



Actors, structures, and foreign policy analysis

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Chapter contents

Introduction	113
Historical background	115
The role of actors and structures in 'process' approaches to FP	116
The role of actors and structures in 'policy' approaches to FP	118
Conclusion	124



Reader's guide

The starting point of this chapter is that the foreign policy of a given state is the product of a number of actors and structures, both domestic and international, and that it is the combination of these that makes this an uncommonly complicated field of study. The chapter then discusses how, in view of this complexity, these actors and structures have been treated in the literature on foreign policy analysis. The first step in this overview is to determine *what* is to be explained, i.e. the object of analysis (or explanandum). The second question is *how* foreign policy is explained, referring to the type of explanatory factors (or explanans) invoked in its analysis. The nature and role of actors and structures are then discussed in relation to these explanatory dimensions and the approaches they have generated within the field. Finally, two further issues are briefly raised—the agency–structure problem, and the question of whether an integrated framework is feasible—before concluding with a recommendation of how to resolve the former in terms of a constructive answer to the latter.

Introduction

Foreign policy is neither fish nor fowl in the study of politics, but an empirical subject matter straddling the boundary between the internal and the external spheres of a state. Such policy is conducted in complex internal and international environments; it results from coalitions of active actors and groups situated both inside and outside state boundaries; its substance emanates from issues of both domestic and international politics; and it involves processes of bargaining and compromise that affect the interests of both domestic and international groupings (Neack 2003: 8–11). This double-sided nature of foreign policy—being 'at the hinge of domestic politics and international relations,' as one eminent scholar writes (Hill 2003: 23)—has complicated the analysis of foreign policy immensely since the very

beginning of this field of study. It has also added significantly to the difficulties of conceptualizing, explaining, and assessing the role of actors and structures in foreign policy analysis. (A further complication, not discussed here, is the blurring of this boundary in the face of globalization; see, e.g., Hellmann and Jörgensen 2015.)

In view of this complexity, is it worthwhile analysing this role? Yes, for the simple reason that **actors** and **structures** are always present in, and indeed crucial to, the making of foreign policy. Christopher Hill has expressed the intimate relationship between these two factors very well: 'Foreign policy making is a complex process of interaction between many actors, differentially embedded in a wide range of different structures. Their interaction is a dynamic process, leading to the constant evolution of both actors and structures' (Hill 2003: 28). In other words, in the real world we find a number of actors, both domestic and international, who are closely involved in foreign policy decision making in one manner or another; and equally there are a number of structures on both sides of the domestic–international divide which decisively affect these actors in many different ways. A few elementary examples will suffice to illustrate the complex nature of this abundance of both actors and structures in the conduct of foreign policy.

First of all, who are the most important actors making foreign policy decisions? The obvious candidates are heads of state, heads of government, foreign ministers or secretaries of state, politburos, parliaments, parliamentary committees, political parties, and so forth. These are the politically responsible decision makers—democratically elected or not—acting internationally on behalf of the polities they represent. They should be distinguished from the wider array of civil servants and experts also involved in this process, in the first place within ministries of foreign affairs, but also within rival entities such as military establishments, economic ministries, and intelligence services, as well as lobbying firms, various think tanks, research institutes, and the media. In addition, while these actors are usually domestically based, they are often in contact—even acting in consort—with their counterparts in other countries, as well as with various governmental and non-governmental organizations, both domestic and international. Although by no means complete, this list suffices to illustrate the empirical complexity facing us here.

The same applies to structural factors affecting the making of foreign policy. In the realist tradition of international relations (IR), such structural entities have usually been seen as belonging primarily to the international system, but this is clearly an exceedingly narrow conception of this phenomenon. Indeed, structures—political, cultural, psychological, economic, national, regional, global, technological, ideational, cognitive, and normative, to name some of the most important—are omnipresent in societies everywhere, existing in various degrees on all levels from the most isolated tribal groupings to the global system as a whole. Not all are equally important to foreign policy making, but many are vital and central to understanding and explaining its manifestations.

In summary, it is not only the inclusion of both domestic and international politics that complicates matters for the foreign policy analyst, but also the omnipresence of both actors and structures, and the intimate and reciprocal link between these two sets of factors. As a consequence, it is impossible to incorporate them fruitfully into explanations of foreign policy without analytically imposing some form of second-order intellectual 'structure' onto this exceedingly messy first-order domain of foreign policy making as an empirical object of study. In view of this, it is essential for the scholar to have some form of analytical framework or approach as a starting point. This is also, in various ways, what scholars of foreign policy

have tried to establish over the years, at the same time as there remain fundamental disagreements about the most fruitful and feasible ways of achieving this goal. This chapter will present and briefly discuss some of the most prominent of these contending approaches to this field of study before concluding on a somewhat more positive and constructive note.

However, before proceeding with this overview, a brief terminological clarification needs to be made. In this chapter, the acronym 'FP' will be used instead of 'FPA' for the field of study usually called 'Foreign Policy Analysis' (upper case), even though the latter abbreviation is the normal one in the current literature. The primary reason is that this acronym situates the study of foreign policy within the broad field of IR; FPA, by contrast, tends to denote a commitment to a separate subfield with its own research questions and techniques.

Historical background

A fruitful starting point for understanding any field of study is to know something about its history. Thus, it is important, on the one hand, to bear in mind that foreign policy as an academic subject matter has had strong roots in the broader domain of the policy sciences, focusing on the whole spectrum of the domestic public policy arena. This was particularly the case in the USA, where FP was first established as an academic subject matter shortly after the Second World War. However, almost concurrently a second major tradition emerged, which has left a stronger imprint on the subsequent evolution of the field. This is the induction into American thinking of **realism**, a doctrine which, mainly through the immense influence of Hans Morgenthau, a European émigré, came to dominate both the study and the practice of foreign policy during the Cold War era. His main ambition, as that of most realists at the time, was to translate 'the maxims of nineteenth century's European diplomatic practice into more general laws of an American social science' (Guzzini 1998: 1). More specifically, by linking the concept of power to that of the national interest, Morgenthau believed that he could provide universal explanations for the external behaviour of all sovereign states.

