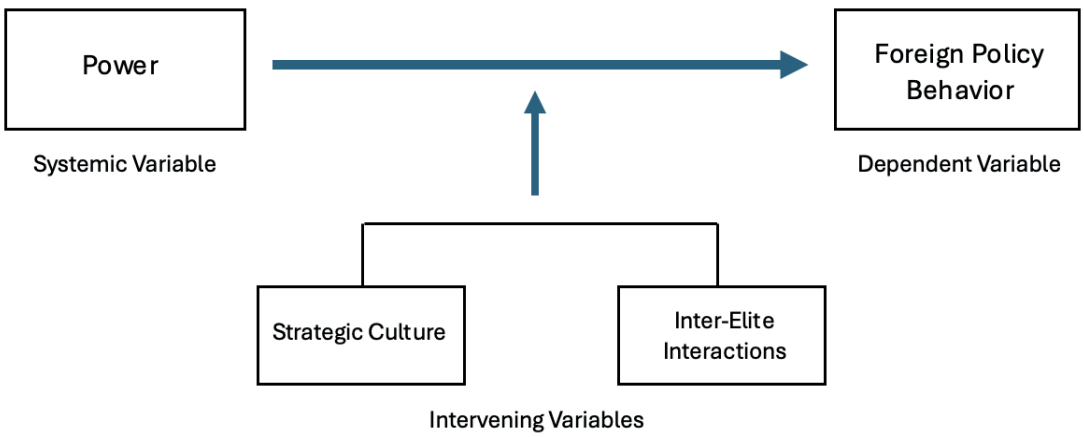
Onea (2012: 144) aptly observes that whenever NCR refers to non-structural variables, "they mean principally the domestic attributes of the state in question, with little attention paid to the matter of its actual interactions with other polities." In response to this limitation, Onea (2012: 146) proposes a "revivalist theory" of NCR, suggesting that "foreign policy is determined by a state's goals, which are in turn chosen as a result of its strategic interactions with other polities." While he highlights an important dimension, his contribution remains underdeveloped, and encounters several issues with the core logic of NCR. First, his theoretical explanation lacks clarity regarding how systemic incentives interact with unit-level factors. Onea (2012: 146) argues that foreign policy is principally "shaped by the strategic context of its interactions with other states," but does not sufficiently address how this strategic context interacts with broader systemic or domestic factors. Moreover, his theory does not sufficiently explain why it should be categorized as NCR, given its primary emphasis on strategic interactions and status-seeking (Götz 2021: 3). By neglecting both the international system and other key domestic variables, Onea's framework aligns more closely with constructivist or certain forms of FPA paradigms, thereby diluting the distinctive core of NCR. Additionally, his theory overlooks the role of elite relationships in shaping strategic interactions, missing critical insights from socio-psychological research.

As Wivel (2005: 367-368) suggests, NCR should borrow from FPA to deepen its engagement with the theoretical foundations of perceptions, interpretations, and motivations. Therefore, NCR's potential to fully contribute to FPA remains constrained as long as it neglects inter-elite interactions between states. In the following section, I propose an NCR theoretical framework that fosters this essential engagement.

A Neoclassical Realist Framework for Foreign Policy Analysis

Existing NCR analyses neglect the impact of elite interactions. To address this theoretical gap, as illustrated in Figure 1, this section develops a neoclassical realist framework that suggests the distribution of material power set parameters for foreign policy, offering alternative options. Meanwhile, strategic culture and elite interactions further refine and specify choices made within these parameters.

Figure 1. Neoclassical Realist Framework for FPA



Systemic Variable: Power

The primary motivation behind the development of NCR is that structural realism, as a theory of International Relations, does not attempt to explain specific foreign policy choices (Schweller 2003: 316). While neorealism focuses on explaining broad patterns of systemic and recurring outcomes, NCR seeks to explain "variation in the foreign policies of the same state over time or across different states facing similar external constraints" (Taliaferro, Ripsman, and Lobell 2009: 21). Policymakers can choose from various strategies offered by the international system, such as identifying allies and adversaries, adopting isolationist or expansionist stances, or aligning with the status quo or embracing revisionism. To clarify how the international system shapes the broad parameters of these strategies, relative power acts as the systemic variable (Reichwein 2012: 38).

