Levels of Analysis
The Making of Foreign Policy

"The national interest," a concept that lies at the heart of the realist analysis of IR, is more productively viewed as the interests of various players—not all of which may coincide, and not all of which are coherently related to anything resembling an objective national interest.¹

—Valerie Hudson, 1995

The state has purposes of its own. The national interest does have empirical reality if it is defined as a consistent set of objectives sought by central decision-makers.²

—Stephen D. Krasner, 1978

In most discussions of international relations and world politics, including in the pages of this book, the tendency is to talk about the behaviors, policies, and interests of states as individual actors. Language such as "the United States did this" or "China did that" is commonplace. For many scholars, such language is convenient shorthand for the more complex and often invisible process of formulating a state's foreign policy. But it can be, as Valerie Hudson suggests, a gross oversimplification that disguises the way the world works, falsely conferring a coherence in policy and interest onto a state's behavior.

For realists such as Stephen Krasner, however, such language is neither misleading nor mere shorthand. In their view, it indeed represents the way the world works: that is, states are unitary actors in world politics with interests that transcend those of domestic individuals and groups. Thus, it does have meaning to say that Chinese interests are X or that U.S. policy is Y. Whatever "special interests" individuals and groups
within a society might seek to promote, from the realist perspective, a set of core state interests remain, and those who formulate foreign policy must and do pursue them.

This chapter will look more closely at the sources of state behavior in international relations and world politics. Specifically, the chapter poses two large questions: (1) What are the key factors or inputs that shape the foreign policies of individual states, and (2) how do key foreign policy decision-makers process those inputs into state policy?

THE SOURCES OF STATE BEHAVIOR

Why did the United States invade Iraq in March 2003? Ask a dozen people that question and you may receive a dozen answers. A short list of possibilities might include: combating international terrorism, stopping nuclear proliferation, preserving the balance of power, George W. Bush’s religious views, the influence of neoconservative ideology, the Israeli lobby, U.S. electoral politics, oil, Vice President Dick Cheney’s ideology, or the influence of the U.S. military industrial complex. Although one might not accept all these answers as equally useful in understanding and explaining U.S. policy, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Several of these answers might even be combined to get a full picture of the sources of U.S. policy.

A useful way to think about the multitude of factors that shape a foreign policy decision such as the Iraq invasion is to categorize them at different levels of analysis. The concept of levels of analysis owes much to Kenneth Waltz’s classic 1959 book *Man, the State, and War.* Rather than asking about the origins of a specific war, Waltz asks the bigger question of why war, in general, is such a frequent event in international relations, and he proposes three possible answers, or “images” of international relations. The first image, the individual level of analysis, attempts to explain war as a result of characteristics that are inherent in human nature. The second image, the state or domestic level, focuses on characteristics of states. The third image, the international system level of analysis, incorporates all those explanations of war that lie in characteristics of the international system as a whole.

Ever since the publication of Waltz’s book, scholars have spent much time debating whether the big events that make up the daily international relations headlines (wars, arms races, treaties, etc.) are best understood as a reflection of the beliefs and personalities of individual decision-makers, the attributes of the individual states that engage in such behaviors, the characteristics of the international system as a whole, or some combination of all of the above. Applied to the 2003 Iraq War, the question is whether the U.S. invasion is best explained by reference to the personalities and world-views of key decision-makers like Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld (individual level), as a result of some specific attributes of the United States such as the power of the Israel lobby or an American belief in the need to promote democracy (state level), or as a consequence of the Middle Eastern balance of power (international system level). Let’s look more closely at each of the three levels of analysis, beginning with the international system level.
The International System Level of Analysis

Waltz's third image of international relations places the roots of state behavior in the overall structure and characteristics of the international system. Structural realists (neorealists), including Waltz himself who is generally regarded as the father of contemporary structural realism, emphasize the international system as the most important source of state behavior. They assume that a state's foreign policy can be understood and even predicted without reference to the internal characteristics of that state. All one needs to know to understand state behavior is the nature of the larger international system within which individual states operate.

For a structural realist there are two primary characteristics of the international system that shape state behavior. Most fundamental is international anarchy. As discussed in Chapter 1, anarchy mandates a number of state behaviors, including the acquisition of military power and other forms of self-help. However, while anarchy, for realists, is a constant, there is another important characteristic of the international system that is continually in flux, and that is the distribution of power. Depending on how power is distributed in the system as a whole, individual state behavior will vary accordingly. For example, in a bipolar system like that of the Cold War era, the two major poles will be unavoidably wary of one another and have an adversarial relationship regardless of internal regime type or leadership. But if your state is one of the three main powers in a tripolar system (three dominant states), your key objective is to make sure you are not the "odd man out" in an alliance of the other two major poles. Again, the internal characteristic of the three main states is less important than the overriding systemic logic.

A good illustration of the changing impact of the international system on the behavior of states is the lessening of tensions (détente) that characterized both U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-Chinese relations in the early 1970s. As noted in Chapter 2, U.S. President Richard Nixon established normal diplomatic relations with Communist China for the first time since the 1949 Communist seizure of power on the Chinese mainland, while simultaneously negotiating arms control agreements and expanding trade with Moscow. That Richard Nixon—a man who cut his political teeth preaching an uncompromising form of anti-Communism back in the 1950s—would be the man responsible for the openings to both Beijing and Moscow might be surprising unless one takes into account the evolving international system. By the 1970s China was a nuclear power and, though still much weaker than either the United States or USSR, some sensed an emerging tripolar system. In that changing international system context, Nixon was engaged in a predictable strategy designed to play off the other two poles against one another. Indeed, Moscow and Beijing were likely engaged in a similar strategy.

This attempt to understand individual state behavior as a function of characteristics of the international system as a whole is sometimes referred to as the billiard ball model of international relations. Think of the table on which a game of billiards is played as providing the basic structure for the game. The size of the table, the number of pockets, and the quality of the felt on the tabletop provide a common setting within which all the individual balls move. How those balls move has little to do with the inner qualities of the balls (they are all the same...
inside). Once someone takes a shot, what matters are the table and the interactions of the balls as they collide with one another. In international relations, the billiard ball model assumes that the structure of the international system (the common table) and the external interactions of states (the billiard balls) tell the whole story.

Implicit in international system level analysis and the billiard ball model is an assumption that states have interests that transcend the special interests of the individuals and groups that exist within the state borders. At the most general level, these state interests, more commonly referred to as the national interest, include at a minimum: (1) the physical security of the country, its borders, and its people; (2) the economic security and prosperity of the country as a whole; and (3) the political sovereignty and independence of the state. Certainly, a state's leaders might disagree over the extent to which any one of these elements of the national interest might be in jeopardy or how best to respond to a challenge. Nevertheless, international system level analysis sees international relations and foreign policy as a continuing effort on the part of state leaders to protect and promote the national interest in light of the challenges posed by events and trends beyond state borders.

While the international system level of analysis tends to be most closely associated with the structural realist paradigm, scholars working within competing paradigms also sometimes stress systemic sources of state behavior. However, the specific systemic characteristics that they emphasize will differ from those stressed by realists. For liberals, the key systemic variables will be less international anarchy or the distribution of power among sovereign states than the existence of international institutions or the degree of economic interdependence that binds states to one another. In place of the realist billiard ball model, some scholars posit a "cobweb model." Whereas the former focuses entirely on the interactions of states, the latter sees world politics as a more multifaceted set of interactions across national borders involving states, individuals, and an assortment of subnational groups. For liberals, the thicker the web of ties that bind people in states together, the greater the disincentive to war and conflict among the actors in the international system.

