

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

Written by Dylan Loh

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/03/27/is-foreign-policy-a-rational-scientific-process-devoid-of-politics/>

DYLAN LOH, MAR 27 2013

Is Foreign Policy and Implementation a Rational Scientific Process Devoid of Politics?

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will argue that foreign policy-making and implementation is not just a rational scientific process devoid of politics. In fact, I argue that it is a process that is more political, and in some ways more incoherent, than it is scientific or rational. I also attempt to show that not only is foreign policy and implementation often non-scientific, but the feedback that policy makers get from the implementers or the 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980) is similarly unscientific as well. Additionally, I will argue that such politicized, non-scientific and (at times) irrational policy decisions and outcomes are often a result of bureaucratic politics.

I will be drawing heavily on 'bureaucratic politics' by Halperin and Clapp and Alison's typology of 'organizational' and 'governmental politics' models (Alison, 1971). I will also be using the US as a case study to draw relevant examples in buttressing my claims. Looking at this question through the framework of the bureaucracy makes the most sense. There are three main reasons why the usage of bureaucracy (and organizations) is the most ideal analytical framework.

First, it is impossible to disentangle foreign policy and implementation from the bureaucracy. When we talk about foreign policy, we do not talk about a single unit or an individual forming decisions on his or her own in a vacuum. For foreign policy decisions to 'happen', there needs to be an apparatus to enable the decision-making process. Policy decisions cannot be made without a functional bureaucracy and the same is true for foreign policy implementation as well. Indeed, the bureaucracy is essential to modernity, and contemporary society cannot function without bureaucracies (Ritzer, 2009:32).

Second, since we already know that foreign policy processes necessarily involve multiple bureaucracies, I find it pertinent to examine not only intra-organizational dynamics but also inter-organizational dynamics. This scrutiny can help us unearth and comprehend the various intricacies in the decision-making and implementation process.

Third, the bureaucratic political approach departs from the rational approach and psychological approach (although I do expand on the psychological approach in detail later), in explaining processes and outcomes that the other two cannot. For example, the bureaucratic political approach can provide explanations for the irrational and unscientific practices in the decision-making process and question the role of 'rationality'. It also differs from the psychological approach by stressing the political exigencies, hierarchical/positional influences and the dynamics between and within organizations in the foreign policy polity, rather than just looking at individual and/or group psychology.

America will be the country that I will be using as a case study in answering the question. The choice of using the US is a deliberate one. There are three reasons for doing so. First, there is a wealth of data and literature on foreign policy decision-making and implementation in the US. Methodologically, this makes for an excellent locus for my research as I will have a rich data set of historical examples to extract and mine.

Secondly, US foreign policy is relevant and important (that is not to say that other countries' foreign policies are

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

Written by Dylan Loh

irrelevant). Probably no other country's foreign policy moves get more analysed by the media, states and social scientists than the United States. Thus the US is the ideal country to test my hypothesis and answer the question posed.

Finally, the US is the only country that is able to project its foreign policy the furthest in the world in terms of its reach, influence and effects. One would be hard pressed to find another country capable of influencing world affairs as much as the US, by virtue of it being the sole super power of the world. Moreover, many countries strategically align their foreign policy positions with (like most European countries do) or against America. Since so many countries take their lead from the US, I think it is germane to look at the US itself and how its foreign policy makers arrive at decisions. It is these reasons that make America a most attractive choice as an analytical case study in attempting to answer the question.

1.1 Methodology

Qualitative research will be used in this paper. More specifically, secondary content/data analysis will be employed. Content analysis is the most appropriate as I will be drawing mainly from secondary sources in my research. Within social sciences, content analysis is one of the best methods to use in analysing texts, books and any form of recorded communication (Colorado State University, 2012).

As mentioned earlier in my introduction, I would add a third dimension to the discussion – the feedback loop from the bureaucrats to the decision and policy makers.

2. Literature Review

There are three main systems that dominate policy-making – the rational actor model; the organizational model; and the bureaucratic model. The rational actor model (RAM) is the model that, in theory, is the most 'rational' and 'scientific'. Hence, in order to prove that the decision-making process is political and unscientific in nature, I will have look at the RAM.

