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Decision Makers, Personal Belief, and Foreign Policy

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IVAYLO IAYDJIEV, MAY 4 2011

Winston Churchill once famously declared that “history will be kind to me for I intend to write it”. He clearly believed in the ability of a single individual to shape his/her environment, but this question continues to be at the heart of the large debate in social sciences between determinism and voluntarism (Kauppi and Viotti, 1999:209). In the field of Foreign Policy Analysis, literature on the role of the individual, the “most micro of all explanatory levels” (Hudson 2007:22), has been growing since the end of the Cold War, when structural constraints lost some of their explanatory power (Carlsnaes, 2008:94). Most scholars, however, continue to employ “the analogy between nations in international politics and a coordinated intelligent human being”, which, as Allison warns, “is so powerful that we rarely remember we are reasoning by analogy” (1971:252). This unitary actor assumption tends to overlook the personal beliefs of individual decision makers, who actually make up the foreign policy machinery. Their ideas are most likely to play a key role in the formulation of perceived options, before outside factors such as structural constraints, domestic pressures, and actual implementation shape the final outcome. Consequently, this analysis will focus on the influence of beliefs in the initial stages of decision-making – how individuals define a given problem and frame different alternatives. Thus, in order to answer to what extent the personal beliefs of individual decision makers influence foreign policy options this essay will demonstrate first why we can’t explain human decisions simply by rational choice theory due to psychological biases; then it would discuss what specific conditions increase the role of personal beliefs; and will finally explore how they actually influence the formulation of options through a discussion of various concepts such as operational code (George 1969), schemas (Larson 1994), and with specific attention to poliheuristic theory (Mintz 2004, Carlson and Dacey 2004). The ideas developed would be then illustrated with a short case study of George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

Do Beliefs Influence Options? – Rational Choice, Psychological Biases, and the Foreign Policy Environment

It is “the leading decision paradigm” that individuals make decisions by rational choice calculations (Mintz 2004:3). For example, Allison in his classic “Essence of Decision” first discusses the “rational actor model” (1971:10-40), which postulates that foreign policy behaviour is a result of “purposive choices of consistent actors”, who offer “calculated solution to a strategic problem” (Allison 1971:11, 13). The decision making process, therefore, involves specifying goals, researching alternatives, establishing consequences, and making a value-maximizing choice based on subjective expected utility (Allison 1971:29-35, Simon 1983:12-17). If foreign policy actors conformed to this theory in practice, personal beliefs would not influence significantly foreign policy options.

However, there’s overwhelming evidence that decision makers rarely operate according to the rational choice model due to its high expectations, limited human capabilities, and the specific characteristics of the international environment. Allison himself proposes that we treat the model only as one part of a wider framework, which includes the role of the individual in formulating goals, perceiving alternatives, and ways of estimating end-means relationships (1971:37-38). Strein points further that it treats preferences as exogenous to the decision making process and does not “explain the beliefs and expectations which *lead* to choice, and therefore [...] leave out most of what is important in explaining foreign policy” (Strein 2008:103). Simon even calls it an “Olympian model”, because it assumes perfect order, no conflicts, complete knowledge and precise probability estimations, while human beings generally lack the facts, the consistency of values, and the reasoning abilities to apply it (1983:14,17).

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The human brain, due to its limitations, is also affected by psychological biases. In particular, people use heuristic 'shortcuts' to make simple judgments when faced with limited data, but sometimes these may lead to inaccurate generalizations, selective recalling of events, and poor estimations (Kahneman and Tversky 1982:4-18). Furthermore, people tend to build simple frames for understanding complex situations, to overlook contradicting information in order to preserve their beliefs, to emphasise causal relationships over probability, to make fundamental errors in attributing purposeful behaviour to others, and to be heavily influenced by whether decisions are framed as gains or losses (Strein 2008:104-109). Foreign policy decision makers also tend to be elderly, and consequently overconfident and averse to ambiguity. The presence of others, social roles, emergencies and the stakes in the particular situation further interfere with the decision making process (Hudson 2007: 47-50). Moreover, research has highlighted the crucial role of emotion in setting the agenda by focusing our attention (Simon 1983:29-30), by influencing satisfaction from decisions and firmness of beliefs (Hudson 2007:45-47), and in acting as an alternative mechanism of taking decisions (Strein 2008:109-113). These shortcomings seriously undermine human ability to follow a perfect rational choice model, which in turn suggests that personal beliefs are likely to affect choices.