Constructivist scholars also weigh in at the international system level. The difference between realists and constructivists employing systemic level analysis is, once again, related to the nature of the systemic variables that get stressed. While for realists the key attribute of the international system shaping state behavior is the distribution of power, for constructivists it is the prevailing global norms. The strong commitment to the norm of state sovereignty, for example, has for much of the history of international relations shaped and constrained state behavior. At the same time, constructivists would argue that such a norm is not a "given" or a "historical absolute." Instead, it is socially constructed. Thus, the challenge to absolute notions of sovereignty since World War II, specifically the emergence of the alternative idea that sovereignty can be overridden in the quest to protect human rights, created a new global norm that affects state behavior.

The attractions of systemic level analysis are its elegance and efficiency. From some basic characteristics of the international system as a whole, one is able to offer understanding and even prediction of the behavior of individual states without needing or its less requiring the lang analysis constraining variations to understand the systemic context.

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needing to know very much about the history of each state, its domestic politics, or its leaders. To understand Russian behavior in the Cold War, for example, does not require one to be a Russian expert, to have spent time in the country, or to know the language. All you need to know is something about the logic of bipolarity.

However, in the view of many international relations scholars, systemic level analysis is not enough. While it might be useful in identifying the larger systemic constraints within which individual states operate, they argue that there is great variation in how states respond to and operate within those systemic constraints. To understand that variation requires looking more closely at the unique characteristics of the individual states that make up the larger international system.

The State Level of Analysis

In the view of many scholars, the international system level tells only part of the story. For a more complete view, it must be combined with factors at the domestic or state level of analysis. To many, this seems obvious. Few analysts of the 2003 U.S. decision to go to war in Iraq would fail to at least consider such issues as domestic electoral politics, public opinion, relations between Congress and the president, or the influence of interest groups ranging from big oil to the Israel lobby. Some might argue that the idea of “democracy promotion” that formed part of the Bush administration’s case for the war has a long tradition in U.S. foreign policy and is a unique attribute of the American approach to international relations that cannot be removed from the Iraq equation. Similarly, some suggest that the tendency of the Bush administration to see the world in terms of good versus evil is also an approach that is deeply rooted in the American foreign policy tradition.

What separates all “second image” (state level) analysis from “third image” (international system level) analysis is the insistence of the former that characteristics of individual states and their societies do shape how states will behave in the international arena. One cannot, from this perspective, predict how a state will act simply from a description of the international setting within which it is operating. You also have to know something about individual states themselves. To return to the billiard ball metaphor, it is as if the game is now being played with different-sized balls made of a variety of materials. Thus, how a ball moves when struck will depend not only on the characteristics of the table and the position of the other balls, but also on the unique attributes of the ball itself.

A complete inventory of state level variables that might impact the foreign behavior of a state would be very long. Among the most significant are the five that follow:

1. **Type of government.** The state level variable that has received the most attention from scholars in recent years is type of government. Democratic peace theory (see Chapters 1 and 4) is a perfect example of state level analysis insofar as it suggests that democracies are less war-prone (at least when it comes to fighting other democracies) than authoritarian regimes. From this perspective, the Cold War has to be understood not just as a function of bipolarity but also as a reflection of the fact that only one of the two poles was a democracy.
Type of government can affect not only how a state will behave but also how effectively it conducts its foreign policy. For example, French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, whose book *Democracy in America* sought to explain the American democratic experiment to nineteenth-century European readers, was pessimistic about the ability of a democracy to conduct an efficient foreign policy. As he famously wrote: “Foreign policy does not require the use of any of the good qualities peculiar to democracy, but does require cultivation of almost all those which it lacks.” In contrast, political scientist James Fearon more recently argued that democracies have an advantage over authoritarian regimes in some respects such as crisis bargaining. In staking out a public position in an international crisis, leaders of democratic states cannot easily back down, because they face potential backlash from their citizens at home. He labels this backlash audience costs. Thus, their competitor states will understand that democratic leaders are not making hollow threats and will be forced to take the public position of democratic states more seriously.

2. Economic system and performance. For some scholars of international relations, a state’s economic system can have an even more significant impact on its behavior than type of political system. For example, Marxist analyses of world affairs have traditionally argued that capitalist economies must seek markets abroad in order to deal with domestic crises of overproduction. That economic imperative requires imperialist foreign policies in which states assert their power to ensure continued access to those markets. In turn, those policies can lead to conflict with other imperialist states and, ultimately, are a major source of war.

Economic performance of a state can also impact its foreign policy. Russian president Gorbachev’s efforts to improve relations with the United States in the 1980s and to end the decades-long Cold War with the West was, by most accounts, driven in large part by the weakness of the Soviet economy. By the 1980s the Soviet economy could barely provide the necessities of life for its citizens, let alone continue to keep pace in the arms race with a technologically superior United States.

3. National style. Some observers argue that national styles in international affairs stem from differences in geography and historical experience. For example, because the geography and history of Russia differ from those of the United States, the two countries have very different approaches to international affairs. Russia is located in the Eurasian heartland, borders on multiple real and potential adversaries, and has a history of conflict across those borders. The United States, in contrast, is protected by two oceans with relatively weak neighbors to its north and south, and it has not fought an interstate war on its soil since 1812. As a result, some suggest, Russian policy reflects a more insecure, pessimistic, and “realist” view of the world compared with the more secure, optimistic, and “idealistic” worldview reflected in much of U.S. policy.

4. Cultural identity. In his controversial *clash of civilizations* thesis, political scientist Samuel Huntington argues that states in the twenty-first century will be increasingly guided by considerations of cultural difference and affinity. As he puts it, “Alignments defined by ideology and superpower relations are giving way to alignments defined by culture and civilization.” If he is correct, this means that developments in the international system are increasingly being interpreted through state mi shares π for long- ing into decision have to
through one's domestic cultural filter. Thus, the arms accumulated by another state might appear more or less threatening, depending on whether that state shares membership with you in a common civilization. Likewise, the prospects for long-term economic cooperation and integration among states will, in Huntington's view, be predicated largely on cultural affinity. (For elaboration, see Chapter 9.)

5. Interest groups and public opinion. While the four state level variables noted above largely describe long-term attributes of individual states, shorter-term domestic factors also help determine how a state will respond to a particular foreign policy challenge. One such shorter-term factor is the relative power of domestic interest groups with a stake in a particular foreign policy decision. Another factor is the mood and intensity of public opinion. For example, no analysis of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in the 1970s would be complete without taking into account the shift in public opinion against the war. Similarly, the initial decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and the later pressure to find an exit strategy both have to be analyzed against the backdrop of changes in the public mood.

As we saw to be the case with the international system level of analysis, so too is the state level of analysis compatible with most of the international relations paradigms. Liberals who emphasize the spread of international institutions or the degree of global economic interdependence operate in large part at

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The purple ink-stained finger on this Iraqi citizen signifies that she has cast her ballot. Democratic peace theory predicts that a more democratic Iraq will be a more peaceful Iraq, less-inclined to act aggressively toward its neighbors—especially if successful Iraqi democratization leads to the spread of democracy elsewhere in the region.
the systemic level, but liberal democratic peace theorists focus on a state level variable (regime type). The liberal Kantian triangle (see Chapter 1) is a way of thinking about world politics that explicitly incorporates both state and systemic factors. Likewise, constructivists can interpret state behavior as reflective of global, systemwide norms or as something that is shaped by the socially constructed norms and identities at the individual state level.