In the RAM, people are assumed to be rational and logical in their thinking. Choices can and should be ranked in a way that is logical. If I favour X over Y and Y over Z, then it is rational for me to choose X over Z (Stein, 2008:102). The actor chooses a course of action that is consistent with his goals, in pursuit of his goals. This is called 'instrumental rationality'. There are several steps an actor takes in the rational decision-making process. It is generally agreed upon by scholars that it involves the following steps: search for goals and rank them according to priority; identify options for reaching the goals; predict the consequences and evaluate the options; select the option that best maximizes your goal. Its aim is always utility maximisation (Miles, 1998; Verba, 1969: 225).

The rational actor model also falls under the realist view in its identification of a 'self-evident' national interest (Morgenthau, 1960: 5) and the subsequent pursuit of goals pertaining to national interests. In addition, some assumptions and characteristics associated with the RAM – the rational unitary actor in the form of the state – are characteristics of the realist point of view as well (Weber and Smith, 2002: 52-53).

RAM is a model that permeates the whole social sciences world and is applied widely across various disciplines (especially economics). But wide adoption does not mean it is without problems. It has been extensively argued that the rational actor model is not realistic and thus has been roundly criticised (Clarke, 1989:27-59; Stein, 2008:103, Snyder and Diesing 1977; Jervis, 1976; Tahar, 2001).

Although the emphasis of this essay is mainly on the bureaucracy and bureaucratic politics as a critique of the rational actor model, it is important to look at the other critiques levelled at the RAM. I shall focus on one of the most common critiques – psychological factors.

2.1 Alternative Approaches to the Decision-Making Process

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

Written by Dylan Loh

It is well established that personality, political skills, age, health, emotions and mood can predispose a decision maker towards a particular course of policy action (Crawford, 2000:115; Vertzberger, 1990: 172-89). But these psychological and neurological factors do not have a place in the RAM.

One of the most important psychological dimensions that affects foreign policy is cognition (Alden and Aran, 2012:22). Cognition, put simply, is the process by which an individual processes information. Many academics have found that this cognitive process actually contradicts the rational decision model. To give an example: Leon Festinger's concept of 'cognitive dissonance' shows how decision makers can and will deliberately remove and exclude information that is contradictory or that does not conform with their own ideas, regardless of the merits of that information (Festinger, 2003). In fact, when presented with contradictory information, decision makers actually strengthen their initial beliefs (Stein, 2008: 104-105).

Others scholars have similarly highlighted how 'built in' biases, mental schemas, prejudices and perceptions can affect how one assesses problems/situations and how one forms policy responses (Axelrod, 1976: 244-52; George, 1969: 190-222). More crucially, as Margaret and Harold Sprout (cited in Volger, 1989: 136) state, there is a difference between the real-world 'objective' reality and the 'subjective' reality that exists in the policy makers' minds, owing to a combination of the psychological and cognitive factors mentioned above. What makes it even more problematic is that these two realities are often at odds with each other.

Since policy decisions are usually made in groups, one has to look at the individuals that make up the groups as well as the groups themselves. Irving Janis (1972) has shown how, in America, 'groupthink' has produced suboptimal policy-making and consequently detrimental implementation and outcomes. 'Groupthink' can be defined as a mode of thinking that dismisses and overrides alternatives due to the desire to maintain group harmony and cohesiveness (Janis, 1972: 8-9).

Emotion plays an indubitable role in the decision-making process. Studies have shown that it precedes and even shapes choice (Stein, 2008: 111; Cohen, 2005:1). Although still primarily in the field of neuro-biology and psychology, scholars in International Relations are increasingly looking at the role that emotions play in areas such as cooperation, wars and conflict (Mercer, 2005). There is a possibility that emotions actually contribute to better decisions being made (Ochsner and Gross, 2005). Stein suggests that people are "hard-wired for altruism and trust..." and that these attributes are crucial to solving many global political problems (Stein, 2008: 113). If so, rational choice models might hinder good foreign policy decisions from being made under some circumstances, since they silence emotions and moral reasoning in the process.