During this period a more general scholarly development, known as **behaviouralism**, also gained dominance in the USA, proclaiming that the social sciences should aspire to be more 'scientific' by emulating the methodology of the natural sciences. This new scientific approach had a decisive effect both on public policy and on realist-oriented perspectives on the study of foreign policy. Its impact on the former was perhaps the more deep-going in the sense that it changed its character altogether from being an essentially idiographic and normative enterprise—i.e. analysing specific forms of policy or prescribing better means for its formulation and implementation—to one that aspired to generate and test hypotheses in order to develop a cumulative body of empirical generalizations. This inaugurated a period, which turned out to be relatively brief but intensive, during which the *comparative* study of foreign policy (CFP) came to dominate the field. The impact on realism was less fundamental, in so far as the behaviouralists never really challenged the underlying assumptions of realism, only its methodology. Realism nevertheless bifurcated into essentially two strands, with **neorealism** giving the structures of the international system an exclusive explanatory role, while **neoclassical realism** (a more recent and eclectic approach) retained the centrality of the concept of power while rejecting the exclusion of domestic factors in the explanation of foreign policy. Most neorealists have also claimed that, given their exclusive focus on how international

structures decisively determine the behaviour of states in a systemic fashion, they are not interested—nor indeed competent—in explaining the specific foreign policies of any given state. (For a recent and more extensive historical discussion, see Carlsnaes 2015).

A third and more conceptual issue has deep historical roots as well, and is also central to the subject matter of this chapter. This is the crucial question of understanding what exactly constitutes the object to be analysed and explained in foreign policy, known as the explanandum (that which is to be explained or, to use neopositivist parlance, the dependent variable). While this definitional issue may seem trivial at first sight, it goes to the conceptual core of what distinguishes foreign policy from both domestic and international politics, the two major subdisciplinary foci of political science. The stipulation and understanding of a given explanandum is also crucial to the appropriate choice of explanatory factors or explanans (that which does the explaining, or the independent variable) to be used in a given investigation. To be theoretically feasible and empirically fruitful, these must be analytically compatible with the object of analysis in such research.

The roles of both explanandum (object of analysis) and explanans (explanatory factors) in analysing foreign policy are discussed below. To simplify matters somewhat, this will be done in terms of two fundamentally different explananda currently in use in foreign policy analysis. The first is characterized by a focus on decision-making *processes* in a broad sense, while the second makes a clear distinction between such processes and *policy*, defined more narrowly as a choice of action in the pursuit of a goal, or a set of goals, often characterized as an undertaking. These, and the selection of explanatory approaches—explanans—in each case, will be discussed and analysed in turn, with a specific focus on the role of actors and structures in each.

The role of actors and structures in 'process' approaches to FP

Valerie Hudson has become the prime spokesperson for the 'process' approach in a series of influential contributions to the field over the past decade or so. 'The explanandum of foreign policy analysis,' she stipulates in the keynote article of the journal *Foreign Policy Analysis* when it was first launched in 2005, 'includes the process and resultants of human decision making with reference to or having known consequences for foreign entities' (Hudson 2005: 2). She then elaborates further on this conceptualization as follows:

One is almost always examining not a single decision, but a constellation of decisions taken with reference to a particular situation. Furthermore, decisions may be modified over time, requiring an examination of sequences of decisions. Furthermore the stages of decision-making may also be the focus of inquiry, from problem recognition, framing, and perception to more advanced stages of goal prioritization, contingency planning, and option assessment (Hudson 2014: 4).

The notion here is essentially that the object of analysis—foreign policy—is a question of what foreign policy decision makers are thinking and doing, i.e. their purposive behaviour. What they are up to is taking part in the dynamic and complex process of making foreign policy decisions on behalf of the state; hence this process as a whole is what needs to be examined and explained. Or, as she notes: 'The explanans of FPA [*sic*] are those factors that influence foreign policy decision-making and foreign policy decision-makers' (Hudson 2014:

5). Thus, the focus is explicitly on 'human decisional behaviour', as Douglas Stuart has noted, adding that this 'makes this the most ambitious and multifaceted subfield of international relations' (Stuart 2008: 576). Because they aim to explore the process of foreign policy decision making as a whole rather than policy per se, scholars of this ilk sometimes use the acronym FPDM to describe the focus of their field of study (Mintz and Derouen 2010).

This process specification of the object of analysis has important consequences for the role assigned to actors and structures. A central question here is what function the state plays in approaches that focus on decision-making processes (rather than specific policies). Viewed in the context of the two major historical strands briefly discussed above, the choice here is between viewing the state in realist terms as the sole and independent *actor* in foreign policy, or viewing foreign policy actors in terms of the domestic functioning of a state, in which decisions are made by a number of elite decision makers acting on behalf of the state. The answer here is relatively clear-cut: states are not conceived as unitary actors, but rather as institutional *structures* within which, and on behalf of which, individual decision makers act. As Hudson emphasizes: 'States are not agents because states are abstractions and thus have no agency' (Hudson 2014: 7). As such, this type of approach is explicitly 'actor-specific', meaning that the actors are not generic entities but always specific individuals.

What roles do actors and structures play in the explanation of foreign policy decision making? A clear trend is discernible here: this type of approach tends to favour a **levels of analysis** framework, defined in its simplest form in terms of an individual level, a state level, and an international level of explanation (Neack 2003), with additional variants including a group decision-making level as well as one incorporating culture and national identity (Hudson 2014). Furthermore, the causal effects on the decision-making process of actors and structures are examined one level at a time, with actors dominating on the lower levels of analysis (individual and group decision levels), while structures take over the stage as the levels become more general and abstract (state, cultural, and international levels) (see Box 6.1).

