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Analysing Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Although as a concept foreign policy has been widely used by students of International Relations (IR), analyzing a policy categorized as a foreign policy is a challenging task. This is due to the complexity of foreign policy as a process. To attain a comprehensive analysis, therefore, IR students need to have a clear understanding of foreign policy as a concept as well as its available alternative approaches.

Key words*: foreign policy, analysis, conceptualising, approach.*

Although many students of international relations (IR) have conceptualised foreign policy (Meehan, 1971:265-294), it is not easy to get agreement about the meaning of the concept (Hermann, 1972:58-79). This is perhaps attributed to the fact that as a process it is a complex phenomenon and therefore subject to many interpretations. As one IR scholar once suggests, even the simplest foreign policy action such as the announcement that a head of state will be travelling abroad can bring multiple interpretations. It can be interpreted as reflecting "the decision of an individual, the deliberations of a committee, the outcome of a policy-making process, the sum of clashing interests groups, the values of a dominant elite, the product of a society's aspirations, the reinforcement of a historical tradition, the response to an opportunity or challenge elsewhere in the world" (Rosenau, 1987:2). Thus in doing analysis, analysts would have to come across with multiple explanatory layers of foreign policy.

Taking into account that complexity, this article suggests that in order to gain a comprehensive analysis, it is necessary for IR students to have a clear definition of foreign policy and knowing alternative approaches that can be used in analysing foreign policy. In the first part, it will reveal how foreign policy has in many ways been conceptualised and elaborated, while in the second part it will highlight alternative approaches that can be utilised for analysis.

Conceptualising Foreign Policy

As revealed earlier, many IR students have conceptualised foreign policy. Rosenau for example, conceives of foreign policy as authoritative actions taken by governments or are committed to take in order either to maintain the desirable aspects of the international environment or to amend its undesirable aspects. It is necessarily

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calculated and goal-oriented, and it has unintended consequences which greatly affect the kind of adaptation that the society makes during a certain period of time; its initiation is purposeful (Rosenau, 1974:6). Others view it consisting of "official actions (and reactions) which sovereign states initiate (or receive and subsequently react to) for the purpose of altering or creating a condition (or problem) outside their territorial-sovereign boundaries" (Wilkenfeld et al., 1980:100). Apart from actions, Holsti (1983:97), suggests that it also incorporates ideas that are planned by policy makers in order to solve a problem or uphold some changes in the environment, which can be in the forms of policies, attitudes, or actions of another state or states. Slightly different from these scholars, however, Modelski defines it as 'the system of activities' that are evolved by communities with the purpose of altering the behaviour of other states and of adjusting their own activities to the international environment (Modelski, 1962:6). In most cases, therefore, scholars generally define foreign policy as authoritative measures or actions undertaken by governments with certain purposes in regard to interactions with governments of other states. Thus it refers by implication to the actions and purposes of personalised national governments with respects to areas and objects lying beyond their territorial limits.

The main problem of the definitions presented above is the confining sense of actions of foreign policy as only being between sovereign units or states, a notion that very much reflects the influence of the realist tradition of state-centred approach perceiving state as a unitary actor in the international system. Those conceptions do not conform to the evolving reality that the international system has become increasingly complex, which one of its causes is due to the emerging importance of non-state actors. Indeed it has been accepted, as a matter of emerging fact, that non-state actors could have had considerable impact on the overall form and dynamics of the international system. Although it can still be said that foreign policy is the sum of statements and actions by a state's policy-makers to promote or control the impact of changes in the states' external environment that was traditionally made up of policies, attitudes and actions of other states, these must now be added by the role of non-state actors (Nossal, 1988:117-180); Mansbach, 2000:133-195; Kegley & Wittkopf, 2004: 135-185; Russet et al., 2006:65-72). Therefore, the first target of foreign policy is a foreign actor, state or non-state actor (Wurfel & Burton, 1990:5).

For the purpose of analysis, the concept of foreign policy is understood to have consists of statements and actions taken by a state subject to its relations with other external actors, states or non-state actors. It is responsive to the actions of other states and is taken to fulfil national interests outside territorial boundary. Equally, foreign policy is a continuation of domestic policy because it serves and reflects national interests (Plano & Olton, 1969:127; Morgenthau, 1978:553), as it is argued by Kissinger, "foreign policy begins when domestic policy ends" (Kissinger, 1971: 22). Foreign policy is also considered as "the point at which influences arising in the international system cross into the domestic arena and at which domestic politics is transformed into international behavior" (Hopkins & Mansbach, 1973:133).