It would be duplicitous to talk about foreign policy and implementation without talking about the international environment. External circumstances and events can constraint and impact the decision-making process (Jervis, 1976: 16-19; Hoffman, 1962: 692:94). In times of crisis, it is argued by some, such as Wolfers, that there would be more homogeneity in behaviour (1962: 13). It is in such an instance that perhaps petty bureaucratic interests give way to more pressing national needs. Since the international environment is complex, unpredictable and ever-changing (Brighi and Hill, 2008:134), it goes to show that it is problematic, in the RAM, to assume precise information (since the environment is uncertain) and the availability of clearly ranked alternatives (since the environment is always in a state of flux).

Sometimes, foreign policy implementation requires the support of other state actors for it to be successful. 'Implementers' in that sense can include states as well. In 2005, at the Gleneagles summit, Tony Blair 'succeeded' in getting G8 countries to commit to debt cancellation in Africa. Subsequently, many of the countries failed to keep their promises (Brighi and Hill, 2008:128). This is an example of how foreign policy implementation can require not only faithful domestic implementers, but the cooperation of international implementers as well.

If the RAM is indeed so problematic, why is it still so popular in foreign policy? According to Weber and Smith (2002), there are three main reasons. The first lies in the language that foreign policy makers use to validate and justify their foreign policy decisions. Implicit in the language is the claim that they act in a rational manner.

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

Written by Dylan Loh

Next, the people that are involved in foreign policy are political elites. The skills, knowledge and competence they possess would theoretically limit any kind of irrational or unscientific decisions and outcomes. Finally, the analytical allure of rationality itself makes it stand out as an attractive model. It serves as an easily accessible model as an approach to making foreign policy decisions (Webber and Smith, 2002: 54).

I would add a fourth reason in addition to what the authors mention. In the eyes of the public, foreign policy is thought to be rational and scientifically rigorous – a watertight procedure that is conducted by people who have the best interests of the nation at heart. As such, there is a need for stakeholders to maintain a semblance of rationality. Otherwise, the associated political costs could be severe.

As mentioned earlier, I will be using 'bureaucratic politics' and bureaucracy as my analytical perspective. It is important to unpack and list out the characteristics of a bureaucracy because these characteristics are vital in explaining some of the political and irrational aspects of foreign policy. According to Weber, in a bureaucracy, there exist six main characteristics: a formal hierarchical structure; a rules based operating environment; impersonality; functional specialization; emphasis on technical qualifications; and the focus of achieving organizational goals (Weber in Ritzer, 2009).

I will be using the terms 'bureaucracy' and 'organization' interchangeably with no real variance in meaning for the purposes of this paper.

3. The Problem of the 'Rational Actor Model'

In this section I will further problematize and critique the rational actor model to show that foreign policy/implementation is not just a rational and scientific process devoid of politics. The RAM, in the context of international relations, makes several assumptions. First, it assumes that states are unitary actors. In reality there are, in fact, many contending forces and groups in the state that may have different preferences. By using the notion of a 'unitary' state, it gives a misconception of a relatively undifferentiated decision-making body.

Second, it assumes that there are readily available alternatives to choose from and that these alternatives can be chosen through a cost-benefit analysis. In reality, readily known alternatives are seldom available owing to misinformation, partial information and an uncertain operating environment. This is a criticism that proponents of RAM acknowledge themselves (Alden and Aran, 2012:14-15).

Third, the rational actor model presumes faithful implementation by actors. This is simply not the case. Because of reasons such as self-interest, narrow organizational agendas, and non-affinity to decisions (to name a few), implementers can resist, ignore or simply do something different to what the decision-maker desires.

Halperin and Clapp highlighted three limits of faithful implementation: implementers do not know what decision-makers want; they are unable to do what they have been ordered to do; and they may resist what they have been ordered to do (Halperin and Clapp, 2006:247).

While overly simplistic, it does capture the essence of the problem of faithful implementation. One of its main limitations is that it is not generalizable to authoritarian regimes. It is nearly impossible, for instance, for a North Korean military officer to resist what he has been ordered to do, regardless of his personal views.

Fourth, the main supposition of the RAM, that actors are rational, can be contested. This assumption fails to take into account the emotive aspects of actors. This is something that has already been elaborated on in the literature review.

The RAM paints actors as cold, calculating, wholly interest-driven and devoid of emotions. This assumption is extremely problematic because as much as decisions can be rational, they can be emotional too. Discounting the emotional and psychological aspects of decision-making is patently misguided. Finally, individual predilections, cognitive biases and psychological considerations are important factors in the decision-making process.