The one paradigm that is intrinsically most resistant to state level analysis is structural realism, which at its core is an international system level perspective on how the world works. Unlike even classical realists who focused a lot of their attention on the individual state and its attributes, structural realists from Waltz forward have emphasized how the international system constrains and determines what individual states do. While Waltz did concede that “states are free to do any foolish thing they choose,” he notes that the international system creates strong pressures on states “to do some things and to refrain from doing others.”

For a recent example of structural realists applying state level analysis to a foreign policy issue, see Theory in Practice 3.1.

In general, state level analysis is more complex than system level analysis. Instead of looking to explain state behavior by virtue of the attributes of the international system as a whole, each state’s actions must be examined in the context of the attributes unique to that state. But even that added level of detail and complexity still leaves another source of state behavior outside of the equation, and that is the impact of individual decision-makers.

The Individual Level of Analysis

Neither the international system nor the state levels of analysis assign much significance to the role of individuals in world politics. Yet on election days in countries around the world, voters take the time and expend the effort to cast ballots for individual leaders based at least, in part, on the assumption that the outcome of the election will have an impact on the country’s foreign policy. In casting their ballots, those voters are implicitly accepting the great man theory of history, which suggests that the course of human history is determined not only by larger social, political, and economic forces but also by the beliefs and character of the individuals who rise to positions of influence.

From this perspective, the history of the twentieth century would have unfolded very differently had such individuals as Lenin, Stalin, Roosevelt, Hitler, Churchill, Mao, Gorbachev, and Reagan not been born. Likewise, many might argue, the early history of the twenty-first century would not have been the same had Osama bin Laden been killed in the 1980s by the Russian forces he was fighting in Afghanistan or if a few hundred votes had shifted from Bush to Gore in the controversial Florida recount in the 2000 presidential election. For better or worse, the United States might not have invaded Iraq in 2003 had Gore been certified as the winner in 2000.

While scholars working at the individual level of analysis do appreciate that systemic and state level factors can shape and constrain what individual leaders do, they caution against a view of leaders as mechanically responding to those systemic and state level factors. Different leaders are fully capable of making
THEORY IN PRACTICE 3.1

The Israel Lobby: Realism and the Levels of Analysis

In March 2006, well-known political scientists John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt published their controversial article “The Israel Lobby,” which they expanded into a book published the following year. Their central thesis is that American foreign policy in the Middle East has for decades been at odds with vital American strategic interests in the region. They blame the disconnect between U.S. policy and the U.S. national interest on the influence of a diffuse but powerful Israel lobby that is more concerned with protecting Israel than in asserting what is best for the United States. The article was very controversial, with the criticisms ranging from accusations of anti-Semitism to charges of poor scholarship.

From the point of view of international relations theory, however, the most interesting thing about the article and book was that two prominent realist scholars wrote them. Mearsheimer’s 2001 book The Tragedy of Great Power Politics is a classic of recent neorealist thinking, arguing that states consistently and predictably act to promote their national interests in response to the larger international context. Thus, the book focuses on the international system level and treats states as unitary actors that apply rational decision-making strategies. Domestic factors get little if any attention.

However, the Israel lobby thesis is focused on the impact of domestic politics. Of course, most realist scholars, though emphasizing the international system level, would acknowledge some role for domestic factors. However, for Mearsheimer and Walt, domestic factors are virtually the entire story of U.S. Middle East policy. In their words, “The thrust of U.S. policy in the region derives almost entirely from domestic politics.”

If one thinks of realism as a prescription for how states should behave, then one might argue that Mearsheimer and Walt’s criticism of U.S. policy is realist in character. However, most realists argue that the power and appeal of the realist paradigm are that it describes and predicts how states actually do behave. If one thinks of realism this way, then the focus on the Israel lobby as the key driving force in U.S. policy seems a decidedly nonrealist analysis.

■ Is realism an approach to understanding how the world does work, how the world should work, or some of both?
■ Compare the Mearsheimer and Walt thesis on the Israel lobby to the billiard ball metaphor discussed earlier in the chapter. How do they differ?
■ Is it fair to accuse Mearsheimer of being untrue to his realist paradigm in his analysis of the Israel lobby? How might he respond?


different decisions in response to the same set of conditions faced. Leaders are human beings, and human beings have agency.

When Waltz articulated this “first image” analysis, he was most interested in examining the common qualities that human beings possess as a species, specifically, the question of whether humans have an innate instinct for violence and warfare. Since that time, scholarship examining world politics at the individual level has focused largely on how human variations can affect the conduct of
international relations and foreign policy. Those variations can be related both to substantive beliefs and to aspects of individual personality and character.

**Belief Systems**

A belief system refers to the set of substantive values and understandings of the world that an individual holds. When we consider the qualities of leaders that have an impact on a country's foreign policy, we often think first of their substantive beliefs and ideas about the world.

At the narrowest level, differences in belief systems may manifest themselves in positions on specific foreign policy challenges. Should we use force to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons? Should we sign a free trade agreement with Mexico? Should we join the International Criminal Court? At a higher level of generalization and sophistication, other sets of questions might be relevant. Is the individual a protectionist or a free trader? An interventionist or an isolationist? A supporter or critic of the UN? Inclined to military or diplomatic solutions to foreign policy challenges? Knowing where a potential leader stands on these kinds of questions can help us anticipate how a leader will act in future situations.

At the most sophisticated and highly integrated level of belief systems is ideology. An ideology is an integrated set of assumptions and understandings about how the social, political, and economic world both is and should be structured and organized. A leader who subscribes to Marxist ideology will have a very different understanding of the world than will a fundamentalist Muslim theocrat. One is an atheist who sees world politics driven by conflict among economic interests, while the other is guided by the Qur'an and sees political leadership as an opportunity to act on religious values. Those ideological differences would presumably affect a state's view of whom its friends and foes are in the world, the nature of the challenges and threats it faces, and the instruments it might use in response to those threats.

State behavior in the world can also be affected by the operational codes of those in power. Operational code refers to a leader's "beliefs about the nature of politics and political conflict, his views regarding the extent to which historical developments can be shaped, and his notions of correct strategy and tactics." A leader's operational code transcends positions on specific issues or even specific ideologies. Instead, it has more to do with the person's general philosophical predispositions to politics. For example, leaders might differ as to whether they believe human beings are inherently good or evil, whether politics is more conflictual or cooperative, or whether the behavior of others is basically predictable and rational.

**Personality Attributes**

In addition to substantive beliefs, many scholars argue that personality attributes can also shape policy decisions. Whether an individual is, by temperament, pragmatic or dogmatic, authoritarian or democratic, impulsive or deliberative, cautious or risk-taking can have as great an impact on that individual's policy as his or her substantive beliefs.

One scholar who has devoted much of her career to examining the impact of leader personality attributes on foreign policy is Margaret Hermann. By studying what leaders say in their speeches and interviews, she distinguishes them across
seven different personality traits: (1) belief that one can influence or control what happens, (2) need for power and influence, (3) level of conceptual complexity, (4) self-confidence, (5) tendency to focus on problem solving and accomplishment versus maintenance of the group and dealing with others’ ideas and sensitivities, (6) distrust or suspiciousness of others, and (7) degree of in-group bias.  