In the process of analysis and partly a reflection of the complexity of foreign policy as a phenomenon, scholars often add further elaborations on its the essence. This leads to other basic concepts that are built-in with foreign policy. Modelski perceives foreign policy as a system of activity that involves the process of inputs flowing into it and outputs arising out of the process. It is in this regard that policy makers become one important element in the process of formulating foreign policy. Furthermore, as foreign policy relates to activities with the international environment, two other elements are closely integrated, namely a capability (power) to execute and the context in which policies are formulated and executed. These policies are composed under particular principles as guidance and in turn are conducted with specified objectives. In short, the basic concepts in foreign policy are policy makers, aims, principles, power to execute, and the context of foreign policy (Modelski, 1962: Part One).

Rosenau (1976), unlike Modelski's system of activity, distinguishes three integral parts of foreign policy known as three concepts of foreign policy. These are foreign policy as a cluster of orientations, foreign policy as a set of commitments and plans for action, and foreign policy as a form of behaviour. As a cluster of orientations, foreign policy refers to attitudes, perceptions, and values, and all these derive from state's historical experience and strategic circumstances which mark its place in the world politics. These cluster of orientations function as guidance for state officials when they are confronted with external conditions requiring them to make decisions and take actions. In other words, these are general tendencies and principles underlying the conduct of states in the arena of international politics. As a set of commitments and plans for action, foreign policy points to revealing strategies, real decisions, and observable policies, which are taken when states get linked to its external environments. They are mostly observable and consist of specific goals and means through which these are achieved. It can be said therefore that the commitments and plans for actions are translations of the cluster of orientations, which are made when observers or analysts refer to the making of foreign policy. Meanwhile, as a form of behaviour, foreign policy refers to its empirical phase involving concrete steps or activities that follow the translation of generalised orientations of foreign policy. Viewed from this angle, in other words, foreign policy appears as the external behavior of states.

Rosenau emphasises that in the process of analysis, considerable confusion is likely to mount when analyst fails to distinguish these concepts because "the analysis of foreign-policy-as-orientations involves different problems and phenomena than the investigation of foreign-policy-as-plans, and both encompass different issues than does the study of foreign-policy-as-behaviour" (Rosenau, 1976:16-17). Thus clear identification about these concepts is essential prior to commencing the analysis stage.

Holsti (1983), takes a slightly different approach from Rosenau's three concepts of foreign policy. He expands and divides the concept into four components ranging from general to specific; foreign-policy orientations, national roles, objectives, and actions (Holsti, 1983:98-144). The first component refers to general attitudes

and commitments toward the external environment. It incorporates basic strategy for accomplishing domestic and external objectives, especially in coping with persisting threats. This strategy and orientations are rarely revealed in any one decision, but results from a series of cumulative decisions that are created in an effort "to adjust objectives, values, and interests to conditions and characteristics of the domestic and external environments" (Holsti, 1983:98).

The second component, national roles, concerns with the policy makers' definitions about the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules, and actions that are suitable to their state, and of the functions their state should perform in a variety of geographic and issue settings (Holsti, 1983:116). Examples of these kinds of roles are regional defender, mediator, protector, and world policeman. The third component, objectives, is meant for an image of a future state of affairs and set of conditions that governments through individual policy makers aspire to bring about by wielding influence abroad and by changing or sustaining the behavior of other states. These generally refer to concrete conditions that are normally stated as the aims of foreign policy (Holsti, 1983:124). The first three components are composed of images in the minds of policy makers, attitudes toward the outside world, decisions, and aspirations. Meanwhile, the fourth component, actions, are the things that "governments *do* to others in order to effect certain orientations, fulfil roles, or achieve and defend objectives", and "an act is basically a form of communication intended to change or sustain the behavior of those upon whom the acting government is dependent for achieving its own goals" (Holsti, 1982:144).

Drawing on from Modelski's system of activity, Rosenau's three main clusters of concepts, and Holsti's four component of foreign policy, it seems that there has been a tendency among scholars to underscore certain points. In other words, the conceptualisation of foreign policy differs according to different scholars' point of emphasis. Nevertheless, there has been similarity in terms of what they have generally considered the main aspects of foreign policy. There are at least three main aspects of foreign policy, namely sources of foreign policy, the process of producing sources becoming policy, and actions that carried out in implementing policy. Within the vast literature of international relations, there are at least three different labels — mostly as the result of different ways by which foreign policy has been conceptualised — which are utilised in distinguishing these three main aspects. First, the three main aspects are identified as the sources of external behavior, the process through which these sources are jointly taken into action, and the action itself. Second, the three main aspects are respectively named as the independent, intervening, and dependent variables of foreign policy. Third, the three main aspects are called as the input, the decision-making, and the output of foreign policy.

