**Lesson - The Individual Level: Policymakers and their environment**

**The Individual Level of Analysis**

Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, Feminism, and Marxism all offer general theoretical approaches to international relations. They give us competing observations about the nature of international relations, at a variety of levels. There is, however, another approach to the study of international relations that focuses explicitly on the decision-making process behind the actions of states. This approach is generally known as foreign policy analysis. Rather than focusing on conditions that lead to war and peace, and that contribute or detract from international cooperation, foreign policy analysts try to develop analytical frameworks that can identify common processes that take place as policymakers are trying to make decisions about foreign policy.  There have been a number of approaches to this issue as well.

One approach is the so-called rational actor model. This approach argues that policymakers are at heart cost-sensitive and purposeful in dealing with policy problems. When confronted with challenges in the international system, they make cost-benefit analyses to pursue their interests. The question that rational choice proponents deal with is: ‘What factors go into these cost-benefit analyses?” Rational choice as an approach is borrowed from economics. In the latter field, however, it is relatively easy to determine how costs and benefits should be calculated. When we are trying to figure out how a business makes decisions, we can examine its bottom line. It will undertake actions to increase its revenues, and it will try not to act in ways that decrease its revenues. The problem, from this perspective, with policymakers in a social environment is that they are not the same as business people trying to enhance their profits. The profit-motive is hardly ever dominant in foreign policy makes. Instead, policymakers have all kinds of other factors that they consider in trying to decide about the utility of different courses of action. The question, again, is “what are these factors?” Can we find a particular set of factors that shape rational policy decisions?

Rational choice proponents have raised economic factors, but have also pointed out the concern the policymakers have with remaining in power. They have, therefore, argued that policymakers make decisions based upon a number of factors, including the relative economic and political cost of a particular course of action in the international system. They will, however, also consider the effects of their decisions on their continued tenure in office. Thus, especially in democracies, we would expect policymakers to be concerned withreelection. In other words, in responding to international challenges, policymakers in democratic countries will wonder how their decisions will affect their chances of getting re-elected. In short, according to rational choice theory, we should examine both international and domestic costs and benefits of alternative policy choices.

Even as people started to develop rational choice explanations for foreign policy decisions, others pointed out that there are significant obstacles to rational decision-making in the international environment. Rational decision-making depends upon the ability of individuals to process a great deal of information accurately. To make a truly rational decision, a human being has to undertake the following steps:

**Define a problem Identify all the possible solutions to the problem Identify the costs associated with each solution (policy) Calculate the likelihood of success of each policy Choose the policy that offers the highest likelihood of success at the lowest possible cost.**

In sum, rational decisions require a lot of information (information about options, information about costs, information about chances of success). Also policymakers have to be able to processall the necessary information. In terms of foreign policy there are a number of considerable constraints that impact the ability of individual policymakers to actually follow the rational decision-making process outlined above (these issues do not only affect foreign policymakers, however, they affect all individuals to an extent. There is, therefore, considerable doubt about the accuracy of the rational choice model. Some scholars have argued that human beings can, at best, follow a process of “bounded rationality,” which implies that they try to follow all the steps, but that they recognize their own limitations and make decisions without following the rational actor model all the way through). What then, are the short-comings of the rational actor model and its application to foreign policy? What are the things that we have to keep in mind?

First, not all the information might be available to policymakers. Because the international system is one in which states do not have an incentive to provide their potential rivals with all the information that is necessary. In short, policymakers, no matter how rational they are, may simply not have all the necessary information to make optimal decisions. For instance, one of the reasons that the Bush administration decided to invade Iraq in 2003, was because it believed that Saddam Hussein was building a WMD capability. As it turns out, this was not the case. While many critics argue that the administration knew this was the case, one has to acknowledge that Saddam acted in ways to make the US believe that he was still pursuing these weapons, because he was worried that his regional neighbors would discover that he was not as powerful as they believed he was. In other words, while there are plenty of good reasons to critique the decision-making process in the run-up to the Iraq war, misperceptions of Iraqi capabilities and perceptions had a lot to do with American decisions. In general, misperception is an important obstacle to making rational decisions, and it is quite common in the international environment.

Second, another important limitation that human beings face is that they simply may not have the cognitive abilities to process all the information correctly. Human beings in general have only limited cognitive capabilities, and this impairs their ability to process information in the way posited by the rational actor model. The amounts of information that are necessary to make decisions are simply usually overwhelming for human beings, especially given the fact that they usually have to make hundreds if not thousands of decisions each day. Our brains would soon become overloaded, if we had to deal with the immense amount of information necessary to make rational decisions. As it turns out, psychologists have found, that our brains protect us from ourselves, and help us conserve energy. They do so, by making cognitive shortcutsthat limit the amount of time we use to process information before we make decisions. These cognitive short-cuts, however, also ensure that we do not always make rational decisions. It is important to understand, that this not necessarily means that the decisions we come up with are not rational, it also does not mean that these decisions are always wrong. What it does mean, is that the process outlined by the rational choice model is not necessarily an accurate reflection of how we make decisions, and this is something we obviously have to keep in mind when we try to understand why policymakers make the decisions they do.  Among the cognitive short-cuts that have been found most prevalent (and most relevant to foreign policy are:

1.   Analogous reasoning

2.   Fundamental attribution errors

Analogous reasoning is the use of logic and history to make decisions about current situations. One of the things that we tend to do as humans, when we are confronted with a challenging decision, is to liken our current situation to one that we have already seen before and by using the solutions we have used in similar situations in the past. For example, if we are at a restaurant with an unfamiliar menu, we could possibly arrive at the most rational choice from the menu by assessing the relative nutritional value and price of each item before choosing the one that is the most likely to make us feel full at the lowest possible price. Many, if not most of us, however, would probably follow another pattern. It would go something like this, “mmmmm…. I don’t recognize any of these dishes. Oh, wait a second, I think I have had something called “cheeseburger” before at another place. It was tasty and filling. Given the fact that I don’t recognize any of the other items on the menu, why don’t I choose that item? It is familiar to me, I know what it should taste like, and I know I won’t be hungry after I finish it.” In short, we use our previous experience (whether at the same restaurant or another one) to guide our decision-making process about a current situation. While we may end up being very happy with our choice, we should also recognize that the decision-making process did not resemble a rational one, as depicted in the rational actor model. As it turns out, most of us make use of analogous reasoning to arrive at decisions, and we do so in many circumstances, not only when we have to make food choices. Human beings, psychologists have found, are particularly prone to using historical analogies to guide their decision-making. This, of course, is not a bad thing if it saves us time and money, and if it produces the right decisions. In order for that to happen, however, we have to make sure to use the correct analogies. In other words, we want to make sure that we use historical examples that are actually a close fit to the situation in which we find ourselves making a contemporary decision. As it turns out, however, human beings are not very good about doing so. That is, they are not very good about dispassionately choosing appropriate analogous situations. In fact, psychologists have found that human beings often tend to make two mistakes when using analogies to guide their reasoning and decision-making.

         First, we tend to choose historical cases that are easilyavailable or that are very vivid in our memory. Rather than scouring our brain for an analogous situation that closely resembles our current decision-making predicament, we tend to use memories that are available in our memory. These may be memories that are traumatic or very eventful. It is not surprising, for instance, that policymakers, and especially those who actually participated in WWII, oftentimes referred to the pre-war years in order to explain how they responded to international crises. When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, President Bush immediately invoked the memory of the Munich Conference prior to WW II, when the British appeased Adolf Hitler, and gave him the incentive to become aggressive later. The appeasement of Hitler at Munich was one of those pivotal moment in history that sticks out in our collective memories, it was especially vivid for someone like George H.W. Bush, who had served as a pilot in WW II. In sum, rather than choosing our analogies carefully, our brains appear to be hard-wired to use our most available memories to guide our decisions. This does not mean that our decisions are always bad, or that they necessarily diverge from decisions reached after using the rational choice model, it just means that the way in which we reach them has little to do with rationality or purposeful behavior in terms of the using information in the right way. The use of the most easily available memory to guide our decision-making process is called the availability heuristic (a heuristic is a cognitive short-cut, and as I discussed earlier, the use of historical analogies is considered a short-cut that our brain makes to process information more effectively, and as such it counts as a heuristic).

         Second, the use of analogies is not the only way in which our brain helps us take charge of decision-making and to overcome potential information overload. Although there are many cognitive biases, another prevalent one that is very much relevant to foreign policymaking is the so-called fundamental attribution error. While rational choice theory suggests that we dispassionately assess relative merits of policy options, psychologists have found that we have a hard time as human beings assessing the intentions and motivations of others. However, to make rational policies in the international sphere, we have to assess what the responses of the other side are going to be, as they directly affect the costs and benefit of our own policy-options. For instance, America’s and Israel’s responses to Iran’s nuclear weapons program are very different from their reactions to a Belgian nuclear weapons program (if one existed).  The reason for this, presumably, is that they have different expectations of what Iran would do once it obtains nuclear weapons. The problem that human beings have, however, is that our brain makes it quite difficult to assess motivations of others correctly. In particular, it appears, we are prone to attribute behavior in different ways. Most importantly, we tend to attribute behavior of our rivals tobad intentions and inherent character flaws, while we attribute our own behavior (and that of our allies) to situational factors. Thus, for instance, American leaders argue that America’s possession of nuclear weapons shouldn’t frighten anyone, or threaten anyone. After all, everybody should know that the US means no harm. Moreover, the US needs nuclear weapons to make sure it is secure, it is the international environment that drives it to acquire the weapons and maintain them.  On the other hand, an Iranian effort to acquire nuclear weapons is attributed to the nefarious intentions and character of the Iranian regime. After all, why would Iran want to acquire nuclear weapons, if its main enemies (such as the US and Israel) only have nuclear weapons to defend themselves? Iran must be up to no-good, in this analysis. This is an example of the effects of the fundamental attribution error, which leads to a lack of empathy for the decisions of our potential rivals, and for a rather severe assessment of their motivations. The problem of course, is that such attributions make it into our decision-making framework, and make us diverge from the rational choice model.