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

Written by Dylan Loh

Dyson's study of Margaret Thatcher's time as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom found that her personality undoubtedly drove much of her foreign policy decisions. For example, her strict 'right-wrong', 'white-black' worldview shaped how she dealt with the Falkland Crisis and her evaluation of Mikhail Gorbachev. Dyson concluded that Thatcher's personality was critical in making sense of her time in office, and highlighted the importance of personality in politics (Dyson, 2009).

Often times, the personality and even charisma of a leader can be the main driver of foreign policy agendas. Weber's tripartite typology of authority gives some clues to this. His typology is as follows: traditional authority, legal-rational authority and charismatic authority (Bendix, 1977).

Of particular interest here is his concept of 'charismatic authority'. He defines it as:

"Resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him" (Weber, 1968:215)

This opens up the possibility of individual charisma and personality driving foreign policy. It should be cautioned that these are 'ideal-types'[1] and one would be hard-pressed to find a decision maker that falls exclusively into one particular type of authority.

Putting it all together, we can see that the uncertainty, lack of clear information, and complexity render the application of an ideal-type RAM impossible. Many scholars recognise this as well (Hill, 2003: 102-5). To better explain the RAM in practice, Herbert Simon came up with the term 'bounded rationality'. This is where decision makers 'satisfice', in which they accept the outcomes or choose the decision that is most approximate to their preferences (Simon, 1991: 125-34), instead of optimizing.

3.1 The US – A Case Study of Unscientific and (Sometimes) Irrational Policy

Halperin and Clapp, in their book 'Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy', show how foreign policy and decisions, in most cases, were arrived at via bargaining, politicking, and conflict rather than through a rational or scientific process.

One example would be the development of strategic missile capabilities by the Navy through its Polaris submarine force. This expansion was met with resistance from the Air force, who felt that this move would threaten their primacy and premier status, in having sole domain over strategic missile power (Halperin and Clapp, 2006:48). It tried to resist the development but was unsuccessful in the end, although it enjoyed greater success in preventing the army from developing such programs.

Bureaucratic and organizational interests frequently trump national interests. By virtue of the number of bureaucracies (some created just to keep another organization in check), some of these organizations have objectives or aims that can be at odds with each other. For instance, in gauging the anti-ballistic deployment proposal, the Budget Bureau was concerned about costs and how to keep the military budget down, whereas State Department officials were more concerned with the impacts on relationships with its allies and the Soviet Union (Halperin and Clapp, 2006:25-6).

Organizations every so often do not come to a decision based on what is good for the 'national interest', as opposed to what is good for the organization (Jervis, 1976:17). Bargaining among bureaucracies is not infrequent – it occurs when these bodies have interests that depart from the decision mooted (McGrew and Wilson, 1982: 227). This flies in the face of the RAM, which is predicated on selecting the best alternative in line with the 'national interest'. It seems that 'national interest' is not as meaningful a concept when one sees how decisions are reached as an aggregation of various organizational interests, as opposed to having a self-evident and universally agreed upon 'national interest'.

Of course, that is not to say that narrow bureaucratic interests will always supersede national interests. For sure,

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

Written by Dylan Loh

there will be actors within an organization that would caution against that, but by virtue of the characteristics of a bureaucracy, these views would likely be sidelined.

Intra-organizational competition also sees less than ideal decision-making and implementation. As stressed before, when actors take a stand on certain foreign policy issues, organizational self-preservation plays a big part. Questions like, “Is this going to increase my organizational budget?” and “how will this affect the prestige of my organization?” can come to dominate the decision-making process and in weighing whether one should support or resist a decision and its subsequent implementation.

While these considerations might be ‘rational’ from the individual organizations’ point of view, when taken as a whole, they point to a very messy, incoherent and political decision-making process. The examples above show that, many times, decisions on foreign policy are made not by any single unitary actor, such as the state, but as a result of collective bargaining, contestations, and negotiations. The multiplicity, strength and influence of the bureaucracies involved in foreign policy decisions and implementations cannot and must not be ignored. This is a consideration that the RAM does not take into account.

