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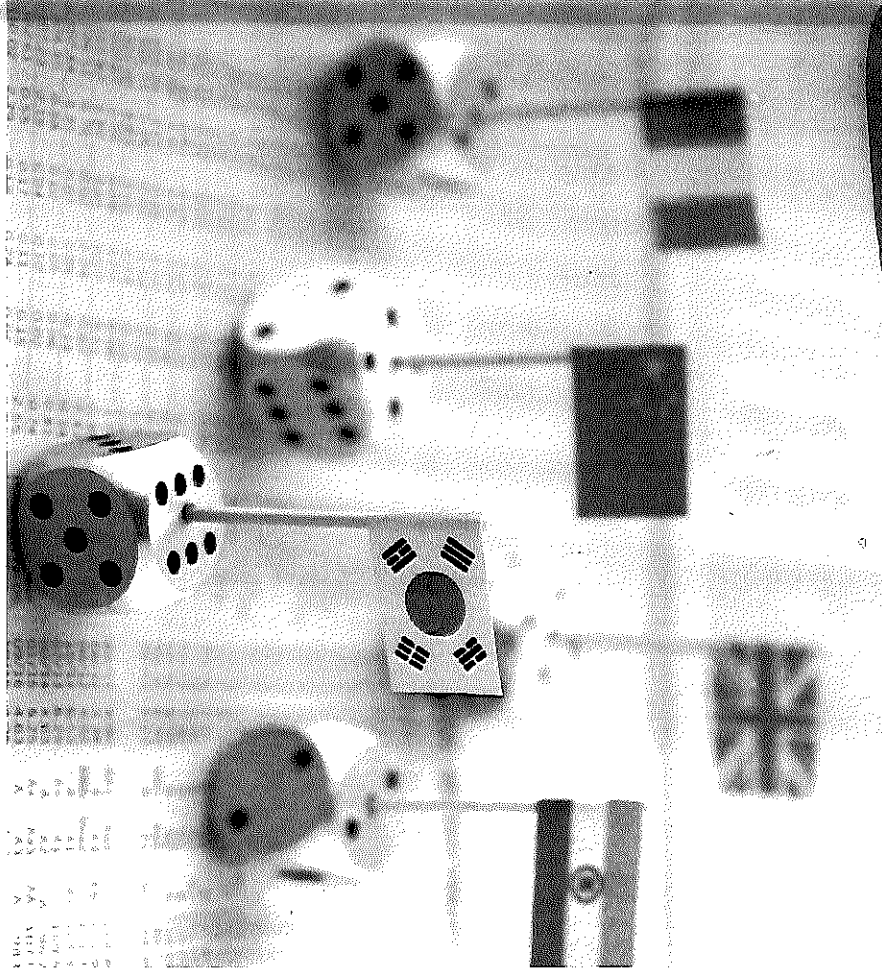
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2　Foreign policy decision making

Introduction

The foreign policy decision-making process is a major focus of FPA scholarship seeking to unlock and explain the complexities of state conduct in the international system. In this regard, rationality and its application to foreign policy decision making is one of the most influential approaches to understanding contemporary international politics. Derived from public choice theory – which itself emerged out of the fields of economics and policy sciences – rational choice scholars have actively sought to utilize a well-established methodology of decision making in the context of foreign policy. Applying this approach to the task of modelling the complex environment of foreign policy decision making has, nonetheless, posed new challenges for rationalists.[1] The result has been the development of innovations in modelling choice in areas as diverse as nuclear strategy and trade negotiations, which have become influential in academic and foreign policy-making circles.

The use of rationalist approaches to analyse foreign policy decision making, at the same time, has inspired considerable commentary and criticism. Indeed, the formative work of FPA has been devoted to assessing the weaknesses of this school of thought and its links to realist assumptions.[2] This critique of rationalist accounts of foreign policy decision making is rooted as much in its inability to accurately capture the actual foreign policy process as in the problems posed by some of its foundational assumptions. Culling from studies of political psychology and cognitive theory, FPA scholars have focused on the centrality of the mind of the decision maker, its powerful effect on the framing of particular foreign policy issues and the consequent impact on the formulation and selection of policy options. The subsequent research conducted into the role of perceptual factors and cognitive shortcomings highlights the many distortions integral to the decision-making process, challenging the very

possibility of achieving rationality in foreign policy. Introducing the problematic of foreign policy implementation, as we will see as the argument unfolds, exposes rationalist assumptions to a further round of criticisms.

Yet there remains within much of FPA a desire to retain adherence to a broadly rationalist description of foreign policy decision making. Notions such as 'bounded rationality', which seek to account for the distorting effects of partial information and narrowing perceptions, are suggestive of the continuing relevance of rational choice theory – albeit somewhat reconstituted in light of criticisms – to any accounts of the decision-making process. James Rosenau's clarion call to identify variables and rigorous methodologies to better organize the study of foreign policy – which led to the ill-fated comparative foreign policy research programme – while embracing much of the critique of rationalism in setting out his FPA 'pre-theories', nonetheless seeks to frame the research agenda squarely within the realm of positivism.[3] The 'pull of rationalism' as a method, however attenuated to account for critiques, remains an important dimension of FPA. The result is that contemporary scholars have developed new methodological approaches to foreign policy decision making, which are explicitly aimed at reconciling the contingencies of rationality with the insights derived from its various critics.

Rationality and foreign policy decision making

Realists believe that all states' foreign policies conform to basic parameters set by the anarchic international system. Above all, realists stress, scholars need to investigate the influences of the structure of the international system and the relative power of states in order to understand the outcomes of foreign policy decisions. Calculations of national interest are self-evident and can be arrived at rationally through a careful analysis of the material conditions of states as well as the particulars of a given foreign policy dilemma confronting states. The classical realism formulation of balance of power provides a crude, but effective, tool for analysing state action in international affairs.

