

PERCEPTIONS
JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

December 2001- February 2002 / Vol. - VI Num.4

HOW TO STUDY FOREIGN POLITICS: SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINTS vs. DOMESTIC POLITICS and DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURE

BİNNUR ÖZKEÇECİ-TANER

Binnur Özkeçeci Taner is a PhD candidate at the Department of Political Science, Maxwell School, Syracuse University.

INTRODUCTION

How are foreign policies made? Who makes foreign policies and implements them? How does international or domestic structure influence foreign policymaking? Do preferences of leaders influence foreign policy decisions more than other factors? If yes, to what extent? These are important questions and one can find as many different answers to these questions as the number of people in the field. While some have argued that the systemic factors constrain or facilitate the behaviour of a government, others have maintained that domestic structure frames how a government is going to act in foreign policy matters. Still others have made the claim that leadership 'matters' in foreign policymaking and a leader's orientation suggests how he or she is going to handle his or her state's foreign policies, regardless of constraints systemic or domestic structures present. The aim of this paper, which is mainly concerned with the problems of systemic-structural analysis of foreign policymaking, is to make a case that domestic factors and decision-making structures should not only be taken into consideration in foreign policy analysis but they should be given a primary place in the literature.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical debate in international relations and foreign policy analysis used to be dominated by the structural-systemic perspective. Domestic factors and decision-making processes and effects of different decision units were given secondary importance in explaining foreign policy behaviour, if they were not totally ignored. However, this situation has been changing for several decades. Critical works by international relations and foreign policy scholars have all shown the importance of domestic factors and decision-making processes and structures in foreign policy analysis.¹

Hans Morgenthau emphasised that national interest "defined in terms of power" determines the behaviour of states.² He was quickly followed by other realists.³ Realists assume that all governments, whether democratic or authoritarian, big or small, developed or underdeveloped, pursue such national interests in an international environment that represents anarchy, where there is no overarching central authority. For them, the Hobbesian type of international anarchy is the underlying cause of war. The presence of anarchy reveals why states find it rational to be prepared at all times to fight. Since security seems scarce, states try to achieve it by maximising their relative advantage vis-à-vis other states and, by pursuing security, they are prone to take actions that can lead

to conflict with others, “which they usually do.”⁴

Although Waltz himself explicitly states that “no single image is ever adequate” in the analysis of international relations (1979, p. 225), for realist scholars the uncertainty created by the anarchical international environment and the resulting constant power rivalry, shows why the system-level, or what Waltz calls the “third-image,” is the most important level in explaining foreign policy decisions. To understand why a state is behaving in a particular way, realists suggest, one should examine its relative capabilities and its external environment, balance of power system and alliances it may have, because those factors will be translated relatively smoothly into foreign policy behaviour and shape how the state chooses to advance its interests. The realist argument concludes that since the foreign policy objectives of each state is apparently guided by a single set of values, preferences and objectives, which speak with one voice that is consistent with the national interest, domestic factors and decision-units do not make a significant difference. After all, the international system ultimately determines the behaviour of states.

Most scholars in the liberal school of thought have never been quite comfortable with the levels-of-analysis distinction, as the realists have. Liberals have included in their explanations domestic variables, i.e. regime structure, role of interest groups, bureaucracies, political parties and decision-making processes. However, the assumption of a state as a unified actor that tries to maximise national interest still holds for the neo-liberal institutionalist strand of the liberal school. This strand of liberalism, which is usually referred to as modified structural realism or, simply, institutionalism, has, in fact, conceded the importance of systemic constraints. According to this approach, regimes and institutions actually change domestic actors’ self-interests so that co-operation is the best means to serve those interests and the co-operative process itself is reaffirmed.⁵ In short, neo-liberal institutionalists assume that interdependent co-operation results from changed conceptions of national interest. Therefore, like realism, this school of thought takes state preferences as fixed and exogenous and seeks to explain state policy as a function of variation in the geopolitical environment by focusing on the ways in which anarchy leads to sub-optimal outcomes. Such an argument logically implies that systemic processes are the real causes for state behaviour, assuming domestic variables and decision-making processes are highly malleable in the presence of systemic constraints or opportunities.