BOX 6.1 Levels of analysis in foreign policy

Although in the 1950s Kenneth Waltz had already enquired into how war and peace can be explained by distinguishing between three 'images', it is David Singer, in a landmark piece published in 1961, who can lay claim to having introduced the 'level-of-analysis' problem to IR (Waltz 1959; Singer 1961). But whereas Waltz's question had been concerned with which socio-political level is the location of the causes of war and peace—whether man, the state, or the state system—Singer's discussion is in terms of only two levels: the state system and the international system. Although there has been confusion on this issue (in both Singer's analysis and the subsequent literature), his question is essentially whether the behaviour of states (the explanandum) is to be explained in terms of causal factors (explanans) on the level of the international system, or on the level of the state itself. His answer is clear: it all depends on the type of question(s) asked. Here he differs from Waltz, who ended up opting for the explanatory level of the international system, describing explanations of state behaviour in terms of the state and/or the individual as 'reductionist' (Waltz 1979). However, both agree that explanations of *foreign policy*—as distinct from international politics more broadly defined—cannot be couched in terms of the systemic level. Singer's formulation of the problem also has another implication, which has remained largely unchallenged as well as problematic: that levels of this kind cannot be integrated or combined.

The role of actors and structures in 'policy' approaches to FP

Studies focusing on explaining the choice of specific *policies* rather than decision-making processes do so because they view policies as *resulting* from such processes rather than being part of them. Charles Hermann, discussing many years ago 'that which is to be explained' (the explanandum), wrote of foreign policy that 'it is the discrete purposeful action that results from the political level decision of an individual or group of individuals', and as such it is 'not the decision, but a *product* of the decision' (C.F. Hermann 1978: 34; my emphasis). Among scholars writing in this tradition there is considerable consensus today around a view of the explanandum which emphasizes the *purposive* nature of foreign policy actions, the centrality of *policy*, and the crucial role of *state boundaries* (Carlsnaes 2013). Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow have explained the rationale for conceptualizing foreign policy in this sense as follows:

When we are puzzled by a happening in foreign affairs, the source of our puzzlement is typically a particular government action or set of actions . . . These occurrences raise obvious questions: *Why* did the Soviet Union place missiles in Cuba? *Why* were 500,000 soldiers in the Persian Gulf? *Why* did Germany give up the Deutsche-Mark? *Why* did the United Nations do so little to defend Srebrenica in July 1995? In pursuing the answers to these questions, the serious analyst seeks to discover why one specific state of the world came about—rather than some other (Allison and Zelikow 1999: 2–3).

The important point to notice here is that by so clearly distinguishing a foreign policy *action* from the decision-making *process* preceding it, the authors are not foreclosing any particular approach to answering the 'why' question. Indeed, the whole point of Allison's original study—and the reason why it had such an impact on the field in general—was his success in showing that the same questions could be answered in different ways, depending on what kind of explanatory model, or conceptual 'lens', was being used (see Box 6.2).

What are the implications for the role of actors and structures of such a specification of the object of analysis (or explanandum)? Contrary to process-oriented approaches, this perspective does not a priori view either actors or structures in any particular way, since the focus here is on 'policy undertakings' and not the behaviour of any particular entity within a specific structural environment (such as 'decision making'). This is also why this perspective—à la Allison's 'lenses'—is able to harbour a number of different and not necessarily compatible analytical approaches.

One way of classifying the various options to be found in the literature, which is both convenient and appropriate in the present context, is to ask once again what role structures and actors play in the explanation of foreign policy actions. The fact is that these two concepts point to a deep-rooted and long-standing tension which exists within this field of study, as indeed in the social sciences in general, between approaches tending to privilege either structure- or actor-based forms of explanation. This is in marked contrast to the decision-making tradition, which is able to accommodate both actor- and structure-based explanations essentially by assigning them to analytically distinct levels of analysis. What complicates matters further is that we also find different approaches within each of these two explanatory perspectives, which will therefore have to be discussed separately.

BOX 6.2 Graham Allison's explanations of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962

One of the most influential twentieth-century studies of foreign policy is Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, first published in 1971, with a second and substantially updated edition appearing in 1999 (with Philip Zelikow as co-author). This study focuses on thirteen days in October 1962, during which a crisis erupted when John F. Kennedy learned that the Soviet Union was in the process of installing intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Fidel Castro's Cuba (see Chapter 14). President Kennedy and his key advisors viewed this action as an unacceptable provocation, and they consequently felt impelled to insist that the Soviets withdraw these missiles. The US government considered three options: to invade Cuba, to conduct air strikes against the missile sites, or to impose a naval blockade of Cuba. President Kennedy finally chose the third option, a tactic that turned out to be successful. Allison's purpose is to explain why and how this choice was made, and he does this by first constructing three different conceptual models or lenses (*rational actor*, *organizational behaviour*, and *governmental politics*), and then using each in three separate empirical chapters to explain and assess the actions taken by Kennedy and his advisors during these thirteen days. He does not claim that these three models are the only feasible options in explaining the puzzles generated by this crisis, but he does show how our view of events such as these is strongly influenced by the 'basic assumptions that we make, categories we use, our angle of vision', and that by 'comparing and contrasting the three frameworks, we see what each magnifies, highlights, and reveals as well as what each blurs or neglects' (Allison and Zelikow 1999: x). What has made this study so influential is that although it purports to explain the same events, it comes to the conclusion that different explanations are reached depending on the conceptual model employed. As against most schools of thought at the time, it thus called into question the assumption that social science can achieve, and therefore should aim for, clear-cut and 'objective' explanations of social actions. Today, this notion that all explanations, predictions, and evaluations are inescapably theory-laden is more or less taken for granted and, at least within IR, Allison's study must be given much credit for this. The importance of conceptual models applies equally to policy makers, which explains why this is one of the most widely read and influential foreign policy studies among foreign policy decision makers as well.