Alternative Approaches

On the backdrop of previous summary that foreign policy consists of three main aspects —sources of foreign policy, the process of producing sources becoming policy, actions that carried out in implementing policy— analysing foreign policy should therefore focus on the three main aspects. Moreover, various factors

possibly affecting foreign policy — which are often the subject matters of analysis — can be sought within the three.

Hopkins and Mansbach (1973), suggest that these factors can be categorised into five groups, external, individual, role, governmental, and societal. First, external factor refers to the relative capability of a state and its strategic location in relation to other states within the structure of international system at any moment of time. Second, individual factors comprise of personality, experience, values, political and leadership style that all make states' leaders unique in influencing the way decisions are made and the quality of decisions as outputs. Third, role refers to a set of socially prescribed behaviours related to all individuals occupying similar official positions within a political system. These officers assume a set of responsibilities and are therefore assigned to undertake certain tasks, which in turn form a kind of interaction among them. Fourth, governmental factors refer to the types of governmental institutions, the distribution of influence among these institutions, the means by which personnel of the institutions are selected and recruited, the interests that these institutions are representing, and the extent to which these institutions are open to societal influences. Fifth, societal factors include all non-governmental aspect of a society that could encompass elements such as economic capability, political culture, and the degree of industrialisation, territorial size, natural resources, social cohesion, and basic values (Hopkins & Mansbach, 1973:136-151).

The main task of analysts in analysing foreign policy is "to throw light on the ways in which states attempt to change, and succeed in changing, the behavior of other states" (Modelski, 1962:7). This is often a challenging task given the complexity of foreign policy. As already suggested in the previous section, foreign policy has been constantly in flux and in many occasions, just like other important national policies, certain decisions are veiled in secrecy (Lovell, 1970:3). The complexity of the structure and the process through which foreign policy decisions are formulated, and the influence of the international situation operating at any moment of time (operational environment) (Rosenau, 1972:145-165; Rosenau, 1976)), and psychological factors underscoring on the role of individual perceptions, values, and interpersonal relations (de Rivera, 1968; Morgan, 1991; Goldgeier & Tetlock, 2001), make the analysing task even more challenging. This is nonetheless important as approaches (theories and perspectives) in general have at least two main purposes; it helps the process of observation and description, and provides scheme of analysis (Modelski, 1962:2).

As this section will shortly review alternative approaches for analysing foreign policy, it is necessary to point out that the subject of foreign policy has been considered part of the discipline of IR. The latter basically concerns with the interactions between actors of the international system, whereas the former relates to specifically actions of one actor against another. It is therefore understandable that approaches (perspectives and theories) regarding analysing foreign policy have originated from and evolved with approaches that have been developing within the discipline of IR.

History is one of the earlier social science disciplines from where alternative approaches (theories, perspectives) for foreign policy analysis (and international

politics in general) have developed (Knutsen, 1992; Smith, 1999; Sked, 1989:87-102; Walker, 1990:482-505; Mansbach, 2000:26-58). An historical approach tends to describe broad trends in states' foreign policies and relates those policies to the social, economic, ideological, and geographic conditions within a certain period of time. It focuses on the analysis of reactions to other nations or the behaviour of interests groups within a broader historical background. Together with the growing complexity of international politics, this early approach has contributed to the rise of liberalism/ idealism and realism approaches, which between World War I and II and particularly after World War II had marked the birth of international relations as a 'separate' discipline (Smith, 1989:3-27). Indeed, the liberalism/idealism and realism approaches have been considered as foundations of IR (foreign policy) theories; both are often referred too as 'traditional theories' of IR (Kegley, 1995:25-34; Holsti, 1995:35-65; Hobson, 2000:15-106).

In essence, liberalism and realism offer different basic postulates describing and understanding the nature of international politics. Griffiths and O'Callaghan summarise that "a central characteristic of idealism is the belief that what unites human beings is more important than what divides them". The idealism proponents reject "communitarian and realist arguments that the state is itself a source of moral value for human beings". Moreover, the advocates of idealism "defended a cosmopolitan ethics and sought to educate individuals about the need to reform the international system" (Griffiths & O'Callaghan, 2002:149). Historically, idealism became prominent as a reaction to the bloodbath of the World War I, and since then went on to dominate the study of international relations until the late 1930s (Griffiths & O'Callaghan, 2002:148).