Rational choice theory (sometimes called public choice theory) as applied to international affairs has sought to introduce a more rigorous, methodologically sound approach that could use the basic laws of choice to assess the process and outcome of foreign policy decision making. From this perspective, the maximization of utility by actors – in this case states – is the ultimate aim of foreign policy decision makers. By maximization of utility, we mean that a state first identifies and prioritizes foreign policy goals; it then identifies and selects from the means available to it which fulfil its aims with the least cost. This cost-benefit analysis involves

trade-offs between different possible foreign policy positions and, ultimately, produces a theory of foreign policy choice that reflects a calculus of self-interest. In this regard, the focus of this approach traditionally is on policy outcomes and therefore assumes a relatively undifferentiated decision-making body for foreign policy (a 'unitary actor') rather than one composed of different decision makers.

However, some rationalist scholars have recognized that an assessment of national interest – defined as enhancing security and wealth maximization (or, to use the public choice jargon, 'preference formation') – is crucial to determining the actual foreign policy choice. Their consideration of the sources for foreign policy preferences suggests that it is the nature of the international system and accompanying structural parity between states produced by sovereignty, rather than any particular domestic feature in a given state, that remains the most significant determinant of choice. As all states reside within the same international setting, in which the conditions of anarchy tend to structure the 'rules of the game' in a similar fashion for all states, coming to an interpretation of action and reaction should not be out of reach for foreign policy analysts.

Operationalizing the core assumptions in rational decision making, especially those of motivation (self-interest) and a single decision maker (unitary actor), can produce some compelling explanations of the process and choices pursued in foreign policy. This general depiction of rationality is best captured perhaps through the application of game theory to foreign policy decision making. Here scholars have isolated particular dilemmas in foreign policy and sought to frame them within a matrix of choice that illuminates the dilemmas facing decision makers.

Game theory is a structured approach which in its original form posits a relatively simple matrix of participants and issues that allows mathematically derived interpretations of decision making. For game theorists, the respective rules of different types of games frame the possibilities of choice undertaken by the participants and the accompanying strategies employed to achieve best possible outcomes. For instance, cooperative and non-cooperative forms of the game produce strategies that range from 'zero-sum' wins by one participant over the other to trade-offs that secure 'win-sets', that is outcomes in which both parties are able to claim satisfactory – if often sub-optimal – outcomes. Snyder and Diesing employ game theory to develop an understanding of the conduct of states during international crises, coming up with nine possible negotiating 'games' framed by different crisis situations: 'Hero', 'Leader', 'Prisoner's Dilemma', 'Chicken', 'Deadlock', 'Called Bluff', 'Bully', 'Big Bully' and 'Protector'.[4] The central contention in this approach is that it is the structure of the crisis that determines the type of bargaining strategies and eventual outcomes

that take place between two parties. Powell shifts the focus to the nature of the negotiation itself during international crises, positing that there is a 'risk/return' trade-off operating during international crises tied to power as well as information asymmetries.[5] Drawing on 'game theory' approaches, three useful examples of this form of rationalism put to the task of understanding foreign policy decision making can be applied in the areas of nuclear strategy, international trade and democratic peace theory.

Thomas Schelling's work on game theory and its application to nuclear strategy elaborates upon the classic prisoner's dilemma schema. Schelling uses the format of strategic bargaining with imperfect information in a non-cooperative game to adduce the conduct of participants facing decisions in a nuclear arms race.[6] His insight is to analyse how deterrence, that is, the promulgation of an arms build-up and a concomitant agreement not to mobilize ('first strike' in nuclear parlance), operates as an imperfect restraint on a state's move towards conflict. The incremental use of strategies of escalation to produce behaviour change in an aggressive opponent, or 'brinkmanship', is advocated by Schelling as a way of establishing and maintaining the credibility of the deterrent. A 'balance of terror' is the predicted foreign policy outcome in this approach and, indeed, served as the core nuclear doctrine for the US for a number of years.

In the area of international diplomacy, Robert Putnam attempts to explain the contrary outcomes found in trade policy negotiations.[7] Putnam asserts that the best way to understand the behaviour of foreign policy decision makers is to recognize that they are in fact operating in two separate environments, each with a distinctive set of logics that structure choice accordingly. Leaders naturally attend to domestic concerns in developing their position on a given issue. The fact that the international environment is a 'self-help system' conditioned by anarchy, while the domestic environment functions in accordance with a recognized authority structure and accompanying rules, means that foreign policy decision makers have to operate in two overlapping – and potentially conflicting – games simultaneously. For Putnam, a win-set is only achieved when the outcome reflects the shared interests of all the relevant actors and is in tune with the imperatives of the domestic environment.

Finally, Levy and Razin's study of democratic peace theory provides a compelling interpretation of the role that information plays in open societies, which allows for them to devise bargaining strategies that produce both cooperation and mutually beneficial outcomes. According to Levy and Razin, it is the flow of information – a by-product of democratic societies – that better enables democratic decision makers to calculate potential gains and losses and thereby to come to an amicable resolution to any dispute.[8] By contrast, it is the uncertainties founded in information

asymmetries in the interactions between democratic and non-democratic states that are the determining factor in explaining the statistical tendency towards foreign policies of conflict between them.

What is notable about the utilization of game theory in foreign policy decision making is the degree to which it tacitly relies upon the *perceptions* of decision makers in structuring the context of negotiations and the process that accompanies them. The lack of explicit recognition by rational choice theorists of the implications that this crucial perceptual factor has on key claims of rationality of the entire process opens up a line of criticism which FPA scholars such as Robert Jervis were to pursue with great vigour.[9]

With respect to the last two applications of game theory to foreign policy, outlined above, it is interesting that they involve greater attention to and integration of the domestic environment and, consequently, a richer description of the decision-making process. At the same time, however, as inputs from the domestic environment are integrated into the decision matrix, the complexity of sources of influence upon the foreign policy decision-making process is increasingly evident. Rationalists operating in this tradition acknowledge that domestic constraints and the disparity between the underlying governing logic of the international and domestic systems exert a determining impact upon foreign policy decisions.[10] This fundamental condition helps explain the variety of foreign policy choices and outcomes which, on the surface, appear at odds with rationalist depictions of foreign policy. Indeed, the putative pressure from domestic sources is even said to be exploited by leaders to extract concessions during negotiations with foreign actors.[11]

More generally, as can be seen from this presentation of the rationalist perspective on foreign policy – and notwithstanding the nagging problems associated with individual perceptions and the complexity implied by giving greater weight to domestic factors – developing foreign policy goals and implementing them involves a relatively straightforward assessment of the situation and other actors' potential actions based on their status and material endowment within the international system. Optimal outcomes, albeit within the framework of available choices, are both the goal and the guide for foreign policy choice. Good foreign policy is achievable and, presumably, is a realistic source for ordering the international system through some form of balancing or trade-off mechanism.