Approaches based on a structural perspective

Realism

Although, as we have noted above, the realism espoused by Morgenthau suffered a decline with the ascendancy of neorealism, both approaches to foreign policy analysis nevertheless remain strong today, albeit in different forms. Hence, while Kenneth Waltz (the originator and still the most eminent proponent of neorealism) continues to insist on the inapplicability of neorealism to the analysis of foreign policy (Waltz 1996; for a contrary view, see Elman 1996; Rittberger 2001), one finds variants of it which focus on precisely such policies. In contrast, latter-day neoclassical scholars following in Morgenthau's footsteps have no such qualms, and hence continue to focus squarely on explaining foreign policy and nothing else.

With regard to the former, a distinction should be made between **aggressive** and **defensive** forms of **neorealism** (Rose 1998). During the past two decades, aggressive realism has been pre-eminently represented by John Mearsheimer, who has argued that whereas the Cold War, based on bipolarity, military balance, and nuclear weapons, produced peace in Europe for 45 years, its demise will, contrary to conventional wisdom, necessarily have negative effects in the long run. This pessimistic scenario follows from a strict application of neorealist tenets,

especially the view that in so far as the structure of the international system invariably fosters conflict and aggression, rational states continue to be compelled to pursue offensive strategies in their search for security (Mearsheimer 1995).

Defensive neorealists, on the other hand, do not share this pessimistic and essentially Hobbesian view of the international system, arguing instead that although systemic factors do have causal effects on state behaviour, they cannot account for all state actions. Furthermore, instead of emphasizing the role played by the distribution of power in the international system, scholars belonging to this school have pointed to the importance of the source, level, and direction of threats, defined primarily in terms of technological factors, geographic proximity, and offensive capabilities but also perceived intentions (Rose 1998: 146).

Finally, **neoclassical realists** share with neorealists the view that a country's foreign policy is primarily formed by its place in the international system and in particular by its relative material power capabilities. However, these theorists also argue that the impact of systemic factors on a given country's foreign policy will be indirect and more complex than neorealists have assumed, since such features can effect policy only through factors on the domestic level (Rose, 1998: 146). Or, as noted by Walt, the causal logic of this approach 'places domestic politics as an intervening variable between the distribution of power and foreign policy behavior' (Walt 2002: 211). As a consequence of the stress on the role of both systemic and domestic variables, research within neoclassical realism is generally conducted in the form of theoretically informed narratives that trace how different factors from both levels combine to forge the particular foreign policies of states (Rose 1998: 153); for a recent overview of this field, see Taliaferro *et al.* (2009).

In summary, realism in its various strands is essentially a structural orientation for the simple reason that at its central core lies the notion of state power, which is defined either in terms of the structure of the international system, as in neorealism, or as a combination of domestic power resources and international structures. The state is the core actor in both instances, and its capacity to act is determined by material factors, and especially by shifts in these, be they external or internal to the state.

Neoliberal institutionalism

Although not generally touted as an approach to the analysis of foreign policy, it is obvious that the type of focus that usually goes under the name of **neoliberal institutionalism** (or simply neoliberalism) is as relevant to the study of foreign policy as are realism and neorealism in their various configurations. Indeed, in so far as this school of thought is posited as an alternative to realism, it also represents an alternative approach to foreign policy analysis (Baldwin 1993).

Neoliberal institutionalism is a structural, systemic, and 'top-down' view for some of the same reasons that neorealism constitutes such an approach. It assumes that states are the primary actors in the international system, that they behave like egoistic value maximizers, and that the international system is essentially anarchic, i.e. non-hierarchical, in distinction from domestic polities (Baldwin 1993: 8–14).

What, then, is distinctive about the neoliberal institutionalist approach to foreign policy analysis? Very briefly, the following: whereas both neorealists and neoliberals view foreign policy making as a process of constrained choice on the part of states acting rationally

and strategically, the latter understand this constraint not primarily in terms of the international configurations of power capabilities facing states, but in terms of an anarchic system which, while it fosters uncertainty and hence security concerns, can nevertheless be positively affected by the creation of **regimes** providing information and common rules, thereby fostering international cooperation to at least some degree (Keohane 1993). Thus, instead of viewing international institutions as epiphenomenal and hence constituting a 'false promise' (Mearsheimer 1994–95), neoliberal institutionalists emphasize that such institutions do matter—that they 'make a difference in the behaviour of states and in the nature of international politics' (Stein 2008: 212). Or as noted by K.J. Holsti, how states 'defend and pursue their purposes is tempered by international institutions that encompass ideas, norms, rules, and etiquette . . . [which] have a moderating influence on the plans and actions of their sovereigns' (Holsti 2004: 306–307). Furthermore, by adding to neorealism a focus on the role of international institutions, neoliberals claim that they have added to the explanatory power of neorealism without undermining its main structuralist assumptions.

Social constructivism

Although **social constructivism** (or simply constructivism) is essentially a meta-theoretical standpoint in the study of social phenomena, and hence is foundational to political analysis rather than being a specific analytical or theoretical approach within IR, here—following a common practice within the literature—the term is used to designate a more or less coherent body of thought in IR, including FP. Its core assumptions are that reality is socially constructed in the form of social rules and inter-subjective meanings, and that this affects our knowledge of it: how we see the world as well as ourselves, and how we define our interests and proper ways of behaviour (see Adler 2013).