Much of what has been said so far has been on inter- and intra-organizational dynamics. The personality and preferences of individuals play a significant part in making foreign policy too. In the US, where much power is vested in the President, personality and personal predilections play a pronounced role. In fact, the exaggerated personality of that individual can be used as a strategic tool in foreign policy.

One manifestation of that can be seen in President Nixon’s ‘madman theory’. Nixon tried to portray himself as a ‘mad’ leader – someone who is unpredictable, erratic and uncontrollable. In doing so, he had hoped to prevent the communist bloc from taking any hostile actions against the US for fear of unpredictable reprisals – like a nuclear attack – from the US (Kimball, 2005).

In the next section, I will talk about the domestic political structure of the US and how it affects policy and implementation.

3.2 *The Domestic Political Structure of the US*

The political nature of policy can be surmised as follows:

“The Constitution has been described as an ‘invitation to struggle’ between the President and Congress over the making of foreign policy. Compared to every other liberal democracy, the US conducts foreign policy in a cumbersome way” (Foreign Policy Association, 2011)

Congress can be a key driver of foreign policy and can outline shared images of national security and foreign policy. The passing of the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979 is a clear example of how congress can set the agenda for foreign policy. In passing this act, Congress rejected the State Department’s draft and replaced it with their own. The act also legally binds the US into providing defensive arms to Taiwan although it is ambiguous in stating if the US would come to Taiwan’s defence if she were invaded.

In another example, Congress passed and persuaded the President to sign a document declaring that the national interest of the United States necessitated regime change in Iraq in 1998 (Halperin and Clapp, 2006: 314). This goes to show that congress can jostle, negotiate and bargain with the President to drive foreign policy decisions.

This example is important because it stresses how different actors (other than the President) can affect and ‘effect’ foreign policy and can even tie the President’s hands in a way. It also debunks the notion of a unitary actor. Congress operates on a bicameral system and is split into two houses – the upper house and the lower house. The representatives from the lower house serve just two year terms and as such have to engage their constituents closely, because elections are a very frequent event. One can assume that foremost in the representatives’ concerns are their constituents’ welfare.

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

Written by Dylan Loh

Consider this hypothetical (but by no means improbable) scenario: an important foreign policy bill comes up for debate in Congress. If this bill, as evaluated by its own merits, benefits the US on the whole and advances her national interest, there should be no real opposition because any rational member would support it. But what if this bill would somehow disadvantage a representative's constituents? If so, would it be possible that he would vote against the bill just to safeguard his constituents or to increase his chance of getting re-elected?

Not only that, members might also vote according to their party line if a bill deviates from the party's position on any particular issue. What is clear is that there is a constellation of other unscientific and sometimes irrational considerations that congressmen take into account (other than national interest) when they take a stance on foreign policy direction.

It is significant at this point to mention that, by virtue of Article One Section Eight of the Constitution, only Congress has the power to declare war and to send troops to foreign countries for more than sixty days, although the President has ignored this congressional oversight on at least 125 instances (Justice Department, 2011). This is yet another classic example of how foreign policy can be conflicting in nature and contested by various parties.

3.3 Problems with Implementation

A good amount of time has been spent dissecting foreign policy processes, which has revealed how they can be very unscientific in nature. I shall now proceed to looking at foreign policy implementation. Foreign policy implementation (as defined here) can be broadly identified as the execution of foreign policy decisions, directives or orders that have been handed down. It is usually executed by bureaucrats^[2] (in the broadest sense) in their official capacity. I shall henceforth refer to these bureaucrats as the 'implementers'.

It was mentioned earlier in the paper that there are some inherent problems with faithful implementation, and that faithful implementation is an implicit assumption of the RAM. On the flip side, another issue with implementation is the problem of over-zealous implementation (Halperin and Clapp, 2006:258-59).

A case of overzealous implementation is illustrated during Truman's tenure as president. Leo Crowley (then head of the Foreign Economic Administration) asked President Truman to terminate the lend-lease agreement with US allies. He told the President that his predecessor Roosevelt had already agreed to it, so Truman signed the termination without reading through it.

Leo Crowley proceeded to place an embargo on all shipment of aid to European Allies and the USSR, although that was never the intention of Truman. The embargo created a geo-political storm and Truman had to rescind the order (Halperin and Clapp, 2006:258-59). Overzealous implementation can thwart and modify policy decisions, and may actually cause detriment to US national interests.