At this stage, it is important to define the concept of power. Baldwin (2013: 274) identifies two main approaches to understanding power: "power-as-resources" approach, and the "relational power" approach. The former approach focuses on the elements of national power by depicting power as physical assets or material capabilities a nation possesses including wealth, territory, population, and armies (Holsti 1964: 180; Waltz 1979). In contrast, the "relational power approach" defines power as a form of causation, describing a "relationship (actual or potential) in which the behavior of actor A at least partially causes a change in the behavior of actor B" (Baldwin 2013: 274).

NCR primarily operates within the confines of the power-as-resources approach, yet it acknowledges the significance of nonmaterial and relational elements of power. Power is defined "in terms of the possession of specific assets or capabilities" (Schmidt and Juneau 2012: 73), and "those capabilities, both tangible and intangible" are viewed in "relative terms" with the claim that "they shape the opportunities and constraints faced by states" (Juneau 2015: 35).

NCR employs various power measurements, such as a state's gross domestic product (GDP), the composition and size of its armed forces, annual defense spending, research and development in military, the population size and demographic trends, natural resource endowments as well as the size of territory (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016: 44). In addition to these tangible sources, neoclassical realists often cite Morgenthau's formula, which emphasizes that while military and economic capacities are fundamental to a state's greatness, "the substance of that greatness springs from the hidden sources of intellect and morale, from ideas and values" (Morgenthau 1948: 176; Juneau 2015: 36).

To clarify the range of foreign policy options available to a state during a specific period, researchers assess its relative power and identify the structural constraints and opportunities it faces. For instance, the end of the Cold War presented the U.S. with several potential grand strategic choices. With the easing of structural constraints, the U.S. had at least three options regarding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO): maintaining and/or expanding NATO's existing borders, establishing a new security system in Europe, or withdrawing completely from the continent (Shifrinson 2020: 349).

In short, the distribution of power defines the structural incentives and parameters of foreign policy, serving as the systemic variable in the NCR developed in this paper. As Schmidt and Juneau (2012: 73) explain, the definition and operationalization of power should be determined empirically, taking into account the unique circumstances of the case under study. This reflects NCR's flexible and eclectic approach, which is essential for its primary aim of developing a theoretically informed narrative of a state's foreign policy in specific contexts.

Intervening Variable I: Strategic Culture

A key characteristic of NCR is its ability to pinpoint domestic factors as intervening variables in the analysis of how states respond to systemic pressures. This requires considering the strategic ideas of foreign policy elites (Kitchen 2010). Ideas enable policymakers to assess the distribution of power, predict power trends, and identify threats, thereby helping them determine their state's interests in a particular situation (Lobell 2009). A foreign policymaker's mind is not a "tabula rasa" (Hudson and Vore 1995: 217); strategic ideas do not arise spontaneously but develop through a process of socialization within a specific context, shaped by historical and cultural influences. Policymakers internalize particular ways of thinking, often making "axiomatic choices based on unexamined assumptions" (Porter 2018: 11). These

ideas are embedded within a strategic-cultural context that shapes perceptions of appropriate conduct and establishes "international behavioral expectation" (Blagden 2021: 1165). This is because, "cultural variables subconsciously set the limits and terms of debate for individuals and institutions, and so have a profound effect on the strategic behavior of states" (Kitchen 2010: 132).

As Dueck (2006: 14) argues, "international pressures must be interpreted and represented subjectively, through a cultural process, in order to have an effect on strategic choice". In this understanding, culture as a general term simply refers to any "set of interlocking values, beliefs, and assumptions that are held collectively by a given group and passed on through socialization" (Dueck 2006: 14-15). Those interlocking set of values and beliefs, particularly those concerning strategic matters, form a nation's strategic culture.

According to Gray (1999) strategic culture does not dictate strategic behavior but provides valuable constitutive context for understanding elite decisions. In this sense, strategic culture does not determine actions but rather "helps shape" them, alongside other "domestic and external" factors (Gray 1999: 68). This perspective implies that the international system also influences state behavior, as "strategic culture…supplements rather than supplants realist approaches to international relations" (Biava, Drent, and Herd 2011: 2). This view allows strategic culture to be integrated as an intervening variable within a neoclassical realist framework. In this paper, strategic culture refers to deeply embedded notions of national interest that do not directly determine but help shape foreign policy.