Beliefs, however, are likely to influence foreign policy professionals in particular due to their specific operating environment. Usually, they have received relevant education and have broad knowledge or experience, which allows them to process information faster (Simon 1983:29), to use sophisticated analogies (Dyson and Preston 2006), and to draw on numerous sources of information (Hermann 1980:14). However, they still need to employ 'filters' as perception provides people with much more data than human brains can process consciously (Hudson 2007:40). Additionally, diplomats and experts have to deal with incomplete information and operate in a highly complex and interrelated environment, where ambiguous situations with uncertain consequences are commonplace. Finally, deadlines and chronic high stress further reduce tolerance for ambiguity and complexity, restrict the search for solutions, and increase the use of stereotypes (Holsti 1979:105-109). In this environment, beliefs present a "mental model" (Hudson 2007:51) and "help to order the world" (Keohane and Goldstein, 1993:12).

In short, beliefs matter due to three reasons. First, rational choice alone cannot explain actual human behaviour. Second, psychological biases and human limitations interfere in the process. Third, experts operate in a particular foreign policy environment, which increases the role of personal characteristics and beliefs.

When Do Beliefs Influence Foreign Policy Options? – External Conditions When Beliefs Matter

While beliefs do matter, the extent to which they influence foreign policy options is likely to vary from case to case; furthermore, they are just one of a number of variables in the decision making process. The essay will now examine under what conditions beliefs can be expected to play a significant role.

Some, as Allison, give personal beliefs relatively little influence. He acknowledges they might play some role in the way actors determine their goals or interpret their positions (1971:37,166), but generally presents various structural constraints as more important[1]. Others, however, argued that it is crucial to understand how these constraints are perceived and what "baggage" the actors themselves bring to this interpretation, especially in the case of satisfying domestic constituencies (Hermann 2001:90, Farnham 2004). Furthermore, some institutional arrangements, such as the hierarchical foreign policy machineries found in presidential systems[2], monarchies, or dictatorships, concentrate decision making in the hands of a "predominant leader" (Hermann 2001:84). Additionally, Janis has identified that decisions made by highly cohesive groups might be influenced negatively by social pressures to conform to certain norms (1982). Finally, crisis situations require fast action and thus reduce the time to search for solutions and the influence of usual constraints, thus encouraging the individual decision maker to take decisions according to already present predispositions and beliefs (Hermann 2001:85-86, Holsti 1979). Hudson summarised the conditions under which leaders' beliefs might matter as regime type; interest in foreign policy; crisis situations; degree of ambiguity and uncertainty; amount of diplomatic training; expertise in particular issue or area; leadership style; and group interaction (2007:38-40).

The personal characteristics of leaders also affect how far their beliefs influence foreign policy options. Thus, even if somebody occupies a leading office, their beliefs are unlikely to play a key role unless he/she actually exercises authority (Hermann 2001:85). Additionally, goal-driven leaders are more likely to initiate action according to their

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beliefs rather than just to respond to contextual cues (Hermann 2001:87-94). Furthermore, little training and low general interest in foreign affairs generally leave decision makers with “little to tap but their predispositions” (Hermann 1980:43) and promote the use of simple analogies to frame situations (Dyson 2006).

It is important, however, to also recognise that beliefs are “important, but not the only, variable that shapes decision-making behaviour” (George 1969:191) and therefore no simple causal connection should be assumed (Keohane and Goldstein 1993:11). In addition, their importance varies between particular issues and between different stages of the decision making process (Jervis 1976:16-17).