In an earlier section, I detailed how personal predilections and personality can colour the decision-making process. By the same token, individual quirks and biases can affect the implementers in the same way. Many times, implementers exercise more discretion than policy makers would like. For example, the US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Kalilzad, is known to make decisions on his own and leave out Congress or the President in the process. When he delayed the constitution in Iraq in order for compromises to be made, he did it on his own will – not Washington's (Halperin and Clapp, 2006:278).

Insofar as organizational interests can shape policy, they can also shape how the policy is implemented. Organizational self-preservation, non-alignment of interests and/or exclusion from the decision-making process can motivate implementers to resist, disobey or make piecemeal changes.

3.4 Constraints of Bureaucracy

Bureaucracies are an indispensable imperative of modernity. With regards to government, one would be hard pressed to find any nation state that functions without it. In foreign policy, the bureaucracy presents itself as a

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

Written by Dylan Loh

paradox. Without a bureaucracy, there can be no platform with which to arrive at foreign policy decisions. There can also be no way to execute and implement foreign policy decisions.

It is a paradox because while it is an 'enabler', it is also a 'disabler' through its constraining effects. And while it is very rational in structure – to meet very rational ends – it can bring about extremely irrational outcomes. Take an example: the holocaust would not have been possible if not for the huge well-oiled bureaucratic Nazi machinery and the attendant characteristic of impersonality within the bureaucracy.

In this section, I will be providing three reasons why bureaucracies constrain foreign policy implementation and make implementation an unempirical process.

One of the main features of the bureaucracy is its large number of rules and its adherence to 'standard operating procedures' (SOPs). This stringent adherence to SOPs can pose problems when it comes to implementation – an instruction that is passed down that runs contrary to the SOPs of the organization is bound to struggle in its execution. The next reason is that within a bureaucracy, at any one time, there are multiple goals (often ambiguous) and unclear information dissemination. This results in policies that are "often contradictory, incoherent, and badly suited to the information at hand" (Jervis, 1976:24).

Third, as an extension of bureaucracy, street level bureaucracy has the potential to challenge and even usurp foreign policy decisions and implementation. Lipsky says that "policy implementation in the end comes down to the people who actually implement it" (1980). Street level bureaucrats practice discretion and make policy choices rather than merely implementing the decisions of policy makers. As such, changes in policy implementation are usually due to the volition of implementers rather than decision makers (Moody and Musheno, 2003; Mackey, 2008).

There is a limit to this explanation, due to the fact that there are varying degrees of freedom that a street-level bureaucrat can exercise. For example, a low ranking soldier in the army is probably expected to have less room to manoeuvre in implementation, as compared to an ambassador. I have argued at great lengths how foreign policy decision and implementation are political in nature and can be irrational at times. Next, I will briefly discuss the feedback process.

An important aspect of the decision-making process (and ironically the RAM) lies in the feedback received from the implementers, either post- or pre-implementation. Policy makers can learn from history and draw suggestions, lessons and insight into future policy considerations (Levy, 1994; Vertzberger 1990).

By 'feedback process', I mean the ways in which information and evaluations, gathered during or after implementation and fed back to the decision makers, would potentially affect current or future policy decisions.

Just like policy-making and implementation, the feedback process can face support or resistance as well. 'Implementers' can exercise discretion in what they want to feed back to the decision makers. This feedback process can be similarly hampered by problems such as personal interest, organizational self-preservation, fear of negative performance evaluation, etc. The feedback process is an integral part of foreign policy, but it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore it deeper. It is, however, a possible area for further research.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to show how foreign policy, implementation and feedback are mainly unscientific and at times irrational. The psychological and bureaucratic political approaches were used to accentuate significant factors that the RAM does not consider.

I used the US as a case study and brought up several cases where foreign policy decisions were made and implemented based not on scientific or rational reasons but rather on political, personal and organizational-centric reasons. The roles of inter- and intra- bureaucratic politics were emphasized to display how important such inter/intra subtleties are in foreign policy – the bargaining, contestations and negotiations that take place are hugely important

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

Written by Dylan Loh

to decision-making processes. I also demonstrated how bureaucracies can make implementation problematic. Putting all these various factors together, it points to a very messy, unscientific, and, at times, irrational way to make and implement foreign policy.