Strategic cultural ideas interact with the relative power and mediate policy outcomes. Consider the US expansionist grand strategy after the Cold War. A liberal-capitalist strategic culture acted as a filter, narrowing the potential options (shaped by power) into a specific set of sensible choices (Layne 2006). The Clinton administration's grand strategy of "Engagement and Enlargement" resulted in a more intensified form of expansionism. This strategy was not directly dictated by the post-Cold War international structure; rather the relative power interacted with other unit-level intervening variables, such as expansionist strategic culture, to shape the policy decisions.

Then, strategic culture interacts with power to explain broad patterns of foreign policy. However, it also highlights what is missing in analysis. As Elkins and Simeon (1979: 131) assert, "culture does not explain the particular choices which individuals make," but its explanatory power "is primarily restricted to setting the agenda". The crucial question then becomes: How can we account for differences and specifics in the implementation of a state's policy toward other actors within the same systemic-cultural context? To address this, we must turn to the dynamic interactions between foreign policy elites across states. These elite interactions provide essential insights into how strategic decisions are made and how states' policies are formulated in response to both systemic and cultural contexts.

Intervening Variable II: Elite Interactions

NCR recognizes that state institutions and policies are shaped by elites, whose decisions are influenced by their ideas and perceptions (Kitchen 2012: 87). These elites, including the head of government, ministers, and officials, are the primary agents in foreign policy-making (Lobell 2009: 45; Ripsman 2009: 171). Therefore, NCR seeks to open the black box of the state—an idea central to FPA due to its actor-specific focus. The idea is that "to understand a state's specific behavior, one must look inside the black box and examine the preferences and configurations of key domestic actors" (Rose 1998: 148). The socio-psychological approach within FPA has been instrumental in uncovering how these preferences are shaped by factors such as operational codes (Holsti 1970), (mis) perceptions (Jervis 1976), leadership styles and beliefs (Kaarbo 2003), and the influence of images (Hermann 2003). It also highlights the importance of strategic and diplomatic interactions among actors (Hermann 2003).

Central to this approach is the emphasis on the psychological dynamics of leaders and elites, particularly how they perceive, process, and evaluate information during decision-making (Hudson and Vore 1995). This focus underscores the need to analyze communication processes and interactions between actors. As Hudson (2005: 15-16) notes, FPA has a longstanding tradition of exploring how individual agency is shaped and transformed through interactions. For instance, Lotz (1997) examined the "interaction between competing entrepreneurs" to shed light on the socio-psychological context of persuasion and diffusion processes. This analysis demonstrated how elite interactions played a pivotal role in securing the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), even as many Americans viewed Mexico as "foreign" while perceiving Canada as more familiar.

In this context, FPA prioritizes "concrete theorizing" over "abstract theorizing," emphasizing that explaining foreign policy necessitates incorporating an "actor-specific" dimension and the "specification of the situation," which, in turn, requires engagement with the decision-making processes of political elites (Lane 1990: 927; Hudson and Vore 1995: 211). While NCR shares similarities with FPA in its emphasis on elites and contends that "the process of strategic adjustment" begins with elites' recognition of "changes in the intentions of other states and non-state actors" (Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman 2009: 32), its theoretical exploration of elite interactions remains underdeveloped. This gap can be attributed, in part, to IR's enduring "fetishization of abstraction" (Foulon and Meibauer 2020: 1208), which has fostered a path dependency in the NCR's theoretical evolution. As a result, NCR has faced similar critiques leveled at broader IR theories, particularly the assertation that "this literature is 'lost' to scholars in IR" (Kaarbo 2015; Breuning 2022: 84).

NCR's emphasis on elites, rather than adhering to the parsimonious "billiard ball" models, highlights its potential to enrich FPA and serve as a bridge between IR and FPA. As Kaarbo (2015: 205) contends, FPA can provide NCR with significant theoretical and empirical leverage, particularly by addressing the underdeveloped conceptualization of how states—

and by extension, their elites—adapt to or resist changes in their beliefs about other states' intentions. The lack of a clear framework in NCR for understanding the evolution of these beliefs underscores the critical role of elite interactions.