How Do Beliefs Influence Foreign Policy Options? – Ways of Organising Beliefs and Poliheurstic Theory

Even though there is a general consensus over the broad definition of what beliefs are – fundamental consciously held assumptions about how the world is structured and how it operates, there is much debate on how people actually relate to them. One of the classic conceptualisations is Alexander George’s operational code belief system, which contains both general philosophical beliefs about the nature of politics, conflict, history, etc., and instrumental beliefs about causal relationships and strategies of achieving objectives (1969). This approach highlights the importance of the ‘image of the opponent’ and suggests that beliefs are a way of defining the situation and picking a strategy, perceived as suitable. Keohane and Goldstein have identified three types of beliefs – causal beliefs, which suggest actual strategies; principled beliefs, which give a normative dimension to actions; and worldviews, which provide a large framework of meaning (1993:8-10). Larson, however, argues that the wider concept of schemas should be used because it includes not only the abstract knowledge of beliefs, but also specific cases and ways in which all this knowledge is actually accessed and used by humans (1994). Finally, from a postmodernist perspective, Larsen focuses on wider discourse and the way in which it frames situations, shapes institutions, and avoids the limitations of the positivist treatment of beliefs and language (1997). This approach, however, treats beliefs as a structural factor inasmuch as individual leaders need to present situations in a way, which resonates with the cultural beliefs of their respective nations, and does not consider the personal beliefs of decision makers (Hudson 1999:769).

Furthermore, it is important to establish exactly how beliefs influence the formulation of foreign policy options. Poliheurstic theory postulates a two-stage decision process – first some alternatives are eliminated by heuristic devices, then the remaining ones are considered in a rational manner according to their subjective estimated utility (Mintz 2004:3-4). It is in the first stage where beliefs exert influence by ‘filtering’ which foreign policy options are worthy of further discussion and which are eliminated. Furthermore, poliheurstic theory has five main characteristics due to which beliefs are likely to play an important role. First, it involves a nonholistic search among a restricted set of alternatives, which means that the options which particular beliefs favour have bigger chance to be retained. Second, it is dimension-based, which suggests that values have important influence on which dimensions are considered crucial. Third, it is noncompensatory, which would indicate a limited role for how constraints are perceived by leaders, as well as whether leaders tend to challenge or obey constraints. Fourth, it is also satisficing, or looking for a “good enough” rather than optimal solution, which again is judged according to personal beliefs. Finally, it is order sensitive, which suggests that beliefs might have a significant role in proposing certain options first and obscuring other nonobvious alternatives (Carlson and Dacey, 2004:40-41). Thus, in short, the process of simplifying a complex situation and narrowing down the variables so that human beings can deal with them within their “bounded rationality” (Simon 1983:85) seems to involve heavily the use of beliefs as principle guidance in framing the available options.

Case Study: The Role of George W. Bush’s Personal Beliefs in the Decision to Invade Iraq

This case study seeks to give empiric evidence for the theoretical discussion presented so far. It has been chosen due to importance generally accorded to neoconservative ideas and to Bush’s personal beliefs in launching the war. Nevertheless, there are some significant difficulties in analysing this decision related to its continuing high salience and emotional impact, the lack of official primary sources, and the difficulty in establishing whether Bush used neoconservative ideas instrumentally or whether he personally held these convictions – a general methodological problem when approaching politicians who present a certain image to their constituencies. Additionally, while ideas had an important role in framing options, the subsequent outcome and implementation were also shaped by many

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other variables. This short discussion will first attempt to sketch the personal beliefs of George W. Bush and the neoconservatives before then attempting to see how they influenced perception of foreign policy options.

