An Overview of Approaches to
the Study of Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The major purpose of this paper is to assess the various approaches to the study of foreign policy. In order to reach this academic endeavour, the paper defines foreign policy, it presents its main characteristics, and it discusses and reviews ten theoretical perspectives in the field of foreign policy analysis. The theoretical framework subject to evaluation comprises the Realist Paradigm, the Pluralist School, Decision-Making Approach, Roseneau's Pre-Theory, Bureaucratic Politics Approach, the Cognitive and Psychological Approach, the Domestic Politics Approach, Discourse Analysis Approach, Social Constructivism School and Structuralism.

Introduction:

Foreign policy is a process in which one international unit, usually a sovereign state, perceives and conducts a particular behaviour towards its external environment. This course of action goes through different steps, including:

1. The Determinants or the factors affecting foreign policy process.
2. Foreign Policy Orientation which implies official statements and the government discourse.

3. Decision-Making Process.

4. Foreign Policy Implementation which is the conduct of foreign policy orientation and state's aspirations, principles and objectives at the external level.

The analyst of foreign policy seeks therefore to investigate the existing correlation between the above-mentioned components of the foreign policy process, notably the concordance between foreign policy orientation and foreign policy implementation. On this issue, the foreign policy analyst, Deborah J. Gerner, links the work of foreign policy analysis with a range of tools and objectives, including:

1. Analysing the societal, governmental and individual inputs that affect foreign policy choices.

2. Ascertaining the facts regarding foreign policy decisions, policies declared publicly, actions taken, and the official and de facto relationships among state and non-state international actors.

3. Considering the consequences of foreign policy actions and assessing whether the goals were desirable and if they were achieved (1).

However, foreign policy is analysed from different outlooks. Some academics emphasise the state as the main actor in foreign affairs, whereas others stress non-state and sub-state entities. Some focus on the impact of domestic factors on foreign policy processes, whereas others emphasise the external milieus straddling the state and its entities. Some analysts stress decision-making processes as central to foreign policy study, whereas others investigate correlations between internal and external milieus as the main focus in their foreign policy analysis. Hence, this paper endeavours to examine the most influential approaches to the study of foreign policy in order to support

the student of foreign policy with a robust and a summarised theoretical framework.

The paper chose ten theoretical perspectives, including the Realist Paradigm, the Pluralist School, Decision-Making Approach, Roseneau's Pre-Theory, Bureaucratic Politics Approach, the Cognitive and Psychological Approach, the Domestic Politics Approach, Discourse Analysis Approach, Social Constructivism School and Structuralism.

I/ The Realist Paradigm:

Christopher Hill, the author of the famous book *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*, describes the ongoing existence of Realism in foreign policy analysis as "ironical given that foreign policy analysis grew up in reaction to the assumption of Classical Realism that the state was a single, coherent actor pursuing clear national interests in a rational manner" (2).

The reason behind the survival of Realism in foreign policy analysis is linked to the nature of foreign policy itself. No matter the nature of the political system, democratic or dictatorship, foreign policy agenda is usually regarded as a high-level dossier for a simple reason: Foreign policy deals with the state sovereignty and security, with other words, foreign policy agenda is a significant part of high-politics.

Unlike the Pluralist Approach, Realism believes that sovereign states are the only actors in foreign affairs. According to Realism, the behaviour of the sovereign state beyond its borders is motivated by state power and state interest (3). Realists noted states trend towards power accumulation and balancing in order to reach sub-regional, regional and worldwide order, and highlighted the fact that state elites have an interest in maximising the autonomy and security of the state.

"In politics, there is no lasting friend or lasting enemy", this is the notion of Realism in foreign policy as friends and enemies are determined according to needs and interests. Therefore, the rational decision-maker in foreign policy is the one capable of maintaining and guaranteeing state interests through a pragmatic policy. Against this background, the main task of the user of Realism in foreign policy analysis is to explore where the interest of the state is in order to understand the nature of foreign policy orientations and actions.

The predominance of some of the Realists thoughts in foreign policy analysis, notably interest and power, does not undermine the significance of other conceptions which contradict with the Realist thesis, including norms, culture, identity, laws, international integration and supra-state institutions, which are often used in analysing states' external behaviours.