A simplified version of Hermann’s analysis is presented in Table 3.1. 11 By combining some of the seven personality traits listed above, Table 3.1 distinguishes leaders across two dimensions: responsiveness to external constraints and openness to information. Responsiveness to constraints has to do with the extent to which a leader perceives external circumstances at the systemic and state levels of analysis to limit his or her freedom of action. Openness to information has to do with the extent to which a leader seeks and is receptive to information that is contrary to his or her preconceived policy views. The result is four basic leadership types: crusaders, opportunists, strategists, and pragmatists.

Crusaders are the least sensitive to the context in which they operate. They have a clear goal or purpose and do not let external constraints or contrary information deter them from meeting their objective. Depending on one’s perspective, they can appear to be admirably bold or dangerously impetuous. At the other extreme, opportunists are the most sensitive to constraints and contrary information. For opportunists, Hermann notes, “Politics is the art of the possible.” 12 Their supporters might view them as appropriately cautious, while their critics might see them as excessively risk-averse. Strategists and pragmatists are also constrained by their environment more than crusaders, but in different ways.

TABLE 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A TYPOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP STYLES</th>
<th>Respects Constraints</th>
<th>Challenges Constraints</th>
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<tr>
<td>Open to Information</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OPPORTUNISTS</td>
<td>STRATEGISTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most sensitive to context</td>
<td>Have clear goals</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inclined to bargaining and compromise</td>
<td>Seek information on best way to achieve goals</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can appear excessively cautious</td>
<td>Can appear unpredictable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Closed to Information</td>
<td>PRAGMATISTS</td>
<td>CRUSADERS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feel the pressure of external constraints</td>
<td>Least sensitive to context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Back off goals if the time and circumstances are not right</td>
<td>Have clear goals and pursue them without hesitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can appear indecisive</td>
<td>Can appear bold and impetuous</td>
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Strategists have clear goals that they consistently seek to promote, but seek information about how best to attain them. To outsiders, they can seem unpredictable as they adjust their tactics in response to new information. Pragmatists see themselves as highly limited in what they can achieve by external constraints. They have goals, but are willing to compromise if the context is not right. They can appear indecisive or lacking in commitment.

One recent study applying Hermann’s typology classified George W. Bush as a crusader and his father, George H. W. Bush, as a hybrid pragmatist-opportunist. Hermann herself suggested that President Clinton showed respect for constraints and openness to information, placing him also in the opportunist camp. While it remains too soon to classify conclusively Obama’s leadership style, his emphasis during his campaign on making his cabinet a “team of rivals” suggested openness to information of diverse types, placing him, depending on his relative level of respect for external constraints, in either the strategist or opportunist categories.

Hermann’s typology is only one of many attempts by scholars to link the personality attributes of leaders with their public policy performance. The application of any of these typologies to specific leaders is bound to be controversial and spark debate. But the larger question is the extent to which the beliefs and personality attributes of individuals make a difference in world politics, given the international system and state level factors also driving and constraining foreign policy. Structural realists, along with many liberals, are dubious, as they emphasize the constraints imposed on leaders by the international system. But Hermann and others operating at the individual level of analysis suggest that individuals do make a difference. How much of difference they make depends on the specific conditions present in a given situation. In general, the beliefs and personality of a leader tend to have greater impact in crisis situations calling for swift and decisive actions, situations that are new or ambiguous such that standard operating procedures do not exist, and times when leaders have wide latitude (e.g., the honeymoon period just after an election).

While Hermann and many other scholars working at the individual level focus on the impact of those who lead sovereign states, nonstate actors also need to be taken into account. Journalist and author Thomas Friedman argues that globalization has created the phenomenon of the super-empowered individual—someone who can arm him- or herself with the most advanced digital communication technologies of the twenty-first century and thus, as an individual, can influence the course of world events to an extent once reserved largely to states and international organizations.

Some of these super-empowered individuals are, as Friedman suggests, “super-empowered angry men” who also have the ability to do great harm to states and people around the world. As an indication of the significance of these individuals to world politics, Friedman notes that in response to the 1998 terrorist bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa, the Clinton administration ordered cruise missile attacks in Afghanistan aimed at taking out a super-empowered man by the name of Osama bin Laden. That the world’s greatest superpower launched such an attack clearly suggests that you need not be the leader of a state to have your beliefs and personality attributes taken seriously in world politics.
FOREIGN POLICY DECISION-MAKING

The “levels of analysis” question is concerned with where the key inputs or variables shaping foreign policy are located. What remains to be examined is how decision-makers take those inputs and transform them into the actions and behaviors that constitute foreign policy. The study of foreign policy decision-making is concerned with what happens inside that “black box” called government, where influences operating at the international, domestic, and individual levels are processed into the state behaviors that we see and read about in the daily news.

Consider, for example, the U.S. response to Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait. No one, not even a scholar working exclusively at the international system level, would be so naive as to suggest that the Iraqi action automatically triggered the U.S. response. The U.S. government is not a giant computer preprogrammed to respond automatically in certain ways to inputs coming from the international system. Instead, the U.S. government, like states and their governments generally, is a collection of individuals and organizations that have to take those inputs, discuss them, and process them into foreign policies.

Thus, following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, individuals in the U.S. government engaged in countless meetings, discussions, and debates over the proper response. In the course of those meetings and discussions, a variety of international and domestic factors—including the actions of Iraq, the views of America’s allies and adversaries around the world, the lobbying from domestic interests, and the opinion of the American public—were to one degree or another entered into the analysis and filtered through the ideological and personality attributes of each person involved in those discussions. Somehow, from this process came a foreign policy output (see Figure 3.1), which in this case was a U.S.-led and UN-sanctioned military intervention, known in the United States as Operation Desert Storm, to force Iraq out of Kuwait.

Scholars differ, however, in their view of exactly how this decision-making process works. The key divide here is between those who see foreign policy outputs resulting from a rational actor model of decision-making and those who see foreign policy emanating from a more complex and pluralistic bureaucratic politics model.

The Rational Actor Model

On August 2, 1990, Iraqi military forces invaded the neighboring, oil-rich kingdom of Kuwait. Within a matter of days, what little resistance the Kuwaiti military could manage was effectively crushed, and Iraq was in unchallenged control. In response, key U.S. foreign policy-makers, including the president, the secretaries of state and defense, the national security advisor, and a host of additional civilian, military, and intelligence officials held meetings, reviewed the intelligence, and consulted with one another and with U.S. allies around the world.

These U.S. officials presumably shared a common commitment: to a set of core national interests: maintaining access to Persian Gulf oil, maintaining the credibility of U.S. commitments to its friends and allies, and maintaining a favorable balance of power in the Middle East. Thus, these U.S. officials assessed how
much those interests were threatened by the Iraqi action, considered what the range of possible policy responses might be, and sought to determine what response or set of responses would best meet the threat posed. After a brief attempt to force Iraq out of Kuwait through diplomatic pressure combined with economic sanctions, U.S. officials concluded that military force was required. On January 17, 1991, a coalition of countries led by the United States initiated, with UN Security Council approval, Operation Desert Storm. Through a combination of air strikes followed by a ground invasion, Iraq was forced out of Kuwait. On February 27 President George H. W. Bush ordered a cease-fire in the Persian Gulf War and declared that Kuwait had been successfully liberated.