Challenging rational decision making: the role of psychology, cognition and personality

Foreign policy is the product of human agency, that is, individuals in leadership positions identifying foreign policy issues, making judgements

about them and then acting upon that information. It is this fundamental insight, at the heart of the behaviourist critique of rationality in decision making, which instigated a concentrated study of the impact of individual psychology on foreign policy. Underlying this behaviourist approach was the recognition that individual leaders of states exercise a seminal influence over the foreign policy process by dint of their experience, outlook and limitations and, therefore, were worthy of special attention. Among the diversity of psychological factors said to play a role in shaping foreign policy are the influence of individual perceptions, human cognition, a leader's personality and the dynamics of group decision making.

For proponents of the psychological approach, foreign policy decision makers operate in a highly complex world and their decisions carry significant risks. These include linguistic-cultural barriers, stereotypes, high volumes of, yet incomplete, information. Hence, through processes of perception and cognition, decision makers develop images, subjective assessments of the larger operational context, which when taken together constitute a 'definition of the situation.' These definitions are always a distortion of reality since the purpose of perception is to simplify and order the external environment. Policy makers can therefore never be completely rational in applying the rationalists' imperative of maximization of utility towards any decisions.

A critique of rational decision making

Harold and Margaret Sprout introduced one of the most defining critiques of the rational approach to foreign policy. They examined the environment within which foreign policy decisions are taken, distinguishing between the 'operational environment' – which they posit as objective reality – and the 'psychological environment' – which they hold to be subjective and under the influence of a myriad of perceptual biases and cognitive stimuli.[12] Foreign policy decision makers take decisions on the basis of their psychological environment, relying upon perceptions as a guide, rather than any cold weighing of objective facts. Harold and Margaret Sprout believed that the accompanying gap between the 'operational environment' and the 'psychological environment' within which decision makers act introduced significant distortions into foreign policy making with important implications for foreign policy as a whole. This division which they set out proved to be a defining feature of the emerging critique of rationalist accounts of decision making, opening up an examination of the impact that psychological and cognitive factors have on the minds of decision makers.

Richard Snyder and colleagues took this insight further, pointing out that it was inaccurate to ascribe decision making to the autonomous

unitary entity known as the state.[13] In their view, the 'black box of foreign policy decision making' needed to be opened up so that one could both recognize the actual complexity underlying decisions (which includes individual biases and bureaucratic processes) and develop a better analysis of foreign policy itself. The result was a focus on the actors, processes and ultimately the structures of foreign policy decision making within the state as sources of explanation for foreign policy. A key contribution made by Snyder was to emphasize the 'definition of the situation' by foreign policy makers.[14] What this notion sought to capture was the centrality of decision makers – and with it their subjective biases – in defining, assessing and interpreting foreign policy events. Human agency, with all its foibles, was in this way reasserted to be at the core of international politics.[15]

For these critics of rationality, foreign policy decision makers do not act in a purely rational manner that conforms to the core assumptions of realism and public choice theory. At best, foreign policy decision makers could be said to operate within the framework of the information available to them and make decisions on that limited basis. Moreover, decision makers are subject also to other influences, such as their perceptions, pre-existing beliefs or prejudices and cognitive limitations on handling information, which introduce further distortions to the process. Much of the substance of this latter critique against rationality as a source of foreign policy decision making was made by the behaviourists in their work on individual decision makers. Critics of rationality believe that attempts at rational foreign policy decision making are misguided and even potentially dangerous for states.

The role of perception

In dividing the setting of foreign policy decision making between the 'operational' and 'psychological' environments, Harold and Margaret Sprout opened up the possibility of FPA scholars investigating the interior lives of individual foreign policy makers. Psychology, especially the work on perception and cognition, became a critical resource for understanding these dynamics inherent in the decision making conducted by individuals. Underlying this approach is cognitive psychology's general insights on human behaviour, which suggest human beings prefer simplicity to complexity, seek consistency over ambiguity, are poor estimators of probability and are loss averse.[16] These fundamental attributes play a critical role in shaping the foreign policy decision-making process.

Robert Jervis produced one of the most influential studies in this area on the role of 'misperception' in foreign policy decisions, which he says stems from the fact that leaders make foreign policy based upon their

perceptions rather than the actual 'operational environment'. His studies demonstrate that individual leaders draw upon a personalized understanding of history in their efforts to both interpret international events and devise appropriate responses to them.[17] These interpretations are rooted in a relatively stable set of beliefs which, when coupled with the cognitive drive for consistency, produce a deliberate (if unintended) reinforcing of the leader's evolving foreign policy prescription and the underlying beliefs upon which they are based.[18] For Kenneth Boulding, this suggests that foreign policy decisions are largely the product of the 'images' that individual leaders have of other countries or leaders and, therefore, are based upon stereotypes, biases and other subjective sources that interfere with their ability to conduct rational foreign policy.[19] All these scholars see leadership as bringing its particular experience and outlook, perhaps shaped by individual and societal prejudices or media imagery, to the foreign policy process and thus introducing distortions in the 'definition of the situation'.