Elites must assess foreign states' motives and intentions through information gathering and processing to make informed strategic choices (Hermann 2003). As Goffman (1971) observes, this process unfolds through interactions between actors, either in face-to-face meetings or via telecommunication, which enable the exchange of expressions and information about each other's ideas, ideologies, thoughts, and intentions:

> "In pursuit of their interests, parties of all kinds must deal with and through individuals, both individuals who appear to help and individuals who appear to hinder. In these dealings, parties—or rather persons who manage them—must orient to the capacities which these individuals are seen to have and to the conditions which bear upon their exercise, such as…culture-bound beliefs" (Goffman 1971: 3).

Therefore, each actor plans their moves based on expectations of the other's response, which in turn influences their decisions (Hermann 2003: 300).

For individuals to make assessments, they must receive information from or about their counterparts. This information is conveyed through expressions. In Goffman's (1971: 5) conceptualization, generating an expression involves making its information available, which he terms "expressed information." Any contact a party has with an individual—whether face-to-face or mediated through devices such as mail, telephone, or similar means—"will give the party access to expression" (Goffman 1971: 7). Thus, interactions between elites provide them with essential information, which, in turn, helps shape their assessments, perceptions, and decisions.

Beyond the exchange of explicit information, reciprocal interactions between states involve negotiation and persuasion, where each side seeks to influence the other's decisions (Lotz 1997). One state may shape another's strategic thinking, encouraging its elites to adopt aligned policies, while elites in the targeted state may internalize or resist these ideas, attempting to influence their counterparts toward less assertive or more cooperative strategies. Thus, states actively shape each other's foreign policy choices in multiple ways.

At this point, it is essential to address a key criticism of an NCR framework that incorporates elite interactions—namely, the concern that such interactions are applied in an ad hoc manner. This reflects a broader challenge often directed at NCR itself, as it is sometimes perceived as lacking theoretical rigor and operating in an inherently ad hoc fashion (Walt 2002; Narizny 2017). This critique is taken seriously, as self-reflective NCR scholarship acknowledges the theory's difficulty in systematically integrating various intervening variables (Meibauer 2020).

Indeed, this issue especially arises when scholars conceptualize intervening variables as "primary" causes of state behavior rather than as moderating or complementary factors within

NCR, risking disruption of the variable hierarchy and undermining the primacy of systemic factors. As Götz (2021: 2-3) notes, neoclassical realists who argue that internal factors always drive state behavior, while systemic conditions are largely indeterminate, closely resemble "inside-out" approaches, which challenge NCR's coherence and theoretical distinctiveness.

Accordingly, NCR scholars have responded by prioritizing improved explanations and intellectual diversity over strict paradigmatic purity while striving to systematize and refine the approach's theoretical and methodological foundations (Meibauer 2020: 23-24). Walt's (2002: 211) suggestion to systematically identify the conditions under which these variables exert varying influence on state behavior has been widely embraced. Some approaches have delineated the systemic conditions that allow unit-level factors to become influential, emphasizing that intervening variables shape foreign policy only when supported by broader systemic conditions (Götz 2021: 2).

Building on this framework, Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016) categorize intervening variables into four types—leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions—highlighting their varying influence over time. In restrictive systemic environment "these intervening variables can influence the policy selection process from a narrow range of policy alternatives" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016: 60). However key intervening variables have greater influence particularly under the conditions of more permissive strategic environment. This systematization attempt has led scholars to view NCR as addressing its ad hoc aspect, positioning it as a more robust framework for explaining foreign policy compared to neorealism and overcoming the limitations and "unsophistication" of traditional FPA (Meibauer et al. 2021; Tang 2023: 1-2). While NCR prioritizes specificity and accuracy over parsimony and generalizability (Juneau 2015), it remains on "exceedingly firm ground" (Sterling-Folker 2009: 215).

Building on this, the framework presented here integrates elite interactions within the broader principles outlined above. As Walt (2018: 6) notes, "unit-level elements…loom larger when states are safer, and the effects of anarchy are weaker." I argue that when a state encounters a window of opportunity with greater power, systemic incentives enhance agency, while elite interactions and strategic culture play a stronger role. Nevertheless, this paper does not suggest elite interactions are the primary driver of state behavior. Rather, choices are fundamentally conditioned by the international system, which establishes the structural context within which states formulate their options. While the international system remains paramount, it is not the sole determinant of foreign policy decisions. Subjective responses to international structural conditions must also be considered to fully account for state behavior.