 It is important to understand that all this does not come to say that rational decision-making is impossible for human beings, or for policymakers. It does come to show that we have to be careful to attribute such abilities to policymakers, especially as they are operating under high levels of stress, which often are associated with foreign policy decision-making. We also have to keep in mind that there are psychological obstacles to rational decision-making that are frequent and widespread, meaning that many individuals will be prone to using analogies and other cognitive shortcuts and that they do so in predictable and consistent ways. We have to be aware of these cognitive shortcuts when we want to explain state behavior.

         Finally, one of the things to keep in mind is that in foreign policymaking, we rarely find individual policymakers make all the important decisions on their own. Most often, policy is made within a small group of decision-makers. Such small groups, as it turns out, often suffer from dynamics that are peculiar to group-decisionmaking. In small groups and foreign policy, we often witness a phenomenon called groupthink. This phenomenon consists of a process in which members of a small decision-making group frequently reach agreement on policy-choices in a way that undermines a rational decision-making approach. Members of small groups often tend to identify a policy solution early in the debate, they often end up discounting alternative solutions, and they often end up being overly optimistic about the effectiveness of the policy-choice they have identified. At the same time, such small groups are often very resistant to criticism and members of the group that oppose a policy-option and offer alternatives are either shunned by the group, or have a tendency to self-censure. That is, because they want to continue having access to the small group, they often don’t tend to voice their concerns and their disagreement, in the knowledge that doing so (especially after a policy option has already been identified) will likely mean that the other members of the group will be less likely to take them seriously, and that objections may lead them to be isolated within the group in the future. Groupthink is an important phenomenon because it cuts-short the search for information for effective policies, and it cuts-short cost-benefit analyses. This does not mean that it produces bad policies. It does mean, however, that it does not necessarily produce rational policies.

         If all this is not enough, we also have to keep in mind that foreign policy, especially in great powers, is not only not usually decided by a single rational individual, but that foreign policy is designed and executed by a foreign policy bureaucracy. Bureaucracies have their own effects on the policy-process, and have a tendency to lead this process astray (again, they don’t necessarily produce bad policies, but they are not conducive to rational policymakers because they get in the way of the search for information, with the assessment of relative utility of various policy options, and perhaps most importantly with the effective implementation of policy choices). To understand foreign policy choices and actions of states, we also have to understand the process by which policy is formulated and executed in modern states. One of the main things to keep in mind in this context is that states are not unitary actors in the way that Realists (and often Liberals) talk about the. Instead states are made up of various bureaucratic actors. In the United States for instance, there are many different organizations that are involved in various aspects of the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. There is the White House, of course, but there is also the National Security Council, the Department of Defense, and the Intelligence Community. The latter, moreover, are divided themselves into multiple actors that all have some input on the process. Thus the Defense Department is made up of the civilian office of the secretary of defense, and the three main armed services (Army, Navy, Air Force), and of course we also have the National Guard and the Marines in the mix as well. The intelligence community alone consists of over 15 different organizational actors, that do not necessarily all see eye to eye. In other words, policy is made by a wide variety of different actors that also have different interests and different views on various matters. Oftentimes, bureaucratic actors will push for policies that fit more closely to their organizational interests, rather than an abstract “national interest.” For instance, the military may not want to be involved in operations that involve nation-building or humanitarian assistance, and may therefore try to push for policies that steer away from that. The State department may not want to see military action in a particular region, because it may intervene with other projects that it has going on. There are plenty of ways in which different organizations that are part of the policy-making process can disagree with one another, and observers have found that individuals from different organizations rarely forget about the preferences of their own organizations when they sit with others to decide as to what policy options they should adopt in response to a particular foreign policy question. Thus, there is a saying that in the bureaucratic process where one stands on a particular issue, is often a function of where one sits, that is, where one’s desk is located. In order to understand the policy process, therefore, we may have to develop a solid understanding of the balance of power within the state apparatus, we have to understand which bureaucratic actors are involved, and we have to have knowledge of the negotiations that take place behind the scenes among bureaucratic actors. Far from getting a process that produces rational decisions, observers have argued, the bureaucratic process tends to lead to “satisficing,” that is, the choice of policy that is the least likely to offend anyone in the room, even though it may not be the optimal policy to adopt in a particular instance.

**Approaching the readings**

While foreign policy analysts frequently argue that individual policymakers have a significant impact on foreign policy decisions (as opposed to theories that look more at the system and unit-levels of analysis), Byman and Pollack argue that we should also think about conditions when individuals, rather than their environment, are going to have the greatest impact on policy. Their article outlines some of these conditions. The article by Smith looks at the small-group decision-making environment, and outlines some of the basic criteria for assessing whether groupthink played a role in foreign policy making. Finally, Halperin, Klapp and Kantor examine the bureaucratic politics model of foreign policy making.

**Sources**

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