Within the realm of foreign policy decision making itself, the apparent symmetry between two potential choices posited by rationalism is subject to underlying psychological biases. The recognition by psychologists that human beings are loss averse, that is, they give greater weight to actions that potentially could stave off loss in relation to actions that might produce gain, provides insight into the consistency with which decision makers pursue 'preservationist' outcomes – producing sub-optimal choices – within game theory. While this relative weighting of the fear of loss compared to gain is accounted for to some extent by rational choice scholars, the broader point is that it suggests that perceptual factors have a primordial hold on the mechanism of choice. Concurrently, there is well-founded empirical evidence that while decision makers persistently ascribe purposeful rationality to the decisions of other actors, they allow for a host of externalities as sources of influence over their own decision making processes. This belief or 'fundamental attribution error' leads to a pattern of under-estimation of the constraints affecting 'opponents' in relation to oneself and contributes to distortions in foreign policy decision making.[20]

The role of cognition

Another dimension of the psychological approach that affects foreign policy is cognition. Cognition, the process by which humans select and process information from the world around them, introduces important problems to the decision-making process. For instance, the sheer volume of possible information that could significantly impact upon a particular

foreign policy and the patent inability of an individual to recognize or process it successfully is a well-known problem. Indeed, the limits that cognition – when coupled to the role of perception – imposes on a rational account of foreign policy are such that it is difficult to describe these decisions as anything but the product of an incomplete (and therefore unsatisfactory) process.

Cognitive consistency is a crucial concept for FPA scholars working on decision-making dynamics. The impulse to seek out and reinforce the existing beliefs of decision makers is a fundamental cognitive drive for human beings. Jervis' investigation of 'cognitive consistency' points out that foreign policy makers habitually screen out the disruptive effects by finding a logical way of incorporating them into the rationale for a given foreign policy choice.[21] Building upon these insights, other behaviourist scholars have highlighted the distortions to rational foreign policy imposed by the search for cognitive consistency by individual leaders. Leon Festinger's concept of 'cognitive dissonance', that is, the effort by which a decision maker deliberately excludes new or contradictory information, in order to maintain his or her existing image or cognitive map, is one example of this.[22] Rosati's work on 'schema theory', however, suggests that these accounts of cognitive consistency are too rigid.[23] Cognitive theorists assume that individual decision makers are fixated on maintaining a well-integrated belief system and that this is both resistant to change as well as serving as a singular source for foreign policy choice. Schema theory posits a much more fragmented depiction of beliefs, which are said to be understood better as isolated repositories of knowledge, allowing for the inconsistency that characterizes their application to foreign policy decision making. The role of learning in foreign policy, including the drive to use history as a basis for decision making, is an expression of this dynamic process (see below).

Given the desire to produce a predictive science of foreign policy within FPA, attempts have been made to put these insights into a workable framework which captures a leader's beliefs in a systemic way. According to Alexander George, the international environment is filtered by decision makers through their own 'operational code', that is, a set of rules and perceptions that have previously been established within their minds and which are used to assess new situations and develop policy responses to them.[24] Robert Axelrod suggests that this interrelationship between individual leaders and their environments can best be explained through the development of a 'cognitive map' that combines perception, prejudice and an understanding of 'historical lessons' and applies these to the task of decision making.[25] His research findings suggest, moreover, that foreign policy makers tend towards those policy choices that involve the fewest

trade-offs, not necessarily the 'best' or 'optimal' policies that the rational choice theorists would have us believe, but the ones that involve the path of least resistance. Indeed, some characterize this sub-optimal decision making as 'satisficing', that is, the decision maker's impulse to choose a policy option that addresses the immediate pressures and concerns rather than weighing the merits of a given policy.[26]

The role of personality

In addition to perception and cognition, FPA scholars have tried to assess the impact of a leader's personality on foreign policy. They note that different leaders bring their own biases to office and – this is most evident in the removal of one leader and the installation of another – can exercise dramatically different influences over their countries' foreign policies. For example, scholars point to John F Kennedy's inexperience and youth compared to Nikita Khrushchev as a factor that played into the latter's decision to deploy Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962.[27] Ironically, in another mark of the force of personality on foreign policy, General Charles de Gaulle cited Kennedy's willingness to tolerate the hostile Castro regime within striking distance of the US in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis as a key causal factor in his decision to pull France out of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and embark on an independent French nuclear weapons programme.[28] De Gaulle reasoned that if Kennedy would not use force against an obvious military threat to the US population, then the American president would not be willing to support the use of US troops in defence of French interests. Finally, Tony Blair's commitment to the 2003 Iraq invasion has been tied by some scholars to his 'messianic' personality, while George Bush's public pronouncements influenced the American public's view of his handling of the conflict.[29,30] Psychological profiling of leaders, analysing the origins of their patterns of behaviour as a clue to their possible actions, has become an important preoccupation for FPA scholars.[31] All these individualistic and deeply personal elements are said to affect leadership and ultimately foreign policy outcomes.

In their study of personality, Irving Janis and Leon Mann introduce a 'motivational' model of foreign policy decision making that emphasizes the fact that leaders are emotional beings seeking to resolve internal decisional conflict.[32] The role of emotions is most pronounced in a crisis, and at this point, stress intervenes, causing a lack of ability to abstract and tolerate ambiguity and an increased tendency towards aggressive behaviour. Tunnel vision, fixation on single solutions to the exclusion of all others, may also ensue under these trying circumstances as leaders struggle to manage the complexity of decisions.[33] According to some scholars, those leaders who

are more highly motivated by the pursuit of power have a propensity for confrontational foreign policy, while those inclined towards greater interpersonal trust display more conciliatory forms of foreign policy.[34]

The expectation that leaders use nationalist foreign policy as a diversion from pressing domestic problems is a truism in popular assessments of leaders as different as Margret Thatcher in response to the Falkland Islands crisis, George W. Bush's pursuit of war in Iraq and Xi Jinping's forward strategy in East and Southeast Asia. In particular, a leader's propensity for engaging in risk-taking foreign policies has been correlated to their holding of 'hawkish' world views, having a familiarity with the use of the military as a foreign policy instrument and confidence in their ability to wield it, while minimizing risk.[35] According to Foster and Keller, leaders who are lower in conceptual complexity are more likely to promulgate aggressive foreign policies that predicated on diversionary strategies, while leaders with higher levels of conceptual complexity will conduct a more thorough-going assessment of risks and avoid diversionary strategies.[36]

Another manifestation of personality in foreign policy is the particular leadership style adopted by the key foreign policy actor. According to Orbovich and Molnar, four different cognitive leadership styles are possible, from systemic (rationalist, cost-benefit calculation), speculative (context oriented), judicial (task oriented) to intuitive (relies on non-rational approach, 'hunches').[37] Management of the decision-making process in foreign policy, be it seeking emotional reinforcement from an advisory group or using the group to affirm the leader's decision through forced consensus, is a reflection of the emotional disposition of the foreign policy decision maker.[38]

All these psychological factors are brought directly to bear on the foreign policy decision maker's assessment of the relative risk of a particular choice. Prospect theory suggests that when foreign policy decision makers perceive their setting to be one of gain, they become risk averse, seeking to hold on to their attainments. Conversely, when foreign policy decision makers perceive themselves to be operating in a setting of loss, they become risk takers, gambling on achieving gains through the pursuit of high-risk actions.[39] These situational (or 'domain') settings provide a context in which the rationality of the decision-making process is maintained in procedural terms, but is fatally compromised by subjective assessments of the situation faced by the foreign policy decision maker.