This very brief description of the U.S. response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait is based, at least implicitly, on a rational actor model of foreign policy decision-making. The model sees decision-making as beginning with the perception of a challenge to one’s interest (the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait) and the clarification of one’s goals (expelling Iraq from Kuwait). In responding to that challenge or in seeking to achieve one’s goal, one then develops a comprehensive list of possible options for action and response (UN diplomacy, economic sanctions, military force, etc.). After carefully weighing the costs and benefits of each of those options, one chooses and implements the option that allows one to achieve one’s goals or meet the challenge at the lowest cost.

This rational actor model can be applied to an understanding of decision-making in any realm—from foreign policy, to domestic politics, to personal matters like the selection of the college that you attend. When applied in the foreign policy arena, the model rests on three key assumptions about how foreign policy decisions get made.

1. If least at a national level, the public (or a subset of the public) makes the custom.
2. The process is almost always by the state, as legislators, or the executive branch, as the president, or a combination of these entities.
3. The decision is based on the interests and goals of the state, as reflected in its foreign policy.

No matter whether the state is the United States, the European Union, or any other entity, these assumptions hold true. In this chapter, we will explore these assumptions in more detail.
1. **Policy-makers begin with a shared sense of the national interest.** At least at a general level, decision-makers share a common understanding of the national interest, and, as they formulate foreign policy, they are motivated and united primarily by the effort to protect and promote those national interests. A powerful national leader (a president or a prime minister) will often serve as the custodian of that national interest, making sure that others in the decision-making process keep it front and center.

2. **Policy-making is a rational, intellectual process.** Foreign policy-making is all about objectively linking ends and means. Key foreign policy decision-makers will collectively and systematically canvass the range of alternative policy choices from which they might choose and, ultimately, settle on the choice that will most effectively and efficiently promote national interests.

3. **Once a policy choice is made, it will be implemented more or less as decision-makers had intended.** This point assumes a unity of purpose between those who define policy and the individuals and agencies that must carry it out.

Note that the model does not assume total agreement among the participants in this process every step of the way. The rational actor model has room for participants to disagree—for example, over how much of a threat was posed by the Kuwait invasion. In the days following the Kuwait invasion, some U.S. officials argued that the United States could live with the loss of Kuwaiti sovereignty and that it did not matter whether the United States bought Kuwaiti oil from Saddam Hussein or from the Kuwaiti monarchy. Neither regime was exactly a paragon of democracy and liberty. The model can also accommodate honest disagreements over the costs and benefits of the various policy responses considered. In the Kuwait case, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, advocated the use of economic sanctions as the best response, while others, including President Bush, had already concluded that sanctions would not work and that a military response was necessary.\(^\text{18}\)

The model also does not assume that the policy ultimately chosen will prove to be the wisest and best of the available choices. Foreign policy-makers often make mistakes. After the 1991 Persian Gulf War, for example, some critics of the Bush administration argued that the cease-fire was declared too soon, and that toppling Saddam Hussein should have been the ultimate goal. Indeed, some within the administration had debated and disagreed over exactly this question.

However, while allowing for disagreements among policy-makers in all these areas, the rational actor model does assume that participants share and are motivated in their deliberations by an overriding commitment to promoting the national interest and to a good faith effort to find the policy response that will best promote it. At bottom, the model sees states as unitary actors that speak with one voice in defense of the national interest.

Put somewhat differently, the rational actor model assumes that "important events have important causes."\(^\text{19}\) Thus, one could work backward from the foreign policy behavior of a state (a treaty signed, a war initiated, an international organization sponsored or joined) to some overriding national interests that can explain why the state engaged in that behavior. Indeed, much contemporary international relations punditry is aimed precisely at trying to figure back from
particular foreign policy behaviors to the underlying and less transparent motives behind them. So, for example, efforts to explain why Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons or why China conducted a test of an antisatellite weapon often implicitly assume an overriding national interest goal and strategy.

If this entire description of the rational actor model seems little more than common sense, that reflects the fact that most lay observers intuitively interpret foreign policy in rational actor terms. So the initial Iraqi invasion of Kuwait must itself have been driven by some overriding Iraqi national interest. Presumably, in deciding to invade Kuwait, Saddam Hussein and his top advisors first discussed the costs and benefits of an invasion and of other options before deciding on a course of action. To suggest that Saddam Hussein was a rational actor does not mean that one shares or endorses his goals or methods; it simply suggests that Iraqi foreign policy resulted from a “rational” process defined as the systematic effort to link policy ends and means. (See Theory in Practice 3.2.)

Critics of the rational actor model argue that it presents an oversimplified and idealized image of how decision-makers act and that it is rarely achieved in practice. The human beings involved in making foreign policy decisions cannot and do not achieve the level of comprehensive rationality implied in the model. Among the characteristics of real as opposed to idealized human decision-making are the three that follow:

1. **Satisficing.** Goals and interests are often vague and poorly defined, and, in many cases, people hold contradictory objectives. Similarly, the ability of human beings to canvass, evaluate, and predict the consequences of all the policy alternatives available will be limited. Information is usually endless, time is frequently short, and the intellectual capability of human beings to process all the available information is finite. Thus, rather than pushing to maximize their national interest goals, foreign policy-makers often opt for *satisficing*—or settling for an outcome that minimally satisfies a more limited set of national objectives. A solution that is “good enough” (rather than “best”) will often be selected.

2. **Polieuristic theory.** Theory of decision-making as a two-stage process in which decision-makers quickly eliminate options that clearly impose high political costs and then, in the second stage, engage in a detailed analysis of a more limited set of options.
THEORY IN PRACTICE 3.2

North Korean Nuclear Weapons and Rational Choice Theory

In a 2004 study, political scientist Bruce Bueno de Mesquita reached a conclusion about how best to get North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il to cease his country’s development of nuclear weapons. According to de Mesquita, “Security guarantees, especially a mix of assurances from the United States (not to attack) and from China (to defend North Korea if necessary), coupled with significant economic assistance (approaching $1 billion or so per year) to North Korea, would induce Kim to mothball his nuclear capability and allow continuous on-site inspections and securing of his nuclear facilities.”

That conclusion was based on de Mesquita’s application of “rational choice theory.” Like the rational actor model discussed in this chapter, the theory of rational choice assumes that human beings are rational. That is, it assumes that people have interests and that they act in accordance with those interests in choosing the course of action that they take. However, for rational choice theorists the interests sought are not “national interests” but the individual interests of the key actors involved in making foreign policy decisions. Thus, in order to understand and predict how a country will act, it is crucial to know four things: (1) who the key players with an interest in influencing a policy are, (2) what their interests or preferences are, (3) how important the issue for each of the players is, and (4) how influential each player is.

In the North Korean case, Kim Jong Il was the key actor with preponderant (though not exclusive) influence over North Korean policy—so his interests and preferences were key. According to de Mesquita, Kim’s main concern (like that of most political leaders) was remaining in power. So there was a possibility of stopping the North Korean nuclear program if it was linked to guarantees of Kim’s political survival. Of course, whether Western countries would want to accept any deal that kept the ruthless Kim in power raises moral questions that have to be considered as well. But the larger point underlying the rational choice approach is that we can better understand the actions of states if we think of them in relation to the interests of the key players responsible for formulating policy.