II/ The Pluralist School:

Pluralist analysis of foreign policy emphasises the importance of groups competing for influence. In this view, states are not the only important actors in the field of foreign policy. There are other groups including non-state bodies, sub-state units, organized crime networks, governmental and non-governmental entities, and multinational corporations, all vying for influence. With other words, Pluralists highlight the permeability of the state in foreign affairs.

In fact, as a theoretical framework, the Pluralist School is more related to international relations seeing that interactions in the international scene witnessed since the end of the Second World War the appearance of a number of international actors along with sovereign states.

Unlike international relations, foreign policy is the function of the sovereign state. Other international actors might have a foreign affairs agenda and foreign representations, but the diplomatic function, which is the main tool of foreign policy implementation, is in the main the work of the sovereign state. However, this assumption does not deny the increasing importance of non-state and sub-state entities in shaping and orientating the foreign policy of many sovereign states.

III/ Decision–Making Approach:

According to the Decision-Making Approach, the best explanation of state behaviour lies in a deep and full understanding of the decision-making unit, the processes of interaction within it, the relationships between its members, and the personal attributes, values and perceptions of decision makers (4). In their book, *Decision-Making as an Approach to the Study of International Politics*, Richard C. Snyder, H.W. Bruck and Burton Sapin proposed shifting the analysis of foreign policy from an emphasis on the state's power and interests towards an emphasis on "decision-making" as the main unit of analysis (5). They further developed the Decision-Making Approach in a book entitled *Foreign Policy Decision-Making* in which they attempted to define decision-making and identify the key actors (6).

Snyder, Bruck and Sapin defined decision-making as a "process which results in the selection from a socially defined, limited number of problematical, alternative projects of one project intended to bring about the particular future state of affairs envisaged by decision-makers" (7). The focus of the Decision-Making Approach is the organisational context of decision-making (8). Snyder, Bruck and Sapin perceived a difference between a "decisional unit" and "decision makers". They noted that there are units involved in the conduct of foreign affairs that appear to be the "self-evident"

or "common sense" decisional units to analyse, however, on closer inspection, there are difficulties inherent in this "self-evident" approach. These difficulties reflect the complexity of the decision-making process. Not all units, nor all people involved in a unit have equal weight in the decision-making process, nor are they consistently involved in all problem solving and decision-making activities (9).

Furthermore, the proponents of Decision-Making Approach assume that foreign policy analyst has ready access to large quantities of information on the decision-making process, neglecting the fact that any analysis involving the human dimensions of decision-making or attempting to investigate what was happening behind the scenes in the state decisional-units is a difficult task since foreign policy details are considered as a national security dossier.

Within the Decision-Making trend, Game Theory emerged with the intention of assessing strategic decisions on conflicts and cooperation through the use of calculations and mathematical models.

Game Theory considers foreign policy decision-makers as rational players who calculate the payoffs associated with the possible options and the envisaged moves.

The commonly used game theoretic models include the Zero-sum/Non-Zero-Sum Games, Prisoner's Dilemma, Peace-War Game, Dictator Game, Theory of Moves, Trust Game, Chicken, Deadlock, Coordination Game, Matching Pennies, Cake Cutting and so on.

Despite the several contributions of game theorists, notably Steven Brams, Game Theory is uncommonly used as a key tool in foreign policy analysis since it requires a certain level of technical and mathematical

sophistication, which is rarely found in the filed of humanities and social science (10).

IV/ Roseneau's Pre–Theory:

Another major contribution to the scholarship of foreign policy analysis was James Rosenau's "Pre-Theory" article in which he grouped the sources of foreign policy behaviour into five categories: (i) idiosyncratic, (ii) role, (iii) governmental, (iv) societal, and (v) systemic. Roseneau considered these five variables to be the key tools for understanding foreign policy (11). The first category includes the personal characteristics of a particular decision-maker such as his/her personal values and background. The second category encompasses the external behaviour of decision-makers stemming from the role he/she occupies. The third grouping examines the governmental structures which restrict or promote foreign policy choices. The fourth category includes the range of non-governmental or societal factors which have an impact on external behaviours. The final category encompasses any factors from the external environment which influence official decisions (12).

Certainly, the use of Rosenau's five variables in the study of foreign policy widens the scope of analysis and helps the exploration of many aspects of the foreign policy process; however, similar to the deficiency of the Decision-Making Approach in terms of data access, scarcity of data on many of Rosenau's variables demonstrates the limitations of Roseneau's proposal.