Although constructivism consists of an increasingly broad spectrum of views, we will focus here only on the so-called 'modernist' or 'thin' type, which predominates in foreign policy analysis. This approach can be said to consist, first of all, of a *normative-ideational* strand, which conceives of norms qua ideas as aspects of social structure emerging from the purposive behaviour of actors in specific communities and that these, in turn, shape such behaviour by constituting the identities and actions of such actors (Hoffmann 2010: 2). Challenging mainstream assumptions of the international system as essentially consisting of power calculations and material forces, early normative constructivists thus 'worked to demonstrate that shared ideas about appropriate state behaviour had a profound impact on the nature and functioning of world politics' (Hoffmann 2010: 2). With particular reference to foreign policy behaviour, the goal was to show how such behaviour is enabled or constrained by normative and ideational factors, i.e. how these influence states' understanding of the external material world. A second research focus, often intertwined with the first, centres on the notion of *identity* to highlight the socially constructed nature of the state and its interests. As noted by Bruce Cronin, 'identities provide a frame of reference from which political leaders can initiate, maintain, and structure their relationships with other states' (Cronin 1999: 18), and as such it 'is a constructivist concept if there ever was one' (Berenskoetter 2010: 2). Indeed, as Paul Kowert has claimed, most of 'constructivist scholarship in foreign policy . . . dictate[s] a concern with state identity' (Kowert 2010: 2). Although human interaction is essential for establishing

and upholding these norms, ideas, and identities, constructivism is nevertheless a structural approach, since the explanation of the policy choices made by decision makers is in terms of the effect of social structures (broadly defined) on the individual actor rather than with reference to any innate characteristics of such actors.

To sum up, although these three different structural approaches to FP do not exclude actors in their analyses, what primarily unites them is that in each instance structural factors rather than actors are invoked as the dynamic factor 'causing' a particular state to behave in a particular way in the conduct of its foreign policy. In the approaches to be discussed below, the tables are turned in favour of the explanatory power of actors and their characteristics in one form or another.

Approaches from an actor-based perspective

Cognitive and psychological approaches

Although research on the **cognitive** and **psychological** characteristics of individual decision makers has been viewed with considerable scepticism by scholars pursuing structural explanations of foreign policy, this has in fact been one of the growth areas within FP over the past quarter of a century (Hudson 2007). As against the **rational choice** assumption—common to both realism and neoliberal institutionalism—that individuals are in principle open-minded and adaptable to the dictates of structural constraints, it is based on the contrary assumption that they are to a considerable degree impervious to such effects because of the 'stickiness' of their underlying beliefs and the way they process information, as well as a number of other personality and cognitive traits.

From having focused on the study of attitudes and attitudinal change in its earliest years, psychological analysis underwent a 'cognitive revolution' in the 1970s. Instead of the conception of the 'passive' actor underlying previous work, a new view emerged, stressing the individual as 'problem-solver' rather than malleable agent (Rosati 1995: 52–54). This was also a period when studies of how the characteristics of leadership—beliefs, motivations, decisional and interpersonal styles—affected the pursuit of foreign policies first received serious attention, a focus which has continued to this day (Hermann and Preston 1998). Under this rubric one can also include small-group approaches, including a focus on the effects of 'groupthink' (Garrison 2003b), as well as prospect theory, which reputedly 'has evoked the most interest among students of foreign policymaking' (Kahler 1998: 927). James Taliaferro has provided us with a comprehensive review of this approach and its current applications in FP (Taliaferro 2010). Role theory, first introduced into FP by Kal Holsti (Holsti 1970) and most recently discussed by Cameron Thies and Marijka Breuning (Thies and Breuning 2012), should also be mentioned in this context.

Although there is much overlap between studies of this kind and those discussed above under the rubric of foreign policy decision making, they should nevertheless be clearly distinguished from each other for at least two reasons. The first is the fundamental difference in the explanandum focused on, which in the case of the FPD approach is the decisional process itself, whereas here it is intentional policy behaviour—the question why a particular policy undertaking was chosen. The second is that while the scholars discussed here are exclusively engaged in finding psychological and cognitive causes (or 'theories') for explaining given

policy choices, the FPDM framework goes well beyond the individual actor level to account for the particular nature of a given decisional process.

Bureaucratic politics approach

The main rationale of the so-called **bureaucratic politics** (or governmental) approach to the analysis of foreign policy, popularized by Allison, is to explain why decisions often take the form of 'resultants' as distinct from what any person or group intended, and it does this not in terms of given preferences and strategic moves (as in rational choice thinking) but 'according to the power and performance of proponents and opponents of the action in question' (Allison and Zelikow 1999: 256). At the same time, the power involved in such interaction is primarily bureaucratic rather than personal, in so far as the actors taking part in these bargaining games represent sectional or factional rather than individual interests. In other words, what we find here is the view that foreign policy can best be explained in terms of bureaucratic infighting, and that this necessitates an examination of the interaction of individuals in their organizational environments rather than, as in cognitive-psychological approaches, in terms of their predispositions as decision makers. Although earlier claimed as, and criticized for, being excessively US-centred in its empirical applicability, it is slowly finding its way to Europe and elsewhere (see Jones 2010).

New liberalism

Although liberalism itself has roots going back to the early history of FP, Andrew Moravcsik must be given primary credit for having put **new liberalism** on the contemporary IR and FP agendas (Moravcsik 1997; see also Moravcsik 2010). In his view, three core assumptions underlie this challenge to neorealism and neoliberalism. The first is the primacy of societal actors over political institutions, the implication of which is that being based on a 'bottom-up' view of the political system, individual and social groups are treated as prior to politics, because they define their interests independently of politics and then pursue these interests through political exchange and collective action. Second, state preferences represent the interests of a particular subset of society, in the sense that state officials define state preferences and act purposively in world politics in terms of these interests. Third, state behaviour in the international system is determined by the configuration within it of interdependent state preferences, i.e. by the constraints imposed on a given state by the preferences of other states (Moravcsik 1997: 520).