There are several important factors in Bush's background which are likely to have contributed to his decision. First, one unknown but potentially crucial variable is his relationship with his father, which might have influenced what lessons he drew from the First Gulf War (Lobe 2010). Some have even suggested Iraq was at the top of Bush's agenda even before September 11 (O'Neill, quoted in Leung 2004). Second, Bush's religious background might have encouraged a Manichean view of the world, which is certainly present in his rhetoric portraying U.S. and "coalition of the willing" facing an "axis of evil". Moreover, Saddam Hussein was dehumanized and portrayed as irrational and unpredictable, which in turn already rules out rational containment as a foreign policy option at the first stage of poliheuristic decision making. Third, September 11 left a deep imprint on his presidency and led Bush to tell his *confidant* Rove "I'm here for a reason" (quoted in Genovese 2004:144). This dramatic event might have reinforced certain previously demonstrated tendencies, such as a preference for unilateralism and distrust of international organizations, already manifest in Kyoto (Singh 2006:20). Additionally, Bush seems to fit extremely well in what Hermann identifies as a "crusader" personality (2001:96). Thus, these beliefs already influence foreign policy options by pushing forward military intervention as the only sure way to deal with Saddam Hussein, rather than the use of sanctions, containment or UN intervention.

The influence of personal beliefs and of neoconservative ideas can be also observed in the actual decision making process. Structural conditions were also conducive to the influence of ideas – the US were in the aftermath of a major crisis situation, when threats were exaggerated by the "one-percent doctrine" and the doctrine of pre-emptive war (Khong 2004:261); there were numerous ambiguities surrounding Iraq's nuclear programme and the behaviour of Saddam Hussein; and the American hierarchical system concentrated top level foreign policy making in the hands of the President. Furthermore, Bush himself had little experience, training, and, it appears, little interest in foreign policy in general (although his previous experience with Iraq suggests that he had a particular interest in that area), initially advocating a "humble" foreign policy during his election campaign. These factors meant that Bush assumed the position of a "predominant leader", who had little to guide him in foreign policy apart from his own belief schemas. Thus, neoconservative ideas, build around four pillars – moral clarity in foreign policy; preserving the military supremacy of the US; willingness to use military power to achieve goals; and distrust of international institutions – could provide an ideological justification for the "slaying of the Iraqi monster" (Homolar-Riechmann 2009:183-188, Khong 2004:256-258). Given these philosophical and instrumental beliefs, military invasion was left as the most plausible option.

Several more instances of specific influence of beliefs in the first stages of the policy making process can be observed. First, Bush may have had long term belief in Saddam's hostility, i.e. to have operated under an inherent bad faith model, which prevents people from updating their mental models in accordance with new information (Strein 2008:106). Second, Bush seemed convinced that he was operating out of necessity and that Saddam could easily stop nuclear production if he wanted, which is known as a fundamental attribution error (Hudson 2007:51). Third, contradictory information was easily absorbed in and interpreted by the pre-existing ideological beliefs about what Saddam was doing and supporting information, such as the unconfirmed reports about the purchase of high-strength aluminium tubes, was easily taken without being verified, which is a result of human desire for consistency (Strein 2008:105).

Conclusion

This essay demonstrated that beliefs do matter in foreign policy as decision making rarely conforms to demanding rational choice models and examined the conditions and the way in which they shape perceived options. Thus, based on evidence from substantial research, the power of ideas in international relations was illustrated, highlighting in particular human weaknesses, which might help understand a number of seemingly inexplicable decisions. Beliefs, however, are only one part of a wider framework, including other individual, state and system-level factors. Nevertheless, as international relations are fundamentally human relations between people in different states and organisations, understanding the individual decision maker is necessary for understanding foreign policy as a whole.

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[1] Allison is more interested in how bureaucracies frame the emerging issues and in how fixed operational outputs impose tight constraints, as well as in the rigid requirements and priorities of particular offices (1971:72-100, 153-184).

[2] It is notable that most of the leading scholarship on foreign policy tends to either come from or draw examples extensively from the United States, where top level decision making is relatively concentrated in few individuals but is also transparent and responsive to structural constraints at different levels.

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