However, these systemic approaches to foreign policy analysis have problems. A theory of foreign policy limited to systemic factors alone is bound at best, to be incomplete and, at worst, inaccurate much of the time. Thus, they by themselves cannot be very helpful and need to be complemented by other levels-of-analyses. Although the systemic-structural perspective seems parsimonious and persuasive at first, it underestimates the complexity of foreign policymaking and implementation. The systemic perspective even falls short of explaining fully the foreign policy differences between states having the same or very similar systemic position, which turns the systemic approach to foreign policy on its head. The dissimilarities of foreign policy behaviour of states in similar systemic positions suggest that foreign policymaking of a country is heavily influenced by factors other than systemic variables.

Countries differ in size, development and political regime.⁶ They also vary in their political institutionalisation and political and societal structures,⁷ in military and economic capabilities,⁸ in the ways political discourses shape public and foreign policy,⁹ in their political and strategic cultures¹⁰ and in foreign policy decision-making units.¹¹ These differences have direct effects on

foreign policymaking.

Some scholars who argue that domestic structure matters have maintained the presence of domestic opposition and regime structures very much influence and shape foreign policy decisions. According to these scholars, domestic opposition and regime can diminish or amplify the behaviour a government might be predisposed to engage in were we to assume a unitary rational actor approach to foreign policymaking. The effect of domestic opposition or regime structure can influence foreign policymaking in three ways: first, the presence of domestic opposition might predispose political leaderships to take greater risks or overextend the state's power with excessive commitments in order to divert attention from disturbing domestic issues and retain power. Second, the presence of a viable opposition might prevent a leadership from taking unnecessary risks and getting involved in war. Third, a domestic opposition's influence might be insulated from any foreign policymaking, having no influence at all in decision-making. In short, the games that the political leadership plays with the opposition in the domestic arena have subtle but "widespread and non-aberrant" impact on foreign policy behaviour.¹²

The role of domestic political influences coming from political parties, interest groups and civil society organisations can be illustrated by negotiations. Robert Putnam, in his *Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: the Logic of Two-Level Games* (1988), discusses in detail how international negotiations resemble a "two-level game", where the chief negotiator, usually the head of government, must interact with and solve problems in two arenas: "acceptable deals with the international partners, and ratification of any deal within the relevant domestic institutions."¹³ In this two-level game, the chief negotiator has no priority because both the international and the domestic levels are equally important to him or her. In addition to the constraints at the international level, the negotiator is also constrained at the national level by his or her domestic constituencies, who pursue their own interests for favourable policies. Domestic constraints on the chief negotiator can even lead to the halt of negotiations, as was the case in the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. This understanding of international negotiations as a two-level game is important because it captures the essential elements of the foreign policymaking process by suggesting that domestic politics affects the extent and the ability of a head of government to respond to constraints at the international level.

The regime structure of a given country is also an important factor in shaping foreign policy calculations. Democratic peace theorists have suggested, for example, that democratic regimes do not choose to go to war with one another due to structural-institutional constraints or shared cultural democratic norms.¹⁴ The presence of constitutional checks and balances and the presence of civil society in democratic regimes as institutional constraints or shared democratic norms tie the hands of decision-makers and prevent the political leadership from taking drastic measures against an adversary.

Other societal factors, such as historical legacies long-standing enmities, political culture and national attributes of a given country, have impact on foreign policymaking by influencing how decision-makers define foreign policy goals and perceive their external environments. The fact that societal factors influence foreign policy making goes to the heart of the systemic approach's emphasis on states as rational unitary actors. It is true that cost-benefit analysis is an important part of any foreign policy decision-making process, however, how those more objective systemic and domestic factors, which provide the environment that foreign policymakers have to operate in are

perceived and framed, or in other words filtered by the decision-makers, are even more important. In fact, how the “operational environment”, that consists of external systems —global, subordinate, subordinate other, bilateral, dominant bilateral system— and internal factors —economic capability, military capability, political structure, interest groups, competition within the elite— that exist outside the decision-makers’ minds, is filtered through the perceptions of the decision-maker and has considerable influence on war and peace decisions.¹⁵ How international changes are perceived at the level of leadership affects the foreign policymaking in a given country. Simple or major changes in the power structure in an international system might result in a “perception of vulnerability and an uncertain environment”, which can cause a government elite to be either overly competitive or co-operative in their zones of influence.¹⁶ The interpretation of economic and military capabilities by the leaders and how they frame the issues, therefore, is of great importance in any foreign policy analysis. Furthermore, how this perception of vulnerability is communicated to the public to garner support and how the mass attitude is changed to create a new strategic culture determines whether a country will act in a more competitive or co-operative way in its foreign affairs.