- What assumptions are shared in common by the “rational actor model” discussed in this chapter and “rational choice theory” as described in the discussion of the Korean case?
- What is the key distinction about the nature of the interests that policy-makers pursue in the “rational actor model” as compared to “rational choice theory”?
- In what sense can we say that a ruthless dictator like Kim Jong Il is rational? Does that imply endorsement of his policies?


This two-stage process saves time and makes decision-making more manageable, but the best option might be discarded before undergoing serious analysis.

2. Misperception. The rational actor model assumes that decision-makers have a clear understanding of their own interests as well as the interests and motives of their adversaries. It also assumes that they accurately perceive and understand the objective facts and information shaping the situation they are facing. However, foreign policy decision-making is often shaped by misperceptions of interests, motives, and circumstances. In an influential 1968 article,
political scientist Robert Jervis listed more than a dozen common misperceptions that tend to color the decision-making process. They include the following:

- Decision-makers tend to fit and shape new information into their preexisting theories and images of the world rather than allow new information to alter those preexisting theories and images.
- Decision-makers tend to view other states as more hostile than they are; at the same time, they find it hard to believe that others see them as a menace.
- Decision-makers tend to see the behavior of others as more centralized, disciplined, and coordinated than it actually is.

Such misperceptions reflect the limits of human rationality in the face of complex situations. Like the satisficing behavior noted previously, misperceptions often result from the need to take cognitive shortcuts necessary to make decision-making more efficient. Thus, fitting new information into preexisting theories and images of the world avoids the need to start analysis from square one every time a decision has to be made. Likewise, the tendency to engage in worst-case analysis and exaggerate the hostile intentions of one's adversary in the face of complex, incomplete, or contradictory information is often seen as both the easier and safer way to proceed.

3. Groupthink. One special problem that has been shown to limit the ability of decision-makers to maximize the national interest is the phenomenon of groupthink. Groupthink refers to the tendency most often found in small, cohesive groups operating under conditions of stress (a set of characteristics quite common in foreign policy decision-making) to quickly abandon critical thinking in favor of consensus perspectives and viewpoints that reflect group solidarity. Scholars have argued that groupthink often leads to faulty decisions that harm those outside the group as well as the larger interests of the group itself. It can also lead to the perpetuation of a misguided policy since criticism of the policy, even when it is going badly, challenges the wisdom and solidarity of the group. As Irving Janis, the scholar responsible for developing the concept of groupthink, noted: “Members consider loyalty to the group the highest form of morality.”

While the phenomena of satisficing, misperception, and groupthink all address the cognitive limits of individual human decision-makers, another criticism of the rational actor model rests on the argument that states and their governments are not individuals. Thus, even if one could achieve perfect rationality on the individual level, states will still be composed of a myriad of people and organizations, and they will not all see things the same way. The differences reflect the fact that the many players in the foreign policy process bring a diverse set of individual and organizational interests to the table. It is on this basic assumption that the bureaucratic politics model of foreign policy decision-making rests.

The Bureaucratic Politics Model
In August 1957 the Soviet Union launched Sputnik I, the first artificial satellite to be placed into orbit around the world. That was followed, on November 3, 1957, by Sputnik II. In the United States, the reaction was a combination of
surprise and concern bordering on panic. The USSR already had the atomic bomb, and Sputnik now suggested a capacity to deliver atomic warheads from space. More generally, Sputnik indicated to some observers that the technological competition between the two Cold War rivals was now tilting in favor of the USSR. Even though President Dwight Eisenhower did not share this sense of panic and the United States was still far ahead in most significant civilian and military technologies, many believed that the United States was losing the space race.

In response to Sputnik, the United States sped up the schedule to test its own satellite via a Vanguard rocket. On December 6, 1957, as many Americans watched on live TV, the Vanguard rocket rose a few feet into the air before collapsing back down onto the launch pad and exploding in a cloud of smoke and fire. It was both a technological and a political defeat, and it added to the growing sense in the United States that the country was losing the space race. Seeking to add to the sense of national humiliation, Soviet officials at the United Nations offered to provide the United States with aid typically reserved for developing nations. (You can watch a newsreel clip of the failed Vanguard launch on YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jK6a6Hkp94o.)

Even the most sanguine observers recognized that the Vanguard failure was, at the very least, a public relations disaster for the United States. Thus, it would
seem surprising that a U.S. Army general who watched the Vanguard test with President Eisenhower reportedly gloated at the failure, declaring it to be a “great day for the army.” How, one might wonder, could any officer in the U.S. military see good news in what was obviously a technological and political setback in the U.S. struggle with Communism? The answer may be found in the interservice rivalry between the U.S. Army and U.S. Navy over which branch of the service would take the lead in developing space for military purposes. The Vanguard, as one might guess, happened to be a Navy rocket, and the failed test seemed to provide an opening for the Army.

This story of the Vanguard rocket and the interservice rivalry that surrounded its development is but one illustration of the bureaucratic politics model of foreign policy decision-making. Sometimes referred to as the “governmental politics model” or the “institutional pluralism model,” it sees foreign policy-making as a competitive struggle among various government institutions and actors to promote their version of the “national interest.” Specifically, the bureaucratic politics model rests on four key assumptions regarding the policy-making process.

1. **Policy-making is a social process.** It involves a tug of war or a “pulling and hauling” among a multiplicity of individual and institutional actors who play a role in formulating foreign policy. Although certain leaders (e.g., presidents, prime ministers) might have ultimate responsibility for policy, they do not and cannot completely shape and control the decision-making process.

2. **There is no single version of the national interest.** While at a general level—especially when faced with some severe threat—all players might have a sense of shared national interest, each participant also brings to the table a set of interests and perspectives shaped by the bureaucratic role he or she fills. As one political scientist famously put it, “Where you stand depends on where you sit.”

3. **Policy decisions are compromises.** If policy-making is, in fact, a social process involving competing interests and differing perspectives on the national interest, it follows that the policies adopted and the foreign policy behaviors that result are often compromises among those competing interests and perspectives. Thus, it is not necessarily the case that “important events have important causes,” and one cannot always work back from policies adopted to a clear sense of unitary state motives and intentions.

4. **Politics does not stop once a decision is made.** To the extent that some players involved in formulating policy do not get all they want, they still may have opportunities to influence policy at the implementation stage. By dragging their feet, following the letter but not the spirit of the policy, or simply failing to follow through with policy implementation, the losers in the policy debate might, in part, still get their way.

The bureaucratic politics model sees foreign policy as a two-dimensional game of politics, influence, and negotiation in which the course of world politics is shaped by the interactions occurring at two levels. At the international level, states interact and bargain with one another as they jockey for influence and power in world politics. Simultaneously, an internal process proceeds within each state as those charged with making foreign policy interact and bargain in
TABLE 3.2
RATIONAL ACTOR VERSUS BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS MODELS

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Rational Actor Model</th>
<th>Bureaucratic Politics Model</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Key Actors</strong></td>
<td>Unitary states</td>
<td>Multiple foreign policy bureaucracies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy Process</strong></td>
<td>Intellectual process</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Policy Objectives</strong></td>
<td>Promote national interests</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Policy Implementation</strong></td>
<td>Administrative/technical</td>
<td>Political process</td>
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their own intragovernmental quests for influence and power. That internal struggle for influence and power is driven by differences of interest, role and mission, and organizational process.27 (For a summary of the rational actor and bureaucratic politics models, see Table 3.2.)