The role of the group

The same human psychological and cognitive limitations which challenge the rational actor model of decision making apply also to groups. Group decision-making structures, which are put in place in order to broaden the

information base, provide alternative sources of analysis and experience – in other words, to combat some of the perceptual misconceptions and cognitive shortcomings that arise in individual decision making – and introduce a new set of problems. Janis' investigation of foreign policy making by groups concludes that they suffer from 'groupthink', that is to say individuals tend to seek to maintain consensus when operating in a group even at the expense of promoting their own particular (and possibly more sensible) perspective on an issue under discussion.[40] Through this process of concurrency-seeking behaviour by group members, the objectively best (or 'optimal') decision to a given foreign policy dilemma can become diluted or even abandoned as individuals strive to come up with a common group position on how to address a specific foreign policy challenge. The very sources of support or opposition to a particular policy choice may be driven by the desire to satisfy the leader of the group rather than by the merit of the proposal. Equally, self-perceptions on how positions adopted by the group may affect one's status within the group – rather than the matter under discussion – have also factored into group decisions.

Considerable scholarship has been devoted to ameliorating the worst effects of groupthink, including restructuring groups periodically and reviewing decisions under consideration. George proposes a number of measures to combat this tendency, including the imposition of a devil's advocate to question pending decisions and rotation of leaders within smaller groups, but the fact remains that under circumstances where time is an issue, such as is the case in foreign policy crises, the impulse towards seeking consensus for sub-optimal policy positions is strong.[41] Other scholars have sought to go 'beyond groupthink' and re-examine the phenomenon in light of new data and insights. Stern and Sundelius, for instance, suggest that a key case examined by Janis, that of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, is better explained by 'new group syndrome' and an absence of assertive leadership than the pathologies associated with groupthink.[42]

Critiques of the foreign policy decision-making approach

The psychological approach in many respects is a devastating one for proponents of rationality in foreign policy. Nevertheless, its limitations as an interpretive tool in FPA have become evident to many working in the discipline. Holsti, for example, ultimately seeks to downplay the significance of psychological factors in foreign policy by stressing the importance of the operational environment as determining foreign policy independent of the psychological environment. He says foreign policy

cannot be usefully explained if one does not take into account several levels of analysis in addition to the individual level (where considerations of perception, cognition and personality do matter), namely bureaucratic constraints, domestic influences and the external environment.[43] Moreover, the stock of images, perceptions and ideology identified by FPA scholars are not the products of individuals, but rather emerge out of society (they are 'socially constructed'). Therefore, it is not especially relevant to focus on individuals alone. It would be more meaningful to focus on the social context within which they operate.

Also, the importance of personality in foreign policy is discounted by some scholars. Steve Smith's study of the 1979 Iran hostage crisis suggests that personality is not as significant as the actual role assumed by individuals holding positions of authority.[44] We explore this issue further in Chapter 3. Others point to the difficulty of measuring the degree of influence that psychological factors have on foreign policy outcomes. Can one really ascribe the decision of Barak Obama to endorse a new military surge in Iraq in 2014, to formative events in his background, and, if so, why were they any more important than the social, economic and security reasons for taking action? Overall, personality – as well as perception and cognition – can usefully contribute to explain aspects of the process of choice in foreign policy, but cannot serve as the sole or overarching explanation.

Psychological approaches in FPA provide a window on decision making that enriches our understanding of the myriad of possible influences on the foreign policy choices made by leaders. In many ways, it could be argued that the work of FPA scholars on perception and cognition anticipated the insights provided by constructivists working in IR theory a generation later.[45] There are distinctive differences, for instance, between the focus on the individual construction of reality which features in constructivism, reflecting their differing emphases on the role of structure and agency. Debates within constructivism centre upon the role of social norms versus discourses as key processes in formulating inter-subjective meanings which have implications for the focus of research in FPA. With respect to the former, the concept of 'strategic social rationality' as applied by norms entrepreneurs conforms more readily to the broader framework of rationality adopted by FPA, especially as reformulated through ideas such as 'bounded rationality'. At the same time, the commitment to positivism inherent in the formative division between the 'objective' and 'subjective' environments of foreign policy decision making produces a barrier to FPA scholars fully embracing constructivist notions of 'inter-subjectivity'.

Elucidating the limitations of the decision-making formulation from a different angle, scholars have emphasized the neglect of foreign policy

implementation as an area of study in FPA.[46] Revisiting Charles Lindblom's celebrated critique of the rationalist depiction of decision making by scholars of public administration provides further insight into the relationship between foreign policy formulation and its implementation. He points out that decisions are not, as rationalists would have it, made in a linear top-down fashion, but rather through a 'root and branch' approach.[47] What this suggests is that the implementing agents themselves – distant from the policy makers in spatial, emotional and often a geographic sense as well – exercise considerable sway over foreign policy. They attribute meaning to foreign policy and through their responsibility for implementation, they affect the manner in which these foreign policy directives are actually operationalized. In so doing, implementing agents have a direct impact on foreign policy, feeding back into the process, thereby affecting the perceptions and choices of top-level foreign policy makers. This feedback process is generally seen to be an imperfect one by participants and carries with it the possibilities of exacerbating the distorting impact of psychology and cognition. The decision-making literature in FPA has not developed a sufficient understanding of the interpretive and operational impact implementing agencies have on foreign policy. This calls for a kind of 'sub-altern' form of analysis of foreign policy decision making rooted in unpacking the relatively unexplored motives, methods and actions of foreign policy implementing agents rather than the perpetual focus on the policy makers. In our view, this would do much to enhance the analytical purchase of decision-making theory.