This framework differs from the actor-based approaches discussed above primarily because of its emphasis on the role of societal actors rather than politically appointed individuals or small-group actors in the formation of the foreign policies of states. In this sense it broadens the scope of explanation beyond the purely political or governmental, and as such places the analysis of foreign policy in a broader socio-political context than any of the other approaches discussed here.

Interpretative actor perspective

The final approach to be discussed here shares with social constructivism an interpretative epistemology, i.e. understanding actors as reflexive entities in an inter-subjective world of meaning. However, whereas the logic of the former is to interpret individual actions in terms

of social rules and collective meanings, this perspective approaches the explanation of foreign policy by focusing on the thinking and actions of individual decision makers. 'Here the concern is to understand decisions from the standpoint of the decision-makers by reconstructing their reasons,' Hollis and Smith thus write. 'The foreign policy behaviour of states depends on how individuals with power perceive and analyse situations. Collective action is a sum or combination of individual actions' (Hollis and Smith 1991: 74).

An illustrative example of this type of essentially atheoretical form of analysis is Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice's detailed study of German reunification (Zelikow and Rice 1995). It offers an insider's view of the innermost workings of the top political elites of the United States, the Soviet Union, West Germany, East Germany, Britain, and France in the creation, following a series of top-level negotiations, of a reunited Germany. Their analysis examines the reasoning behind their choices and proffers an explanation of the immense changes that occurred during the year following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in terms of this reasoning and its effects. The assumption underlying this type of analysis is the counterfactual argument that if the main actors in this historical process had not reasoned and made choices in the way they did, the history of this period would have been different.

Conclusion

The purpose of the above discussion has been to give an overview of how FP scholars have tried to deal with the many actors and structures which exist in the real world in which foreign policy is made, and which, in one way or another, are therefore involved in the formation and pursuit of such policies. As we have seen, some scholars give pre-eminence to the role of actors in such explanations, while others, although similarly intent on explaining specific policies, place their bets on the prime importance of structural factors in explaining such actions. A third group, focusing on decision-making processes rather than on policies, casts its net much wider, incorporating both actors and structures in the form of a levels-of-analysis framework. Thus, whereas scholars aiming to explain policies can be said to practise a logic of inclusion and exclusion, of privileging either actors or structures, those focusing on decision-making processes take the opposite tack of including all possible factors which may play a role in the general activity of foreign policy decision making. The first two groups also differ in terms of applying either a top-down or bottom-up analytical procedure, in the sense that structural explanations generally take the first form, while actor-based explanations take the second. This is not the case with scholars explaining decision-making processes, for which this problem does not seem to exist in so far as each level of analysis is treated separately and on its own merits.

These differences within FP point to at least two important issues. The first is commonly referred to as the **agency-structure problem**, the implications of which are neatly illustrated in the discussion above: scholars focusing on explaining policies either view actors as the prime cause of policy actions, or give structures this role, and when both are present (as in decision-making analyses), they are essentially treated as separate factors not interacting with each other. The problem is that it is generally recognized that, in real life, actors and structures do not exist in such a zero-sum relationship but, rather, that human agents and social structures are in a fundamental sense dynamically interrelated entities, and that hence we cannot

BOX 6.3 The agency–structure problem in FP

The agency–structure problem focuses on the empirical claim that human agents and social structures are fundamentally interrelated, and hence that explanations of social actions must incorporate both. Or, as noted by Colin Wight, 'In the social world both agents and structures are necessary for any social act to be possible' (Wight 2006: 111). The 'problem' is that although such views of reciprocal implication are generally taken for granted, we nevertheless 'lack a self-evident way to conceptualise these entities and their relationships', as Alexander Wendt has noted (1987). Although he wrote this in 1987, in the first discussion of this issue in IR, it is fair to say that the problem is yet to be resolved to the satisfaction of most IR theorists. One persistent stumbling block is the continued influence of two types of explanations in IR, which deny either the need or the possibility of such a resolution: methodological individualism, claiming that social outcomes can be explained solely in terms of the characteristics of individuals (a 'bottom-up' notion), and methodological structuralism, which accords such powers to structures (a 'top-down' notion). A second issue that has caused considerable controversy is the claim that agents and structures 'constitute' each other, and that this is essentially the nature of the link between them. This means that although agents and structures mutually affect each other, this relationship is not of a causal nature. Here, Wendt has argued in terms of this link providing explanations of what an entity *is*, as for example in the master–slave relationship—the one actor constitutes the other (see Wendt 1998). As against this, Wight has argued that the 'relationships that constitute them as certain types of social actors *are* what causes them to behave in certain ways' (Wight 2006: 117). A third body of controversy (and confusion) concerns the relationship between agency–structure, micro–macro, and level-of-analysis issues, all of which are closely related, sometimes conflated with one another, but which, it is argued by some scholars, should nevertheless be kept analytically apart. The most penetrating discussion of these issues—as of the agency–structure *problematique* in general—is provided by Wight in his exhaustive book on this topic (Wight 2006: 102–120).

account fully for the one without invoking the other. None of the approaches discussed above has resolved this problem, since each tends to privilege either actors or structures in its explanations, or treats them separately on different levels of analysis (see Box 6.3).

This raises a second problem: the feasibility and/or need for an integrated or synthetic framework in FP, incorporating both structures and actors and the dynamic interaction over time between the two. My own view is that a synthetic framework for analysing foreign policy is indeed feasible, but only if the explanandum is defined as purposive policy behaviour rather than in process terms. The second step is a recognition and acceptance of the empirical fact that all foreign policy actions, small or large, are linked together in the form of *intentions*, *cognitive–psychological* factors, and the various *structural* phenomena characterizing societies and their environments, and hence that explanations of actual foreign policy actions must be able to give accounts that do not by definition exclude or privilege any of these types of explanans.