**INTERESTS** At the crudest level, the differences in perspective apparent among the actors who formulate foreign policy derive from differences in interests. Those interests are related to questions of institutional prestige, budgets, and power. The U.S. Army general who wanted to grab control of the satellite program from the U.S. Navy no doubt was motivated by a combination of all those selfish institutional considerations. A successful Vanguard rocket test would have meant more money to the Navy and less for the Army. Perhaps even more important, the race to space in the 1950s was a high-visibility endeavor. Whichever branch of the military service came out on top in this race would bask in considerable attention. Careers would be affected, as would political influence.

However, reducing foreign policy disputes merely to clashes over money and power can be overly simplistic and cynical, missing much of what motivates the actors involved in the process. In many cases, the actors bring genuine differences in judgment about how best to define and promote the national interest as each perceives it through the lens of his or her particular bureaucratic role and organizational mission.

**BUREAUCRATIC ROLES AND MISSIONS** The concept of bureaucratic role refers to the responsibilities associated with a particular job or position. While each individual brings different qualities and approaches to any given job, the job itself can shape and constrain the perspective and behavior of the individual who holds that position. Likewise, the larger mission of the particular bureaucratic agency within which one works can also affect the perspective among the actors involved in formulating policy.
For example, in the early 1980s, during the Reagan administration, the Soviet Union was constructing a 3,000-mile pipeline through which natural gas would be exported to Western Europe. At the time, U.S. Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger and U.S. Secretary of State Al Haig advocated different approaches toward their European allies. While each held a deeply ingrained suspicion of the Soviet Union and its motives, and although both worried about Western Europe becoming dependent on the USSR for energy, they disagreed on how to handle this issue. Weinberger advocated economic sanctions against Western Europe if it went ahead with the pipeline deal, whereas Haig advocated more subtle diplomacy, fearing the consequences of economic sanctions on the NATO alliance. 28 This difference in approach can be at least partly explained through differences in bureaucratic roles. As secretary of state, it was Haig, not Weinberger, who had primary responsibility for maintaining good diplomatic relations with America’s allies. Since economic sanctions would surely complicate those relations, Haig’s perspective was bound to differ from that of his counterpart at Defense.

**Organizational Processes** Differences in bureaucratic perspectives are also a function of differences in organizational process. Over time, bureaucracies, like individuals, develop differences in their routines or standard operating procedures. Those standard operating procedures (or SOPs) emerge in response to prior experiences in dealing with like situations. They can be a source of comfort in responding to complex situations, and they can be efficient insofar as they avoid the need to reinvent the wheel every time a new situation develops. However, they can also be a source of rigidity in dealing with unique circumstances.

A classic example of this clash between organizational SOPs occurred during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. John F. Kennedy's response to the discovery of Soviet offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba was to order a naval blockade of the island. Hoping to avoid a potential third world war with the USSR, Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara were concerned with precisely how the U.S. Navy would respond should Soviet ships test the blockade. As Graham Allison notes in his study of the Cuban Missile Crisis, McNamara called on Admiral George Anderson, the chief of naval operations, and peppered him with questions about how the Navy would respond if Soviet ships approached. Eventually, Anderson became frustrated by McNamara’s efforts to micromanage the blockade:

The Navy man picked up the Manual of Naval Regulations and, waving it in McNamara’s face, shouted, “It’s all in there.” To which McNamara replied, “I don't give a damn what John Paul Jones would have done, I want to know what you are going to do now.” The encounter ended on Anderson’s remark: “Now Mr. Secretary, if you and your Deputy will go back to your office, the Navy will run the blockade.” 29

Note, in particular, that this exchange took place after the policy decision to respond with a naval blockade was adopted. The tension between McNamara and Anderson was over the implementation of this policy. Yet how this blockade was implemented was not merely a technical, administrative matter; it was potentially a matter of war or peace between the two great powers of the day. One
can easily imagine, as McNamara obviously did, how the manner in which policy was implemented could easily undo what he and Kennedy were trying to accomplish.

**Different Models for Different Circumstances?**

In the view of many scholars of international relations and world politics, choosing between the rational actor and bureaucratic politics model is not an either/or proposition. Instead, the consensus in the literature is that both models provide insights, and that the relative utility of the two decision-making models varies with the circumstances. Here are three rules of thumb:

1. **Nature of the situation.** In a crisis situation where an immediate and severe threat to widely shared vital interests exists, the rational actor model is likely to prevail. In contrast, decision-making in more routine, noncrisis situations provides greater scope for the parochial interests and organizational perspectives of the subnational actors.

2. **Nature of the leader.** In any regime, high-level leaders (presidents, prime ministers, etc.) have broad responsibility for promoting the national interest. When those leaders have a high level of interest in foreign affairs, when they are politically adept, when they have expertise and experience related to foreign affairs, and when they have broad popular support (e.g., because they are charismatic or during the honeymoon period after coming into office), the rational actor model will have maximum utility. That is because the leader will be in a better position to harness the centrifugal forces pulling policy in the direction of subnational bureaucratic interests. In contrast, when top leaders are unengaged, ineffective, inexperienced, and politically weak, the pull of bureaucratic interests will be maximized.

3. **Nature of the regime.** In open, democratic regimes, subnational interests and perspectives tend to have greater scope for influencing policy. In democratic regimes, bureaucratic actors are able to forge alliances with societal groups that share their interests. In closed, authoritarian regimes, in contrast, power is by definition more centralized, and the ability of bureaucratic actors to mobilize constituencies will be limited. Thus, a democracy has more room for bureaucratic politics than does an authoritarian regime.

While these rules of thumb do provide some insights and a starting point for analysis, they are not hard and fast laws. Consider the decision of the Soviet Union to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968. Czechoslovakia was a Communist country and a member of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact military alliance. In the spring of 1968, however, a reformist government in Prague began to relax government censorship, experiment with economic liberalization, and tolerate increased political pluralism. From the perspective of Soviet leaders in Moscow, the Czech reforms constituted a crisis that threatened many shared interests. In particular, Soviet leaders shared a concern that the reforms, left unchecked, could spread to other eastern bloc countries, threatening the security of their East European buffer zone and ultimately providing a challenge to the Soviet model of
Communism. Given this perception of crisis, the attention given to the situation by top leaders, and the authoritarian nature of the Soviet regime, one might expect the three rules of thumb noted above to lead to a textbook application of the rational actor model.

In fact, a close study of the Soviet decision to invade reveals considerable evidence of bureaucratic politics. Among those pushing for military intervention, according to political scientist Jiri Valenta, were Communist Party leaders in the Soviet republic of Ukraine (who feared a confrontation with the Czech disease), Soviet generals located in Warsaw Pact countries (who feared that weakened morale in the Czech army would make their organizational mission harder), Soviet bureaucrats charged with ensuring ideological purity (who feared the Czech model would undermine their efforts), and army ground-force officers (who sensed a chance for glory and an increase in their stature compared with other Soviet military forces). Lined up against them were the Soviet Foreign Ministry (concerned with how an intervention would affect relations with the West on arms control and other issues), KGB officers operating in Western countries (who feared greater Western vigilance), and officers in the USSR’s strategic rocket forces (who saw a potential to lose political clout to the ground forces). Valenta concludes that “the final decision was essentially the outcome of a contest among various bureaucracies with differing foreign, domestic, and organizational policy interests.”