In contrast to idealism, realism offers "both descriptive and prescriptive insights about international relations' (Griffiths & O'Callaghan, 2002:262). Most of its proponents share at least the following basic premises. First, it regards "the structure of the international system as a necessary if not always sufficient explanation for many aspects of international relations". Second, it notes that "the absence of a central authority to settle disputes is the essential feature of the contemporary system". Third, it considers states as the central actors in the international system. Fourth, it perceives the states' behaviour as being rational because "it is guided by the logic of 'national interest', usually defined in terms of survival, security, power, and relative capabilities". Fifth, state is considered as a unitary actor. Therefore, states' actions are primarily a response to external rather than domestic political forces (Holsti, 1995:36-37; Griffiths & O'Callaghan, 2000:261-262).

Drawing on from the premises of realism, it is clear for its proponents that the most significant focus in analysing international relations and foreign policy is on the external aspects. This is a consequence of the way in which the proponents of realism portray the importance of state as the main actor in the international system, which they consider act rationally as unitary actors. It downplays, although not necessarily discounts, the significance of domestic politics. In contrast, idealism approach has the tendency to consider the state more as a coalition of interests that could represent individuals and groups, and emphasises on low politics. Nevertheless, according

to Ole R. Holsti, at least until the end of the Cold War, realism has emerged as the dominant approach and this has been partly due to its usefulness in providing framework for understanding the Second World War and the Cold War (Holsti, 1995: 39).

Criticisms to both idealism and realism approaches have at least derived from two other approaches, namely psychological approach and decision-making approach. From the psychological approach, as de Rivera argues, idealism and realism do not provide more detailed picture of forces shaping foreign policy due to the lack of attention of both on the role of a psychological factor that "emphasises on the individual perceptions, values, and interpersonal relations". According to de Rivera "the individual is always present; a correct perception, or a particularly creative one, is just as psychological and reflects individual values just as much as does a distorted view of reality". The problem, he further argues, "there is a tendency to take for granted psychological factor simply because we assume human nature as a constant factor", and reminds that "one danger of taking psychology for granted is the danger of failing to see that things could have happened differently if man had behaved differently". Therefore, "any analysis [of foreign policy] that divorces history, political science, psychology, and the other social sciences is apt to be incomplete and somewhat misleading" (de Rivera, 1968:2-3).

Another criticism comes from scholars who concentrate on the way foreign policies are made; decision making approach of foreign policy (Snyder et al., 1962; Frankel, 1963; Powel & Purkit & Dyson, 1987:203-220; Anderson, 1987:285-308; Hermann, Hermann & Hagan, 1987:309-336). Basically, the proponents of decision-making approach stand upon several shared premises. First, they believe that individuals holding decision-making positions within the government bureaucracy play a major role in what and how foreign policies are planned and formulated. Second, they equally believe that bureaucracies (government organisations) have imperative role in the process of formulating foreign policies because the actual or end policies are often adopted as the product of bargaining between the concerned government's organisations or departments. Third, as those important individuals work within a bureaucratic procedure, they tend to rationally operate according to certain rules that link them. Frankel, one of the proponents of decision-making approach, sums up that state decisions are essentially designed and formulated by individuals and groups of individuals acting on behalf of state. They are usually, although may not at all times, "the incumbents of official positions determined by constitutions and legal systems." Therefore, discussion centres on individuals and groups who represent their states (Frankel, 1963:2-3).

Based on those arguments, the proponents of decision-making approach challenge the realism premise considering the state as a unitary rational actor whose behaviour can be explained by mainly referring to the structure of international system. In what seems to be close to the basic premises of liberalism, the advocates of decision-making approach argue that individual, groups, and organizations acting in the name of the state are also sensitive to pressures and constraints other than international system (external environment). These pressures and constraints could include elite maintenance,

electoral politics, public opinion, pressure group activities, ideological preferences, and bureaucratic politics. They claim that national interests cannot be solely defined by international system because national interests can also reflect elements within the sphere of domestic politics. Moreover, they strongly believe that the internal process of the state must be taken into account with the main focus of analysis directed at decision makers and how they define the whole situation, domestic and international politics (Holsti, 1995:47; Snyder et al., 1962).