The role of perceptions further suggests that different decision-units might have a diverse impact on foreign policymaking.¹⁷ Typically, there are three distinct types of ultimate decision-units having the sole authority to commit the resources of the government whose decisions are irreversible: a predominant leader, a single group or a coalition of multiple groups, each of which has specific implications for foreign policymaking.¹⁸

If the ultimate decision-making unit is a predominant leader, whether that person is responsive to constraints, open to information, problem- or relationship-focused greatly affects his or her foreign policy decisions. While an expansionist dominant leader, like Saddam Hussein or Muammar Qadhafi, who challenges constraints (high need for power and high belief in power to control events), is closed to information (high self-confidence and low conceptual complexity) and problem focused (high task focus and high distrust of others), can easily be prone to make expansionist foreign policy decisions. A collegial leader, who respects constraints (low need for power or a low belief in power to control events), is open to information (high or low self-confidence and high conceptual complexity) and relationship focused with a low distrust of others, will be more conciliatory and nurturing in foreign policy issues. This distinction between leadership styles, therefore, is very important, given the fact that leadership matters.¹⁹

If, however, the ultimate decision-unit is a single group, which can either consist of representatives of different bureaucracies in countries like the US or a single-dominant group as is usually seen in juntas, or a coalition of multiple groups, an understanding of group dynamics is an important component of foreign policymaking analysis. Since the decisions taken by single groups depend on whether they are open to incoming information or they are mainly driven by strong internal loyalty leading to ‘group think’, which in turn may result in overly competitive foreign policy behaviour.²⁰ Similarly, it is equally important to know whether there are well established decision rules or the decisions are mainly given in an environment dominated by extreme internal competition, leading to deadlock in foreign policymaking, when the ultimate decision-unit is a coalition of multiple units. The presence of a pivotal actor, who has a certain view on the issue at stake, can have an impact on war and peace decisions, e.g., Turkey’s Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit, who acted as a pivotal actor in deciding to intervene in Cyprus in 1974.

Given all these, where should the field stand? An effort has been made above to show that the systemic approach to foreign policymaking is incomplete and often misleading. This paper has

argued that domestic factors have considerable explanatory power in foreign policymaking. The argument, however, should not be understood as suggesting that systemic variables should be abandoned completely. Systemic variables are important because they provide the researcher with the minimal information about the foreign policy behaviour of a given country. However, systemic constraints and opportunities can best be understood when looked at from the perspective of the actors.²¹ This modified version of the systemic perspective has, in fact, been suggested by Hudson, Hermann and Snyder (1989), who called their model the “situational imperative.”²² ‘Situational imperative’ is defined as the relationship at a given point in time and space between two or more international actors who assume certain roles with respect to a foreign policy issue. A foreign policy analysis, in order to be complete, should take this situational imperative as a baseline, into which domestic variables and decision-units should be incorporated as to provide a comprehensive framework. In this way, the researcher not only would be able to avoid essentialising any of the level-of-analysis in foreign policymaking but he or she could also be more capable of evaluating how domestic politics and decision-units can amplify or diminish the behaviour a government might be predisposed to engage in were we to assume a unitary rational actor approach to foreign policymaking.