Dividing the foreign policy process into a decision phase and an implementation phase is arguably a more fundamental error produced by rational choice scholars. The idea of a neat sequencing of the foreign policy process does not, of course, hold up to close scrutiny when set against empirical evidence. Allison's seminal work on bureaucracies is but one of a number of case studies of foreign policy decision making that comes up with this assertion (see Chapter 3). Even the notion of a decision-making process that is implicitly treated by scholars as being relatively isolated – and therefore examinable – from the context of prior decisions, is questionable. At the same time, recourse to the artifice of this sequencing model of policy making is analytically useful, as Harald Saetren reminds us:

It is true that the public policy process does not necessarily follow the sequential logic of the stages metaphor in all cases, especially not its later stages (like implementation, evaluation, feedback, and policy learning). Nevertheless, the stages metaphor is important because it reflects institutional rules and norms about how public policies

should to be transformed from ideas to practice in modern political systems. The appropriateness of this analytical construct should not be taken for granted or dispelled axiomatically. What the stages metaphor does is to describe a hypothetical process sequence, the validity of which must always remain an empirical question.[48]

The problem resides in confusing this effort at modelling foreign policy decision making for the real thing and thus obliges scholars to challenge its easy depiction of the process against actual cases.

Reconciling rational and non-rational approaches: bounded rationality, cybernetics and poliheuristics

Efforts to rehabilitate rationality as a source for foreign policy decision making have resulted in a number of innovative approaches that attempt to incorporate the insights and criticisms levelled against it. Herbert Simon's work (although he is not an IR scholar, but an economist) suggests that while decision makers cannot achieve pure rationality, they nonetheless conduct themselves along the lines of 'procedural' rationality when faced with a particular policy dilemma. Foreign policy makers, therefore, operate within the framework of what Simon calls 'bounded rationality', that is, they act rationally within the context of partial information and other limitations placed on decisions.[49]

John Steinbruner, responding to the general critique on rationality, the problematic of group decision making and the issues raised by the bureaucratic politics model, introduced what he called a cybernetic processing approach to foreign policy. He posits that there are three paradigms in decision making – analytical (or rational), cybernetic and cognitive – and that an integration of the last two more accurately captures the actual process of decision making and the foibles of individual and group actors.[50]

Alex Mintz proposed another way of reconciling the critique against rationality in foreign policy decision making, while maintaining much of the substance of rational choice approaches.[51] Mintz proposed the 'poliheuristic method', declaring that foreign policy decision making is best understood as a two-stage process. In the first step, the non-rational elements governing decision making hold, in particular considerations of what is politically possible by the leader of the state, and the menu of policy options is developed on that basis. These are 'non-compensatory' choices, that is to say, selection is not subject to trade-off in terms of the calculation of utility (costs versus benefits) as the domain in which decisions are considered is situated firmly within the realm of the decision maker's domestic environment. Once courses of action that are not politically

palatable or attainable, such as surrendering sovereign territory in response to a foreign ultimatum, are discarded, the second step of decision making occurs. In this stage, policy options are introduced and selected in a rational manner that conforms to the rules of public choice theory, namely that foreign policy decisions are driven primarily by a search for the maximization of utility within a particular framework.

The strength of the poliheuristic approach is that it attempts to account for the variations in outcomes through integration of the impact of non-rational factors on that process and a systemic and parsimonious approach to handling the multifaceted features of foreign policy decision making. At the same time, poliheuristic theory leaves open issues such as the nature and impact of a given decision-making structure, which essentially is depicted by Mintz as unitary, on choice, as well as more conventional concerns associated with rational choice theory around preference formation as given or 'exogenous'. Moreover, it is difficult to claim that the singular focus on 'political survivability' at the first stage of decision making adequately addresses the concerns raised by some of rationality's most trenchant critiques: rather, poliheuristic theory seems to dismiss matters such as cognition and psychological factors in favour of this mono-causal depiction of the sources of agency. One could take the position that domestic politics is *the core non-rational concern* that is paramount for all decision makers and, since it involves the leader's perceptions of threat, can serve as a proxy for the impact of cognition on the process, but scholars working in this area do not assert this: in fact, some have sought to expand the number of non-compensatory dimensions.[52] And, finally, while poliheuristic theory is predicated on assessing risk – political risk in its most explicit form in stage one of the decision-making process – it nonetheless does not account for differing frames of reference for decision making and their impact on risk assessment as outlined above, in prospect theory. Despite these concerns, poliheuristic theory represents a compelling attempt to revive and expand the role of modified forms of rational choice in formulating a theory of foreign policy decision making.

Bringing foreign policy implementation back in

While FPA makes a fundamental claim to explaining the conduct of inter-state actions through a deep analysis of the decision-making process, its scholars devote very little energy to assessing how these decisions are actually operationalised and what are implications of their success or failure.[53] This lacuna in the literature is a curious one, especially given the fact that there is an implicit systems theory approach that permeates FPA's treatment of decision making. A state's foreign policy is derivative

of its interpretation of stimuli from the external environment and, concurrently, responds to feedback based on how other states and non-state actors operating in that environment react to the implementation of these very same policies. Throwing a shadow over this dimension of foreign policy not only obscures an important part of the process, but inadvertently, seems to diminish (if not deny altogether) the possibility of learning or exercising agency on the part of foreign policy actors positioned within the state system.

Certainly foreign policy decision making has been and remains at the core of the 'FPA project' and its enduring contribution to IR. The tilting effect generated by the 'decision-making turn' (as one might call it retrospectively) on realism and its grip on the study of IR are mainstreamed now within the discipline. On closer examination, however, the seminal contribution of FPA on decision making and the continued focus on that aspect of the foreign policy process strikes one as flawed and imbalanced. Foreign policy decision-making theory is predicated on a systems approach. It assumes that there is a feedback loop of information from the 'external environment' to policy makers, allowing for readjustment and innovation. Yet the decision-making approach still suffers from some significant shortcoming. Decisions are depicted as *sui generic*, outside of history and its cycles, without reference to previous decisions or the accompanying interpretations by decision makers. One expression of this is the dilemma facing rationalists in explaining the formation of preferences, which are uncritically assigned motivation primacy, but are notoriously difficult to square with empirical studies of actual decisions and the perspectives of those involved.