My own favourite method of conceptualizing such a synthetic analytical framework consists of a simple tripartite approach to explaining foreign policy actions (the explanandum) consisting, respectively, of an *intentional*, a *dispositional*, and a *structural* dimension of explanation (the explanans) (Carlsnaes 1992) (see Figure 6.1).

Although conceptualized as analytically autonomous, these three dimensions should be viewed as closely linked in the sense that they can be conjoined in a *logical step-by-step* manner to produce *increasingly exhaustive* (or 'deeper') explanations of foreign policy actions.

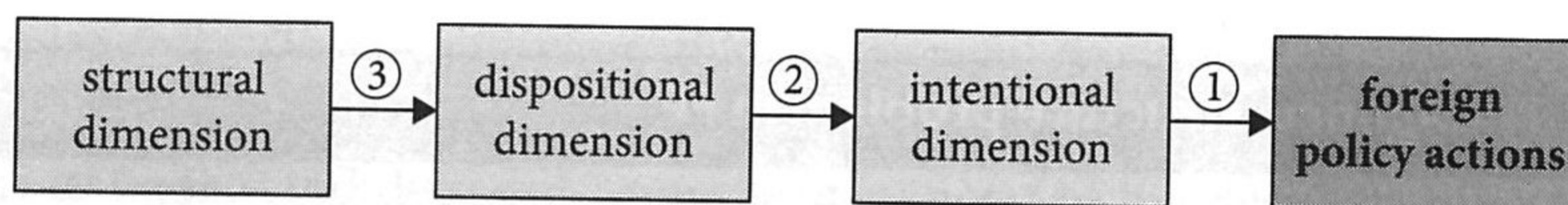


Figure 6.1 Three dimensions for explaining foreign policy actions.

The starting point in such an explanation would be to focus on the first link, i.e. the relation between a given foreign policy action and the intention or goal that it expresses (arrow 1 in Figure 6.1). This is a *teleological* relationship, giving us the specific reason(s) for, or goal(s) of, a certain policy undertaking. This is also a *necessary* first step, given the inherently intentional nature of the explanandum. The study of German unification by Zelikow and Rice (1995) is an excellent example of such an approach, giving us a 'thick' description of top-level negotiations and statecraft at its best. However, scholars who are also interested in giving *causal* in addition to intentional explanations will want to go further than this. This distinction can also be described in terms of an 'in order to' and a 'because of' dimension in explanations, in which the former refers to actions pursued intentionally (i.e. 'in order to' achieve a certain aim), while the latter aims to indicate those prior or underlying mechanisms which 'caused' a given actor to have this, but not that, intention. Thus, scholars not satisfied with merely tracing descriptively the reasoning behind a certain action will want to ask why one rather than another intention in the form of a policy undertaking was being pursued in the first place.

In such an analysis, the next step would be to trace the link between the intentional and the dispositional dimensions, with a view to finding the particular and underlying psychological-cognitive factors which have *disposed* a particular actor to have this and not that preference or intention (arrow 2 in Figure 6.1). In the analysis of such dispositions the primary focus would be on the underlying *values* (or 'belief systems') which motivate actors to pursue certain goals, as well as on the *perceptions* which make actors see the world in particular ways ('world views'). This is where cognitive and psychological approaches to the explanation of foreign policy enter into the analytical picture. In the case of German unification, for example, in-depth leadership analyses of the various individual statesmen, not pursued by Zelikow and Rice, would be relevant in determining the actor dispositions of the main protagonists.

This leaves us with the question of how structural factors are to be incorporated into this framework, since they are present in neither of the first two dimensions. In my view, they do so in terms of a third, 'deeper' and very powerful structural dimension, always underlying and thus affecting the cognitive and psychological dispositions of individuals (arrow 3 in Figure 6.1). These structural factors—domestic and international, social, cultural, economic, material, or ideational—do so in many ways, but essentially as a consequence of being perceived, reacted to, and taken into account by actors, and it is in this sense that structural factors can be said to influence, condition, or otherwise affect—either by constraint or by enabling—human values, preferences, moods, and attitudes, i.e. actor dispositions as here conceptualized. It is also by causally affecting the dispositional characteristics of the agents of policy in this manner that structural factors—via their effects on the dispositions of actors (and only in this manner)—can be said also to determine the particular types of intentions motivating policies (thus combining all three arrows). In the case of German unification, such structural factors would be the end of the Cold War, the economic decline of the Soviet Union, the group dynamics of

the persons involved in the negotiations, the continued consolidation of a peaceful European Community, and the central importance of democracy—to name but a few.

If this approach to foreign policy analysis provides an *integrative* framework, linking both individual decision makers and social structures across state boundaries, does it resolve the *agency-structure* problem? No, not as it stands, for although it combines actor and structural features (which is a step forward), it privileges structures over actors in so far as the former are viewed as having causal effects on the latter, but not the latter on the former. In short, it is a logically *static* framework, which can be used to explain *single* foreign policy actions but not a series of such actions over time. However, once we view policy undertakings with reference also to their actual *outcomes*—which may be intended or unintended, extensive or marginal—a *dynamic* component enters into the picture. In other words, in so far as these outcomes have subsequent effects over time on both the structures and actors determining the foreign policy undertakings of a particular state, we have a case of mutual interaction between the two (see Carlsnaes 1992). To quote Hill once again, this conceptualization of the reciprocal relationship neatly encapsulates the notion that 'Their interaction is a dynamic process, leading to the constant evolution of both actors and structures' (Hill 2003: 28).

In conclusion, this is but one possible way, outlined in the barest detail, in which to conceptualize an integrative framework for the analysis of the roles of actors and structures in foreign policy actions, as well as a dynamic model of the agency-structure relationship. Nevertheless, much remains to be done to consolidate further a field of study that, despite some lean years in the shadow of the vibrant theoretical developments and debates within the larger discipline of IR, is now ready once again to make more space for itself.