What, then, of the role of science and rationality in foreign policy? Should we throw out empirical methodologies, like the RAM, in coming up with policies and in the way we implement them?

I would submit that, knowing what we know about foreign policy and implementation, we should involve even more 'science', not less. This is because, more often than not (as shown in the examples provided), when unscientific or irrational deliberations become part of the process, suboptimal decisions are made.

But this does not mean that we should eradicate all unscientific activities in the decision-making and implementation processes, mainly because it would be impossible to do so. Furthermore, some of these processes – moral reasoning for example – can contribute to a better decision-making framework. For example, if morality were given consideration in planners' minds during the Iraq war in 2003, perhaps it would not have turned out so disastrously.

And although the RAM is imperfect, this does not mean that it should be abandoned. It is still the most accessible, methodical and comprehensive system for policy. But a reconfiguration of the RAM is needed – a synthesis of the 'traditional' RAM with elements from non-RAM approaches.

To that end, I propose the following:

First, we need policy makers and implementers to acknowledge that the RAM process is flawed and recognise some of the limitations of the RAM.

Second, the decision-making process should be 'liberated'. It should involve more stakeholders and third-party actors (other than related actors) in the process. Having more 'neutrals' can bring more objective voices, untie the problem of narrow bureaucratic interests overwhelming national interests, and possibly create tighter implementation.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, 'good' elements from non-RAM approaches should be incorporated into the RAM. For instance, a step such as "evaluate and debate the moral rightness of each alternative" could be added into the process.

4.1 Areas for Further Research

What I have mentioned above are cursory proposals from limited research. A more in-depth look into the other approaches and how they can contribute meaningfully and practically to foreign policy is required.

My essay has primarily used the US as the country of research. This US- (and to an extent, western-centric) approach dominates existing literature on foreign policy decision and implementations. There is a dearth of research on non-western countries and their foreign policy decision-making and implementation processes. Therefore, research can and should be carried out into other countries, especially undemocratic regimes and authoritarian regimes, so as to map out their decision-making and implementation processes to investigate whether the deficiencies in the RAM that are present in the democratic US plague them as well.

Next, I have identified policy feedback as an essential component to the foreign policy decision process. Since it is outside of the scope of this essay to give it a fuller elucidation, a deeper inquiry into the feedback process is called for. It can potentially provide more tools and insights into bettering decision-making and implementation processes.

Finally, a thorough research into the pre-decision-making stage is warranted. How foreign policy goals are identified and prioritized; how foreign policy problems are framed and by whom; and what communication process/channels involved are some important questions that can be answered. Having knowledge of these 'pre-decision' processes would be immensely advantageous in the reconfiguration of the RAM or in creating new approaches to decision-

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

Written by Dylan Loh

making.

Bibliography

- Alden, C., & Aran, A. (2012). *Foreign Policy Analysis. New Approaches*. Routledge. New York, NY.
- Allison, G. (1971). *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1ed*. Little Brown.
- Axelrod, R. (1976). *Structure of Decision. The Cognitive Maps of Political elites*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bendix, R. (1977). *Max Weber: an intellectual portrait*, University of California Press: 294.
- Brighi, E., & Hill, C. (2007). *Implementation Approaches* in Smith, S., & Hadfield, A., & Dunne, T., eds, *Foreign Policy. Theories. Actors. Cases*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Clarke, M. (1989). 'The Foreign Policy System: A Framework for Analysis', in M. Clarke and B. White (eds) *Understanding Foreign Policy: The Foreign Policy Systems Approach* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar 1989), 27-59.
- Cohen, J. (2005), 'The Vulcanization of the Human Brain: A Neural Perspective on Interactions Between Cognition and Emotion', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 19: 3-24.
- Colorado State University. (2012). *Uses of Content Analysis*. Retrieved from <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/research/content/com2a2.cfm>
- Crawford, N.C. (2000). The Passion of World Politics. Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships, *International Security*, 24(4), 116-56.
- Dyson, S. B. (2009). Cognitive Style and Foreign Policy: Margaret Thatcher's Black-and-White Thinking *International Political Science Review*. 30: 33-48.
- Festinger, L. (2003) in Christopher Hill, *The changing politics of foreign policy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 114.
- Foreign Policy Association. (2011, August 8). *How US Foreign Policy Is Made*. Retrieved from http://www.fpa.org/features/index.cfm?act=feature&announcement_id=45
- George, A. (1969). 'The "Operational Code": A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decisions-Making'. *International Studies Quarterly*, 13(2), 190-222.
- Halperin H, M., & Clapp, A, C. (2006). *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*. Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press.
- Hoffmann, S. (1962). *Restraints and Choices in American Foreign Policy*. Daedalus 692-94
- Janis, I. L. (1972). *Victims of Groupthink: a Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Jervis, R. (1978). *Perception and misperception in International politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Justice Department of the United States. (2011, September 25). *The President's Constitutional Authority to Conduct Military Operations against Terrorists and Nations Supporting Them*. Retrieved from <http://www.usdoj.gov/olc/warpowers925.htm>