And yet, as we saw throughout this chapter, the inconvenient truth of misperception, bias and other equivalent 'pathologies' that formed the critique of foreign policy decision making in FPA nonetheless could not bring scholars to wrestle themselves away from the underlying systems theory framework. As such, the decision-making formulation retains an often unrecognized commitment to this rationalist model and its narrow application to the decision-making unit, which continues to hold an impact on analyses of the decision-making process. Beyond these issues, the role of foreign policy implementation as a neglected component of the foreign policy equation too remains barely examined especially with respect to varieties of actors, their articulation of the boundaries of foreign policy within the confines of the states and how the foreign policy decision-making process operates under these circumstances. Agents on the ground, their parochial interpretation of national foreign policy directives, and the form these take when translated into local actions is a feature of the feedback loop that arguably is as consequential a part of the decision making as the original formulation.

The significance of foreign policy implementation as a crucial area of study is illustrated by the series of blunders by East German officials that led to the breeching of the Berlin wall, the most potent symbol of the CW. Starting in late October 1989, the Hungarian government's opening of its borders inspired a growing number of East Germans to migrate via the country to neighbouring Austria and onwards to West Germany. For the Democratic Republic of Germany (DDR or East Germany), this growing tide of migrants posed an existential threat to the state's claims to command its citizens' loyalty. After a heated discussion within the DDR's Politburo on 8 November, a decision was taken to temporarily relax some strictures on East Germans' movements to the West. Guenter Schabowski, a Politburo member with a growing media profile in the country, took it upon himself to blurt out the plans during a live television press conference and, contrary to the Politburo decision, to declare it had 'immediate effect'. The result of this sensational reversal of policy was that within a few hours, thousands of East Berliners gathered outside the checkpoint of the Berlin wall in expectation of exercising these apparently new rights to travel to the western side. East German guards responsible for that sector, whose previous mandate included shooting at any citizens attempting to breech the wall, were unable to reach authorities for guidance as to how to respond to the increasingly restive crowds. Eventually, they decided to let them through the once impervious gates. This action on 9 November by lowly border guards struggling to interpret the seemingly contrary messages from the once-feared East German state apparatus inadvertently signalled the end of the forty-five years of separation between the 'two Germanys' and, with that, sounded the death knell of the CW.

FPA's foray into understanding foreign policy implementation so far has been largely derived from the insights into bureaucracy's influence in the decision-making process. In particular, Allison and Halperin identify 'action channels' as the key juncture between actors and institutions where foreign policy formulation takes place, which they divide into a decision-making component and an implementation component.[54] Michael Clarke's scholarship in this regards stands out as distinctive in his efforts to lay out the conceptual foundations for the study of the topic, building on his work on foreign policy bureaucracies.[55] Recognizing that if traditional FPA focus on decision making was grounded in rationalist accounts of actor conduct examining foreign policy from an organizational systems approach would naturally give greater weighting to concerns of implementation.[56] Along with Smith, he produced a systematic investigation of foreign policy implementation, declaring that it is constituted by a threefold approach, namely: 'the nature of decision, the characterization of the international environment as an arena of policy implementation and

the question of types of control which foreign policy-makers can exercise within that environment'.[57]

The *nature of the decision* is composed of a variety of possible procedural choices of consequence to foreign policy at different stages and positions within the implementation hierarchy and time line. Certain foreign policy decisions may be reinterpreted by the implementing agents, who exercise de facto authority over a given policy by virtue of their capacity to put it into practice. Clarke and Smith tell us that in these cases '. . . the implementation process *is* the decision process to a greater or lesser extent'.[58] The *implementation environment* is a setting whose crowded and contested nature defies both the easy platitudes of anarchy associated with realism and the accompanying division between domestic and external environments. Echoing Keohane and Nye's work on 'complex interdependency', the authors see coalition strategies cutting across actor-defined, institutional and physical boundaries as an inevitable outcome of this situation. Finally, Clarke and Smith emphasize the nature of actual *control over implementation* as a key foreign policy influence that determines its uneven trajectory from policy goals and formulation to policy application and any subsequent adjustment.

In this context, the problems of foreign policy implementation are constituted first by 'slippage', that is to say the gap between policy maker's intentions in promulgating a particular policy and the manner in which the foreign policy bureaucracy actually operationalise it.[59] A second problem is that of 'routine complexity', which is the sum of numerous micro-decisions taken in the course of implementation, be they procedural or the products of networking arrangements aimed at translating the policy imperatives into action, and rationalised as the policy. Finally, 'self-implementation' underscores the degree to which foreign policy is the product of the politics of declaration where intentions are merely aimed at affirming generalized and collective positions in international settings like the UN.

For their part, Brighi and Hill focus on a more reflexivist approach to foreign policy implementation, arguing that it should be understood as a set of *channels* which serve to translate policy into practice and *behaviours* emanating from involvement with the external environment that shape accommodation and change by states.[60] Studies of foreign policy tools and techniques, from sanctions to coercive diplomacy, are abound. However, these remained positioned within the decision-making framework without reflecting much (if at all) about the onerous process of implementation and the role of its agents, and its relative autonomy.

While the FPA literature on foreign policy implementation may be episodic and (notwithstanding the aforementioned notable exceptions) unreflective in character, the same cannot be said for the research in the field of

public administration. Scholarship on public policy has produced a more systematised approach to the policy decision/implementation nexus that bears closer examination by FPA academicians. Public administration's emphasis on learning as a central feature of the process is also a significant addition to our understanding. At the same time, with the commitment to rational choice approaches holding sway for many academicians in the field, the inherent complexity and general messiness of understanding the application of policies has sometimes served as an effective deterrent to a stronger research commitment.[61]

In this respect, the aforementioned work of Charles Lindblom's 'root and branch' approach remains seminal in shaping understanding of the dynamics at play between policy makers and the implementing agents.[62] He provides a suggestive description of implementing agents (the 'branch') at the periphery of the organization entrapped by their suspicions as to the motives and meaning of policy directives from the organizational centre (the 'root') and, consequently, exercising conservative interpretations of these policy pronouncements so as to limit the likelihood of making misjudgements. His assessment is that, under the circumstances, organizations can merely hope to 'muddle through' as these internal contradictions continually restrict the possibility of producing and executing policies effectively.