1 Brecher, Michael, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1972; Caporaso, James A., ‘Across the Great Divide: Integrating Comparative and International Politics’, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 41, pp. 563-592, 1997; Dassel, Kurt, ‘Civilian, Soldiers and Strife’, *International Security*, Vol. 23, 1998, pp. 107-140; Duffield, John S., ‘Political Culture and State Behaviour: Why Germany Confounds Neorealism’, *International Organization*, Vol. 53, 1999, pp. 765-803; Hagan, Joe D., ‘Domestic Political Explanations in the Analysis of Foreign Policy’, in Neack, Laura, Hey, Jeanne A.K. and Haney, Patrick J. (eds.), *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1995; Hermann, Gunther, ‘Goodbye Bismarck? The Foreign Policy of Contemporary Germany’, *Mershon International Studies Review* Vol. 40, 1996, pp. 1-39; Hermann Margaret G. and Hermann, Charles F., ‘Who Makes Foreign Policy Decisions and How: an Empirical Inquiry’, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, 1989, pp. 361-387; Hermann Margaret G. and Hagan, Joe D., ‘International Decision-Making: Leadership Matters’, *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 10, 1998, pp. 124-137; Hermann, Margaret G. and Kegley, Charles W., ‘Rethinking Democracy and International Peace: Perspectives from Political Psychology’, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39, 1995, pp. 511-533; Kaarbo, Juliet, ‘Power and Influence in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: the Role of Junior Coalition Partners in Germany and Israeli Foreign Policy’, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, 1996, pp. 510-530; Kaarbo, Juliet and Hermann, Margaret G., ‘Leadership Styles of Prime Ministers: How Do Individual Differences Affect the Foreign Policymaking Process’, *Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 9, 1998, pp. 243-263; Kupchan, Charles A., *The Vulnerability of Empire*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1994; Putnam, Robert, ‘Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: the Logic of Two-Level Games’, *International Organization*, Vol. 42, 1988, pp. 427-460; Sikkink, Kathryn, ‘Transnational Advocacy Networks, Human Rights and Democracy in Latin America’, paper presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, San Francisco, CA, 29 August-1 September 1996; Stern, Eric K., ‘Crisis Decision-Making: a Cognitive-Institutional Approach’, *University of Stockholm Studies in Politics*, Vol. 66, 1999.

- 2 Morgenthau, Hans, *Politics Among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace*, sixth edition, 1985, revised by Kenneth Thompson, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
 - 3 Kaplan, Morton. A., *System and Process in International Politics*, New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1957; Waltz, Kenneth N., *Man, the State and War*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1979; Gilpin, Robert, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
 - 4 Mearsheimer, John J., 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War', *International Security*, Vol. 15, 1990.
 - 5 Keohane, Robert O., *After Hegemony*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.
 - 6 Rosenau, James N., *The Scientific Study of Foreign Policy*, New York: Free Press, 1971; Doyle, Michael W., 'Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs', 1986 in Brown, Michael E., Lynn-Jones, Sean M. and Miller, Steven E. (eds.), *Debating the Democratic Peace*, MIT Press, 1997; Russett, Bruce, *The Fact of Democratic Peace*, *ibid.*, 1993.
 - 7 Hagan, 1995.
 - 8 Brecher, 1972; Dassell, 1998.
 - 9 Hellman, 1996.
 - 10 Duffield, 1996; Kupchan, 1994.
 - 11 Hermann & Hermann 1989; Hermann & Hagan 1998; Hermann & Kegley 1995; Kaarbo & Hermann 1996.
 - 12 Hagan, 1994, p. 125.
 - 13 Caporaso, 1997, p. 567.
 - 14 Doyle, 1986; Russett, 1993.
 - 15 Brecher, 1972.
 - 16 Kupchan, 1994.
 - 17 Kaarbo & Hermann, 1998.
 - 18 Hermann & Hermann, 1989.
 - 19 Hermann & Hagan, 1998.
 - 20 Hermann, Charles F., 'Avoiding Pathologies in Foreign Policy Decision Groups', in Caldwell, Dan and McKeown, Timothy J. (eds.), *Diplomacy, Force and Leadership: Essays in Honour of Alexander George*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993.
 - 21 Çuhadar, Esra, 'Turkish-EU Negotiations: a Two-Level Game', unpublished paper, 2001.
 - 22 Hudson, Valerie M., Hermann, Charles F. & Singer, Eric. 1989. *The Situational Imperative: A Predictive Model of Foreign Policy Behaviour*, in *Cooperation and Conflict* 24: 117-139.
-