Strategic culture interacts with systemic stimuli to influence foreign policy trajectories in both the short-to-medium and medium-to-long term (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016: 61), shedding light on broader patterns of state behavior. Additionally, integrating elite interactions as an intervening variable enhances the specificity and accuracy of foreign policy analysis by capturing the form, substance and timing of decision-making especially in short term. Elite interactions shape how strategic cultural ideas are operationalized, often amplifying or modifying them based on the dynamics of elite relationships.

Recent examples from Türkiye's foreign policy illustrate how elite interactions, along with power dynamics and strategic culture, shape decision-making. Over the past two decades, as Türkiye's relative power has risen and the international system has shifted toward multipolarity (Yeşiltaş and Pirinççi 2021), the country has found opportunities to expand its influence across various regions, including the Middle East, Balkans, North Africa, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. However, Türkiye's strategic culture—characterized by cautious activism and engagement with its historical-geographical basin (Mufti 2009)—has influenced its response to this increased maneuverability. Elite interactions have also played a role in translating these broader systemic opportunities into specific foreign policy actions. For example, in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, Turkish-Egyptian relations reached a historical peak following the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muhammad Morsi in the 2012 presidential elections, largely due to interactions between Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the then prime minister of Türkiye, and Morsi-linked elites (Yeşilyurt 2020). However, relations deteriorated after Morsi's removal by the 2013 coup d'état. It was not until elite-level diplomatic efforts intensified, particularly since 2020, that ties began to normalize. Erdoğan's visit to Cairo in February 2024, along with President Sisi's first visit to Türkiye in 12 years in September 2024, marked significant strides toward potential renewed cooperation and Türkiye's engagement with Egypt, highlighting the crucial role of elite interactions in shaping variations and specifics in Turkish foreign policy toward Egypt.

As demonstrated in the example above, building more precise accounts of foreign policy requires incorporating elite interactions between states to analyze the substance, form, and timing of decisions. This approach, while adding complexity, enhances explanatory power by bridging the gap between structural forces and individual agency, and between IR and FPA, addressing key shortcomings noted by scholars (Wivel 2005; Kaarbo 2015; Sears 2017; Kozub-Karkut 2019; Breuning 2022).

This framework differs from solely actor-based theories in FPA by offering a more comprehensive approach that integrates multiple levels of analysis. In this regard, it responds to the suggestion that bridging the NCR with assumptions typically associated with FPA could foster "a very interesting kind of eclectic scholarship," ultimately aiding both mainstream IR theories in incorporating domestic-level variables and foreign policy theories in achieving a structural dimension (Kozub-Karkut, 2019: 203).

Conclusion

NCR has long been viewed as a promising framework for bridging the divide between IR and FPA. However, as this paper demonstrates, its current formulations lack the necessary explanatory power to fully account for foreign policy dynamics. While the interaction between relative power and domestic strategic culture provides a broad lens for understanding foreign policy trajectories, it does not adequately address variations and specifics in a state's behavior toward other actors. By incorporating elite interactions as an additional variable, this framework can more effectively capture the nuanced and evolving nature of state actions in foreign policy.

The NCR framework in this paper argues that relative power sets foreign policy parameters, while strategic culture and elite interactions filter and specify choices. This approach integrates the statist nature of realist foreign policy analysis with the opportunities offered by the socio-psychological perspectives of FPA and elite studies. State leaders' decisions are closely tied to their interpretations of the external environment, particularly their assessments of other states' intentions. This process begins with receiving and processing information, where elite interactions play a crucial role. These interactions shape decision-makers' assessments while also serving as a mechanism to influence and align foreign counterparts' decisions with their own strategic interests. Thus, these exchanges are not merely reactive but actively shape foreign policy actions.

Incorporating elite interactions into the NCR framework strengthens its capacity to fulfill its promise to FPA, enhancing its explanatory power in capturing the dynamic and context-specific nature of foreign policy. Additionally, it contributes to ongoing efforts to incorporate diverse factors into explanatory frameworks, directly addressing the agent-structure problem in IR. For IR scholars, even if the ultimate task is not to develop "a grand theory of everything" (Wendt 1999), it remains to pursue a systematic-integrative approach for comprehensive analysis. By situating agents and structures in relation to one another, this study is an attempt to offer a unique of combining international and domestic as well as material and ideational dynamics in the study of foreign policy.

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