Learning and implementation

Learning is another dimension of public administration scholarship on implementation, which could be usefully adapted to the study of foreign policy. While FPA focuses almost exclusively on the individual and learning, primarily through an analysis of the role and impact of history on the foreign policy process, public administration puts a much greater emphasis on capturing the process of institutional learning in the round.[63] The first concern of the literature is aimed at developing an understanding of what is learning, and the second is on locating where and under what circumstances it is said to be occurring. Commentators have pointed out that learning within organizations takes place at a various levels, especially when authority is distributed across an organization, but broadly speaking follows a hierarchical logic of top-down or bottom-up.[64]

May divides 'learning' in the policy process into four categories: instrumental, social policy, political and a sort of false form of learning, which he calls 'mimicking'.[65] *Instrumental learning* occurs when the focus is on analysing policy tools and techniques in order to improve performance through redesigning policy. *Social policy learning* happens when the focus is on assessing the effectiveness of policy interventions and consequent redefinition of the problem the policy has been created to address and

results in an adjustment of goals. *Political learning* takes place when the focus is given over to devising advocacy strategies aimed at winning constituencies to support the policy approach. Finally, May talks about 'superstitious instrumental learning' or *mimicking* where there is an adoption of policies not objectively related to the nature of the problem or cognizant of the prevailing political environment.

Broadly echoing these insights, but applying them to the conduct of organizations, Argyris provides a picture of how institutions learn as expressed through changing routines.[66] Single loop learning occurs in organizations when their policies are adjusted without questioning underlying assumptions, while double-loop learning introduces a modification or even rejection of the policy goals. Becoming a 'learning organization', that is one which integrates learning into its very routines and practices, is often held up as the essence of institutional success.[67] Government institutions as different as the military and aid agencies have embraced this approach by systematically applying it to their policy cycles through internal monitoring and evaluation of programmes. Deriving 'lessons' from an analysis of past policy implementation forms a distinctive part of the policy process. In this respect, the singularity of 'failure' as a source of profound learning by organizations is notable and contrasted with the weaker impacts of positive lessons.[68]

In the end, the scholarship on foreign policy implementation — and its 'cousin' in the work of public administration — seems to offer tantalizing insights into the reconstitution of policies by implementing agents through routine procedures and the application of learning. At the same time, it inevitably seems to constitute what Rothstein aptly declares to be 'misery' research.'[69] Bounded to the study of minor functionaries of the state's institutional apparatus and examining its formal and informal procedural rules, foreign policy implementation is maddeningly complex and even tedious in its incidental (at times biographical) minutia. Coupled to this scholastic disincentive is the gap between the elevated political stature of elaborating policy, as opposed to the mundane realities of policy application where power incrementally slips away, rendering policy aspirations as necessarily contingent and of limited effectiveness. At times, as the next chapter elaborates, it may be entirely captured by bureaucracies and their infighting.

Conclusion

What is clear from the above analysis is that a purely rational account of foreign policy decision making cannot hold up against the various criticisms, whether psychological or empirical in content. At the same time, the insights of the cognitive school themselves have been criticized for

'focusing in on the minute intricacies of human behavior at the expense of useful generalizability.'[70] In this respect, the durability of rationality as a means of analysing foreign policy continues and, in part, reflects the willingness of FPA scholars to accept the basic tenets of criticism, but also their reluctance to abandon the methodology of public choice and the perceptions it provides. This commitment to retaining features of ratio-nality, albeit somewhat reduced in scope and ambition, is integral to FPA's focus on developing a predictive understanding of the decision-making process.

It should be pointed out that the influence of rationality is more wide-spread than in the realm of FPA theory debates alone. Rational analyses of foreign policy underlie much of our ordinary interpretation of interna-tional events, and we are making assumptions about the unitary nature of decision makers when we talk, for example, about 'French foreign policy' without accounting for different influences on decision making within governments and the impact that implementation has over the policy pro-cess as realized. Thus, while criticisms of rationality remain both power-ful and valid, its assumptions still play an important part in much of our day-to-day understanding of foreign policy. This process becomes more analytically meaningful when reflecting upon constructivist insights into how national identity develops and is sustained through narratives (see Chapter 7).

As this chapter shows, the relationship between the decision maker, the state and the structure of the international system is complex, and it can be argued that the utility of such concepts as misperception in explaining different types of foreign policy depend as much on the characteristics of the state, the issue being addressed and the type of policy being formu-lated, as on the leader's cognitive constraints. Since, arguably, all foreign policy decisions are the product of the foreign policy institutions within which decisions are taken and implemented, there is a compelling case for broadening the focus to include institutional procedures and bureaucra-cies. In keeping with this insight, in Chapter 3, we examine the impact of these organizations on the foreign policy process.

Notes

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3   James Rosenau, 'Pre-theories and theories and foreign policy', in R.B. Farrell (ed.) *Approaches to Comparative and International Politics*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966, 27–92; Rosenau offers a trenchant critique of this seminal article in later years; see James Rosenau, 'A pre-theory revisited: World politics in an era of cascading interdependence', *International Studies Quarterly*, 1984, vol. 38, pp. 245–305.

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6   Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*; see also Kathleen Archibald (ed.), *Strategic Interac-tion and Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.

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8   Gilat Levy and Ronny Razin, 'It takes two: An explanation for the democratic peace', *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 2004, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 1–29.

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11 Ahmer Tarar, 'International bargaining with two-sided domestic constraints', *Jour-nal of Conflict Resolution*, 2001, vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 320–2; see also Tsebelis, *Nested Games*.

12 Sprout and Sprout, *Man – Milieu Relationship Hypotheses in the Context of Interna-tional Politics*.

13 Snyder et al., *Foreign Policy Decision-Making*.

14 Ibid., p. 65.

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