V/ The Theory of Bureaucratic Politics:

The Theory of Bureaucratic Politics was developed by Graham Allison in *The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (13). Allison noted that politicians often rely on specialised bureaucratic networks due to uncertainties and fluctuations in government and due to the fact that

individual politicians may not have sufficient expertise in the field of foreign affairs. Thus, some scholars have shifted their analysis from focusing on the top decision-makers to addressing the role of bureaucracy, the bureaucratic structures and processes.

In developing his theory, Allison presented three models of decision-making: Rational Actor, Organizational Processes and Bureaucratic Politics. The Rational Actor Model emphasises the rationality of the decision-maker and foreign policy choices since it argues that rational governments aim to achieve definable state goals rooted in reasonable calculations. The Organizational Processes Model emphasises organisations since it considers foreign policy to be the result of interactions between groups of organisations within governmental structures. The Bureaucratic Politics Model argues that foreign policy choices are the result of intensive bargaining within the bureaucratic networks. Bargaining within the government bureaucracy is based on "pulling and hauling". According to this model, bureaucrats, whose relative importance differs according to their position in the hierarchy of the government bureaucracy, are the most significant actors in orienting and executing foreign policy (14).

Bureaucratic structure and processes were also the main analytical tools used in the book by Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts on US involvement in Vietnam, entitled *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (15). The authors believed that the US involvement in Vietnam was irrational and had been a failure due to malfunctions in the US bureaucratic processes and misperceptions of the main bureaucratic actors (16).

Certainly, sophisticated bureaucratic networks are highly considered when formulating foreign policy in Western democratic regimes because (i) such networks exist and (ii) they are regularly consulted; however, the

existence of such sophisticated networks in developing and underdeveloped countries is questionable for the reason that Third World countries are usually poor in terms of technocratic institutions. Moreover, foreign policy decision making in Third World regimes is mainly formulated by one ruler or a clan of individuals, this makes the contribution of bureaucrats and technocrats irrelevant. Thus, the Theory of Bureaucratic Politics is merely useful to understanding foreign policy making in countries which are characterised by flexible decision-making processes and complex/sophisticated bureaucratic structures.

VI/ Cognitive Processes and Psychological Attributes in Foreign Policy Analysis:

Since the recognition of the importance of the personal attributes of decision-makers in foreign policy analysis by Snyder, Bruck and Sapin, and following Roseneau's call to look at the idiosyncratic aspects of decision-makers alongside the governmental, societal and systemic variables, individual-level theories which focus on the psychological make-up of decision-makers have begun to play a more prominent role in foreign policy analysis. According to Vivier Burr: "Cognitivism is the assumption that psychological processes such as thinking, perception and reasoning find expression in individual and interpersonal behaviour" (17).

Cognitive processes and psychological attributes were used as major analytical tools in foreign policy analysis as early as 1962 by Kal Holsti in "The Belief System and National Images: A Case Study" in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (18). Margaret Hermann studied the correlation between the personal characteristics of world leaders and foreign policy in "Effects of Personal characteristics of Political Leaders on Foreign Policy" (19), "Explaining Foreign Policy Behaviour Using the Personal Characteristics of

Political Leaders" (20) and "Personality and Foreign Policy Decision Making: A Study of Fifty-Three Heads of Government" (21).

Alexander George provided the field of foreign policy analysis with the concept of "The Operational Code" (22) while Robert Axelrod contributed the "Cognitive Mapping Approach" (23). Both approaches focus on a specific set of beliefs that interact with each other and affect the behaviour of decision-makers.

Similar to most individual-level theories, the psychology of decision makers remains widely used as an analytical tool in the study of foreign policy, notably when analysing the external behaviour of the countries that have been ruled by charismatic leaders.

Even though gathering details on the cognitive and psychological attributes of top decision-makers is problematical, the contributions of Kal Holsti and Margaret Hermann on cognitive processes and psychological features are commonly considered to be vital to the literature on foreign policy analysis, which explains the ongoing strength of this trend.

VII/ Domestic Political Explanation in the Analysis of Foreign Policy:

Another approach to foreign policy analysis has focused on the perception that decision-makers must cope simultaneously with domestic pressures and the external environment. According to Christopher Hill, "Foreign policy can never be abstracted from the domestic context out of which it springs. Without domestic society and the state there would be no foreign policy" (24).

Robert D. Putman has further developed the domestic political explanation of foreign policy in his concept of "two-level games" (25) and George Tsebelis has advanced the notion of "Nested Games" (26).

Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushirnen Ehteshami presented the "Domestic Vulnerability Model" of foreign policy-making, which is based on the idea that the main threat to unstable regimes, notably in the Third World, is domestic. Consequently, foreign policy becomes a key instrument of domestic survival either through policies that revive a regime's popularity and fill the legitimacy deficit, or through the deployment of external support to counter domestic opposition (27).

In his article on "Domestic Political Explanation in the Analysis of Foreign Policy", Joe D. Hagan discussed the issue of foreign policy domestication and how leaders use foreign policy to mobilise the masses or legitimize a regime and its policies (28). Hagan argued that leaders assert their legitimacy in order to confront opposition. "This strategy is most often associated with the game of retaining power in which a leadership manipulates foreign policy issues. Leaders seek to enhance the domestic political position of the regime in a number of ways: (i) appealing to nationalism and imperialist themes, or "scapegoating" or "bashing" foreign elements; (ii) showing that leaders have a special capacity and wisdom for maintaining the nation's security; and/or (iii) diverting attention away from divisive domestic problems (29).

Undeniably, domestic politics as well as internal needs and pressures, generally help the understanding of the state's aggressive or cooperative deeds at the external level, however, since foreign policy is a complex process in which interacts both internal and external milieus, considering the domestic

background as the only source of the external state behaviour might mislead foreign policy analyst as it only provides half of the picture.

VIII/ Discourse Analysis in the Study of Foreign Policy:

Commonly, the nature of foreign policy discourse is shaped according to the nature of the political system and the characteristics of the state ruler. In this framework, there are several types of foreign policy discourse, including revolutionary discourse, radical discourse, peace discourse, offensive discourse, deceptive discourse, manipulative discourse, demagogic discourse…and so on.

An important effect of foreign policy language is the shaping of national identity. Through the language of foreign policy, nationals are defined and outsiders are represented as "other". Therefore, foreign policy language is important precisely because it reinforces national and statist culture (30).

Ole Waever, David Campbell, Roxanne Doty and Henrik Larsen have all focused on analysing the language of foreign policy (31). Analysing discourses and statements relating to foreign policy might reveal both mind-sets and actions (32). Discourse Analysis can take into account not only the denotative, but also the connotative dimensions of language.

Nevertheless, political discourse is not often genuine as in politics words usually do not match deeds which shakes the accuracy and efficiency of political discourse as a reliable tool in foreign policy analysis.

IX/ Social Constructivism in Foreign Policy Analysis:

Social Constructivism has focused on the importance of the relationship between identity and foreign policy. According to Yücel Bouzdağlioğlu, "despite the presence of different approaches within the constructivist research

program, constructivists, in general, share the idea that international politics is not solely driven by material forces …. States' interests, and consequently their behaviours, are influenced by social and intersubjective factors such as norms, culture, ideas and identity. Where they disagree with rationalists (and neo-realists) is the degree to which international policies is affected by these factors" (33). Alexander Wendt has also noted the debate about "the extent to which state action is influenced by structure" (34). He explains that the main argument of constructivists concerns the social rather than material nature of the structures of international politics and the importance of those structures in shaping identities and interests (35).

Mlada Bukovansky sees Social Constructivism advancing the argument that anarchy and power are insufficient explanations for state behaviour. According to this outlook, analysis of the social construction of state identities can broaden the understanding of state interests (36).

In an article entitled "Norms, Identity and culture in National security", Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt and Peter J. Katzenstein wrote that "state identity precedes and even accounts for interest because actors often cannot decide what their interests are until they know what they are representing –'who they are'– which in turn depends on their social relationaships" (37).

In their book on *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett noted that the formation of state identities is an interactive process. International politics is "a social interaction in which the actors shape the structure of international society and are shaped by it" (38).