Key points

- In the real world we find a number of actors, both domestic and international, who are closely involved in the formulation of foreign policy. Equally, there are a number of structures on both sides of the domestic-international divide that decisively affect these foreign policy actors and their behaviour in many different ways.
- The combination of these factors complicates the conceptualization, explanation, and assessment of the role of actors and structures in foreign policy analysis well beyond what is the case, for example, in the study of either domestic or international politics, since it involves both of these as well as the interplay between them.
- As a consequence, it is not feasible to incorporate actors and structures fruitfully into explanations of foreign policy without analytically imposing some form of *second-order* theoretical or intellectual 'structure' onto this exceedingly messy first-order domain of foreign policy making as an empirical object of study. In other words, it is essential for the scholar to have some form of *analytical framework* or *approach* as a starting point.
- This is also, in various ways, what scholars of Foreign Policy (FP) have tried to do over the years, and hence it is only in terms of these attempts to structure this field of study analytically that a reasonable and fruitful examination and discussion of the role of actors and structures within it can proceed.
- The first such second-order conceptualization is that of the explanandum—the phenomenon that is to be explained, often also referred to as the dependent variable. Two different types of such explananda can be found in the current literature: scholars focusing on foreign policy as a decision-making *process*, and scholars (a much larger group) focusing on *policy* conceived as a product of

such processes. In the first, actors are viewed as those individuals partaking in decision making, whereas structures are primarily those of the state, on behalf of which decisions are made. In the second, the role of actors and structures is left undefined, since the focus is on policies defined as undertakings or commitments, which are neither actor-like nor structural in nature.

- The second and more important analytical category of relevance here is that of the explanans—those factors scholars point to in order to explain a certain phenomenon, often also referred to as independent variables. Scholars focusing on explaining foreign policy qua *processes* tend to invoke the explanatory role of actors and structures in terms of the notion of analytically separate 'levels of analysis', some of which are actor-based and others structural. On the other hand, scholars who view their object of analysis in *policy* terms tend to do so from either of two perspectives: those highlighting structures as explanatory factors (a top-down view), or those who privilege actors in this role (a bottom-up view).
- In view of this array of contending approaches to the study of the role of actors and structures in FP, it is generally agreed that there is a strong need at present for scholars to facilitate integrative frameworks of analysis, as well as to break the habit of viewing actors and structures as two mutually exclusive rather than constitutive and interactive entities. One such suggestion in the form of an analytical framework is offered at the end of the chapter.

Questions

1. Why is the study of the role of actors and structures in foreign policy important?
2. Why is it necessary to employ approaches or frameworks of analysis when studying actors and structures in foreign policy?
3. Give a brief sketch of the historical development of foreign policy analysis.
4. What characterizes 'behaviouralism', and what effects did it have on the subsequent development of the field of foreign policy analysis?
5. Give a brief characterization of 'process' approaches to foreign policy analysis, and how they treat actors and structures.
6. What, in your view, is the essential difference between 'process' and 'policy' approaches to foreign policy analysis?
7. Give a brief outline and comparison of the various approaches to foreign policy analysis based on a structural perspective, and the role which actors and structures play in these.
8. How do the cognitive and psychological approaches discussed in the chapter differ from process-oriented approaches?
9. Give a brief analysis of the agency-structure problem and its relevance to foreign policy analysis.
10. Evaluate the 'synthetic' framework suggested in the conclusion.

Further reading

Allison, G.T. and Zelikow, P. (1999), *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd edn (New York: Longman).

The second and much revised and updated edition of one of the twentieth-century classics in foreign policy analysis, much read by students, scholars, and decision makers alike.

Carlsnaes, W. and Guzzini, S. (eds) (2011), *Foreign Policy Analysis, Vols 1–5* (London: Sage).

A five-volume collection of some of the most seminal contributions to FP since the Second World War. Although obviously a subjective choice, this collection is intended to present a broad picture of the analytical diversity of the field.

Hill, C. (2003), *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 2nd edn 2016.

One of the few substantive books in the field of the last two decades, by one of Britain's foremost foreign policy scholars.

Houghton, D.P. (2007), 'Reinvigorating the Study of Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Toward a Constructivist Approach', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 3: 24–45.

A constructive example—still too rare—combining American and European traditions within the field.

Hudson, V.M. (2014), *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory*, 2nd edn (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield).

The most recent theoretically oriented American textbook, by a leading member of the younger generation of foreign policy scholars with roots in the comparative foreign policy tradition.

Snyder, R.C., Bruck, H.W., Sapin, B., Hudson, V.M., Chollet, D.M., and Goldgeier, J.M. (2002), *Foreign Policy Decision-Making (Revisited)* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

A latter-day resuscitation of one of the real classics of early foreign policy analysis, much cited but rarely emulated.

Wight, C. (2006), *Agents, Structures, and International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press).

Currently the definitive study of the agency–structure debate, and worth penetrating if one wants to get a real grip on the meta-theoretical and theoretical issues involved in studying actors and structures in the making of foreign policy. However, not for the theoretically faint-hearted.



Web links

<http://www.cfr.org/> Website of the Council of Foreign Relations, perhaps the best single source for users searching for up to date information and insights about international politics.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/> Website of *Foreign Affairs*, published by the Council of Foreign Affairs in New York; probably America's most influential mainstream publication on international affairs and foreign policy.

<http://www.foreignpolicy.com/> Website of *Foreign Policy*, a major policy journal published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC; oriented towards the analysis of global politics, economics, and ideas.

<http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/> Founded in 1920 and based in London, Chatham House is one of the world's leading organizations for the analysis of international issues.

http://www.brook.edu/fp/fp_hp.htm Website of the Foreign Policy Studies Program at the Brookings Institution, one of the most respected American think tanks in international affairs.



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www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/smith_foreign3e/