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

Written by Dylan Loh

Kimball, J. (2005, October 24). *Did Thomas C. Schelling Invent the Madman Theory?* Retrieved from <http://hnn.us/articles/17183.html>

Levy, J. (1994). 'Learning and foreign policy: sweeping a conceptual minefield', *International Organization*, 48/2: 279-312.

Lipsky, M., (1980). *Street-level Bureaucracy; Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Mackey, E., R. (2008). *Street-level ureaucrats and the shaping of university housing policy*. Fayetteville, Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press.

Maynard-Moody, S., & Musheno, M. (2003). *Cops, Teachers, Counselors: Stories from the Front Lines of Public Service*, University of Michigan Press.

Mercer, J. (2005), Rationality and Psychology in International Politics, *International Organization*, 59-77-106.

Miles, K. (1998). Rationality in International Relations, *International Organization*, 52.(4): 919-941.

Ochsner, N, K., & Gross, J, J. (2005). The Cognitive Control of Emotions. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*. 9(5).

Ritzer, G. (2009). *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots: The Basics*. McGraw-Hill: 32

Simon, H. (1991). Bounded Rationality and Organizational Learning. *Organization Science* 2 (1): 125-134.

Smith, S., & Hadfield, A., & Dunne, T. (2008). *Foreign Policy. Theories. Actors. Cases*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Snyder, G., & Diesing, P. (1997). *Conflict among nations: bargaining, decision making and system structure in international crises*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton university press.

Tarhar, A. (2001). International Bargaining With Two-Sided Domestic Constraints, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 45(3): 320-2.

Weber, M. (1968). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, New York, Bedminster Press.

Webber, S., & Smith, M. (2002). *Foreign policy in a transformed world*. Essex, Pearson Education.

Wolfers, A. (1962). The Actors in International Politics, in *Discord and Collaboration*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press: 3-24.

Verba, S. (1969). Assumptions of rationality and non-rationality in models of the International system', in Rosenau, j.n (ed), *international politics and foreign policy. A reader in research and theory*. New York: Free Press, 217-38.

Vertzberger, Y. (1990). *The world in their minds: information processing, cognition, and perception in foreign policy decision-making*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Volger, J. (1989). Perspective on the Foreign Policy System: Psychological Approaches', in Clarke, M. and White, B. (eds), *Understanding Foreign Policy. The Foreign Policy Systems Approach*. Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 135-62.

Zaleski, P. (2010). Ideal Types in Max Weber's Sociology of Religion: Some Theoretical Inspirations for a Study of the Religious Field, *Polish Sociological Review* No. 3(171).

Is Foreign Policy a Rational Process Devoid of Politics?

Written by Dylan Loh

[1] Weber's 'ideal type' does not refer to the 'best' type. It is 'value-free' and refers to the 'purest' or most accentuated elements of that particular phenomenon or concept. (Zaleski, 2010)

[2] I use the term 'bureaucrats' here generously. It can be used to identify any executioners of foreign policy decisions including (but not limited to) military officials, ambassadors, trade officials, etc.

—

Written by: Dylan Loh Ming Hui

Written at: Rajaratnam School of International Relations (Nanyang Technological University)

Written for: Associate Professor Alan Chong

Date written: September 2012