Ultimately, the forces favoring invasion won the day, and that can be at least partly explained, as Valenta concedes, by the fact that in the final days of the crisis, even skeptics of the invasion came to accept it on the grounds that there were indeed shared national interests at stake. Thus, one can see elements of both the rational actor and bureaucratic model at work in a single case. Each provides a different way of looking at the issue, and each, by itself, would arguably provide an incomplete picture of how foreign policy decisions get made.

Paradigms and Decision-Making Models

The clearest and most unambiguous relationship between paradigms and decision-making models is that between structural realism and the rational actor model. With their common emphasis on states as unitary actors, their common insistence that there is an objectively defined and commonly shared set of national interests, and their common assumption that a state’s foreign behavior is shaped primarily by the interaction of those interests with structures and forces located at the international system level, the rational actor model appears to be a logical elaboration of the realist paradigm.

Some versions of liberalism and neo-Marxism are also compatible with the rational actor model. Liberal institutionalism (with its emphasis on the role of law and international organization in reducing anarchy) and liberal commercialism (with its emphasis on the political consequences of economic interdependence) can readily incorporate the rational actor model into their views of the world. Their difference from realism on this question has less to do with the process of decision-making than with the international context in which those decisions are made. Likewise, neo-Marxists, especially those emphasizing capitalism as a world
system, also tend to embrace the rational actor model, but instead of focusing on the rational pursuit of national interest, they stress the rational pursuit of class interests.

In some instances, however, the connection between paradigms and decision-making models becomes a bit more ambiguous. For example, Robert Jervis, whose work, noted above, raised questions about the limits of the rational actor model, is a self-described realist. Graham Allison, whose 1971 book on the Cuban Missile Crisis jump-started discussions of the bureaucratic politics model, is also a realist. And while certain subtypes of liberalism and neo-Marxism embrace aspects of rational decision-making, neither of these paradigms is bound exclusively to the rational actor model. This situation has led at least one scholar to proclaim that the study of foreign policy decision-making “has been a kind of free-floating enterprise, logically unconnected to, and disconnected from, the main theories of international relations.”

Perhaps the best way to think about the relationship of paradigms to decision-making models is by focusing on differences of emphasis rather than on hard and fast boundaries. So, for realists, the emphasis and starting point in foreign policy analysis remain the assumption of rational decision-making but with mitigating factors like misperception, groupthink, and bureaucratic politics creating a deviation from the rational ideal type. For critics of realism—including liberals, constructivists, feminists, and neo-Marxists—the deviations from the rational actor model are qualitatively great enough to undermine the model and many of the realist assumptions about the world that are closely associated with it.

A case in point is the argument, advanced by some scholars, that constructivism is the logical theoretical home for critics of the rational actor model. If one common thread binds all the criticisms of the rational actor model, it is that the model does not account for differences in the ways individuals and organizations involved in foreign policy-making perceive the situations they are facing. One classic work on the subject, published long before constructivism emerged in international relations theory, emphasized that foreign policy decision-making is all about arriving at a “definition of a situation.” That includes defining the national interest, defining the threats faced, and defining the motives of one’s adversaries. While the rational actor model, along with realism, assumes that all these things are objective facts waiting to be discovered, critics of the rational actor model assume that one’s “definition” of each is shaped by the images, interests, roles, and preconceptions one brings to the table. This sounds a lot like what constructivists argue when they suggest that ideas and norms shape our reality as much as they are shaped by it. It is also consistent with feminist views that suggest women tend to define a situation differently than men.

CONCLUSION

As suggested in this chapter, most sophisticated analysts, whatever grand paradigm they work within, accept that no single level of analysis or decision-making model is capable of fully explaining how the world works. In some cases, scholars shift among levels and decision-making models, depending on the foreign policy behavior they are trying to explain. In other cases, they apply multiple levels of
analysis and decision-making models to get the full picture of even a single foreign policy behavior of a state. As the controversy over the role of the “Israel lobby” suggests, even the most hard-core structural realists sometimes concede that international relations is about more than the structure of the international system.

However, certain differences of emphasis are inherent in the competing paradigms. In particular, what continues to separate realists from their critics is the general realist insistence that one begin any analysis of world politics and individual state behavior with the assumptions that (1) states are rational and unitary actors with preestablished preferences or interests, and (2) states act to defend those interests and assert those preferences in response to the larger international context. Domestic and individual levels and bureaucratic politics enter the picture only as a secondary consideration. As one scholar put it, the tendency is to “synthesize theories by employing realism first . . . and then introducing competing theories of domestic politics . . . to explain residual variance.”

For many critics of realism, the emphasis needs to be altered. For a liberal internationalist, democracy is not a secondary factor explaining state behavior but is at the core of understanding a state’s foreign policy. For a Marxist, the interests of domestic capital explain not merely residual variance but, rather, the essence of a capitalist state’s foreign policy. For a constructivist, evolving conceptions of friends and enemies trump realist assumptions about the determining influence of international anarchy or balance of power. For many students of bureaucratic politics, bureaucratic interests and roles not only compete with the dominant pursuit of the national interest but are also crucial in deciding what that national interest might be in the first place.

In short, the realist view—that we begin with the international system level and the assumption of states as rational actors—has the virtues of elegance and analytical efficiency. It presumes that without peering inside the messy world of domestic and bureaucratic politics, we can understand and predict a great deal about state behavior. The question, however, is whether this analytical simplicity does more to illuminate or distort our understanding of how the world of international relations works.

**EXERCISES**

Apply what you learned in this chapter on MyPoliSciKit (www.mypoliscikit.com).

- **Assessment**: Review this chapter using learning objectives, chapter summaries, practice tests, and more.
- **Video**: Analyze recent world affairs by watching streaming video from major news providers.
- **Flashcards**: Learn the key terms in this chapter; you can test yourself by term or definition.
- **Simulations**: Play the role of an IR decision-maker and experience how IR concepts work in practice.
REVIEW QUESTIONS

- Think of a recent foreign policy decision taken by a state, and list the factors that might have influenced that decision at all three levels of analysis. Which, if any, of the levels seems primary in this case and why?
- Every year, the college or university that you attend will make a decision about whether, and by how much, to raise tuition for the following year. How would the decision-making process proceed at your school in the rational actor model? How would it proceed in the bureaucratic politics model?
- What do realists mean by “the national interest”? Can you come up with a list of your country’s national interests that most of your fellow citizens would accept?

KEY TERMS

- levels of analysis: 70
- billiard ball model: 71
- national interest: 72
- audience costs: 74
- clash of civilizations: 74
- great man theory of history: 76
- belief system: 78
- ideology: 78
- operational code: 78
- super-empowered individual: 80
- rational actor model: 82
- unitary actors: 83
- satisficing: 84
- poliheuristic theory: 84
- worst-case analysis: 86
- groupthink: 86
- interservice rivalry: 88
- bureaucratic politics model: 88
- bureaucratic role: 89
- organizational process: 90

NOTES

18. For a useful glimpse at some of these debates and interviews with some of the participants involved, see the video in the PBS Frontline series *The Gulf War*, 1996, http://www.pbs.org.
27. The standard treatment of all these issues is Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Brookings, 1974).
34. The points made below are noted and developed in Houghton, “Reinvigorating the Study of Foreign Policy Decision-Making,” 24–45; Juliet Kaarbo, “Foreign Policy