The decision-making approach has three variants, namely bureaucratic politics, organisational process or group dynamics, and individual decision-making or some called it the presidential (leader) management model. The first –bureaucratic politics– points to the proposition that perceives foreign policy decisions as being resultant from "a game of bargaining and compromise between upper-level decision makers". Sometimes the compromise process is beyond the control of the leader of the state. Thus, decision-making is considered as the result of bargaining process within the states' bureaucratic organizations. The second –organisational process or group dynamics– is a variant of decision-making approach whose proponents argue that the interests of organisations involved in the process of foreign policy decision-making dominate such process. Within this variant, therefore, foreign policy is being understood as the product of group interactions in the process of decision-making. Meanwhile the third –individual decision-making– is a variant of decision-making approach whose advocates argue that it is the leader who actually generates and controls the system in which foreign policies are formulated, partly as an effort to maintain leadership. Thus, foreign policy is being considered as the result of individual leader's choice in the process of decision-making (Holsti, 1995:47-56; Newmann, 1998:187-216. Regardless of the models, nevertheless, using decision-making approach means for the necessity to view foreign policy through the eyes of those who act in the name of their state. These are decision-makers and individual groups, including the leaders, who perform and function within the context of their state's organisational bureaucratic procedures.

In general, as Barkdull and Harris (2002:63-90) suggest, theories or approaches for analysing foreign policy can be categorised in three groups, namely systemic theories, societal theories, and state-centric theories. The first category, systemic theories, refers to theories or approaches that are seeking to analyse and explain foreign policy by emphasising on the important influence of international system. For this group of theory, in other words, foreign policy is seen more as a product of states' efforts in adjusting towards the international system or states' external environment.

The second category, societal theories, is a group of approach that points to foreign policy as being a product of combination between domestic politics and culture of a given state. These theories underscore about the essential or important influence of domestic political factors on the states foreign policy. And the third category, state-centric theories, is a group of approach that pursue answers to questions concerning foreign policy within the structure of the state, and this also incorporates the individuals who transmit and implement foreign policies on behalf

of their country. In other words, it points to the role of actors involved in decision-making process of foreign policy.

In a slight different, Smith (1989:375-379) identifies five main ways of studying (analysing) foreign policy, namely through a domestic politics perspective, international relations theory, comparative foreign policy, case studies, and middle-range theory. To analyse or study through a domestic politics perspective means that the state is assumed as being a self-contained unit. It considers foreign policy as a behavior determined by process within the state's domestic structure and downplays the role of factors deriving from states' external environment.

In contrast, international relations perspective ignores the significance of state's domestic structure. Instead, it argues for the importance of systemic causes of state behavior. States' foreign policy behaviour is considered more as states' response and adjustment processes toward the influence of the international system. The comparative foreign policy, meanwhile, treats the equal importance of domestic and systemic factors by making comparisons of foreign policy between states. However, it leaves questions concerning dissimilar situations experienced by various countries. For example, circumstances in the developed states are certainly different to the developing countries.

Given the inherent weaknesses from the first three, Smith suggests that case studies and middle-range theory can be of more useful compromised path. While case studies may lack wide theoretical explanation, it provides detail description over issues under studied. Likewise, middle-range theory concentrates on specific aspects of generalised foreign policy system and this would provide opportunity to reach theoretical explanation although confined within certain conditions.

Conclusion

Drawing from what has been offered by the existing alternative approaches, it seems obvious that each tends to emphasise certain aspects of foreign policy. Arguably, by doing so the proponents of certain approach have highlighted its strengths in guiding analysts to throw light on the ways through which states attempt to change, and succeed in changing, the behaviour of other states or non-state actors. The proponents of each approach have argued for the merits and usefulness of their own approach in understanding and explaining foreign policy behaviour.

The problem, however, that by opting to argue and concentrate on particular aspect of foreign policy, each approach plays down the importance of other aspects. It means, as a result therefore, that there is no single approach in the foreign policy analysis that is capable at one time of providing comprehensive answers to all questions related to the complexity aspects of foreign policy. In other words, the complexity of foreign policy phenomena practically makes it near impossible to have one single approach or theory that is capable of analysing and explaining foreign policy comprehensively. Indeed, as suggested by Hill and Light (1985:156-173), every approach or theory has its own strengths but at the same time has its weaknesses as well. Therefore, any attempt to analyse foreign policy requires taking into account this situation, and that means that every analyst should have this in mind in the efforts to analyse foreign policy.

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