Ideas of Social Constructivism have been applied in many works on foreign policy analysis. In a book entitled *Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkish*

Identity, Yücel Bouzdağlioğlu investigated whether the existence of cooperation or conflict in state behaviour depended on a rational calculation of costs and benefits or on the social identities of the relevant actors (39). In order to examine the issue, Bouzdağlioğlu employed elements of Constructivism developed by Alexander Wendt and argued that state identity is a key factor in explaining a state's external behaviour, including anarchy or cooperation. The author focused the research on the formulation of the foreign policy preferences and interests of Turkey (prior to 2003) because of its unique position in the international system. He perceived Turkey not only to be on the border between "north and south" and "east and west", but also to be in a special position between the Muslim Middle East and the West. "It is a country with a predominantly Muslim population, but at the same time, it represents a unique version of a secular state" (40). In recent history, while having "fully identified itself with the West, especially with Europe, and established close relations with the USA ….Turkey maintained a very low profile in her relations with the Muslim Middle East" (41). Proponents of the Realist Paradigm might argue that Turkey's identification with the West was primarily motivated by security and economic interests. However, Bouzdağlioğlu argues that Turkish foreign policy cannot be understood without analysing Turkish identity (42). Turkey behaved as it did because of the triumph of its Western–secular identity over its Middle Eastern identity.

Another book that examines the links between foreign policy and identity is *The Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Politics: Moscow, 1955 and 1999* by Ted Hopf (43). Through an empirical focus on Soviet foreign policy in 1955 and Russian foreign policy in 1999, Hopf demonstrates that a state's collection of identities affect the ways in which its decision-makers understand other states and interact with them in

international politics (44). Hopf believes that it is impossible for foreign policy decision-makers to escape the social cognitive structure of their society (45).

Thus, the proponents of Social Constructivism consider the social construction of the state as a key determinant in the foreign policy process simply because interstate relations are contingent on the way identity is constructed and states interests are determined by identity and national character.

The practicality of Social Constructivism in foreign policy analysis remains unsettled because of the ongoing debate between Realism and Social Constructivism; Realists claim that identity is determined by interests, whereas Social Constructivists claim that interests are shaped by identity, a controversy that sounds like the chicken-egg paradox on which came first: The chicken or the egg?

X/ **Structuralism**:

Structuralism considers "structure" as the main tool in foreign policy analysis. Two forms of Structuralism exist in the study of foreign policy:

1. In his Neo-Realist Approach, Kenneth Waltz rejected the consideration of the state behaviour at the external level as a result of the cruel human nature as he emphasised the role of major developments and changes within the anarchical international system in orientating and shaping states foreign policies. Accordingly, Neo-Realism is considered as one trend of Structuralism because it emphasises the structure of the international system as a significant factor in formulating the foreign policy process (46).

2. The other trend of Structuralism in the study of foreign policy is Dependency Approach, a theoretical thesis associated with the work of

Raul Prebish, André Gunder Frank, Theotonio Dos Santos, Fernando Cardoso, Enzo faletto, Paul Sweezy, Celso Furtado, Anibal Pinto, Paul Baran, Samir Amin and Immanuel Wallerstein. Despite the existence of several thoughts within Dependency School, this theoretical trend considered the world capitalist system as decisive, that it is a hierarchy, not Realism's simple anarchy, and that, in this hierarchy, the economic dependence of late-developing states sharply constrains their sovereignty as developing/underdeveloped states are fragmented and penetrated and, therefore, are unable to conduct an active-independent foreign policy. Due to this complex situation, dependent states adopts two forms of foreign policy: (i) Pro-Core Foreign Policy characterised by hegemon-client relationships between the Core and the Periphery and (ii) Anti-Core Foreign Policy either to appease domestic opposition to dependence or to counteract dependence and reach complex interdependence or greater independence which is in point of fact unattainable due to structural dependence (47).

The use of "international structure" as the main tool in analysing foreign policy demonstrated its effectiveness in several Neo-Realists studies on Great Powers' foreign actions during the Cold War era, notably on the issue of arms race.

Dependency thoughts were also functional in explaining the foreign policy of several Third World countries, notably the countries that have been characterised by a complex post-colonial relationship with their former colonial masters.

Conclusion:

According to the above-discussed arguments and facts, it seems that establishing a fixed deduction about the adequacy and the practicality of each of these theoretical theses is not achievable. Manifestly, the practical utility of each of the previously discussed analytical tools depends on (i) the theme, (ii) the available data and (iii) the research sources.

On the other hand, the paper demonstrated that generating a common analytical framework for the study of foreign policy is not feasible as each foreign policy approach looks at foreign policy process from a particular angle. In fact, this is the dilemma of political science as a whole with all its sub-fields.

Undeniably, the paper did not offer a theoretical solution to this predicament; however, it provided an overview of the main approaches to the study of foreign policy and the choice is left to the researcher who decides the suitable approach for his/her work according to the nature of the subject matter or the accessible data on the topic.

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