

An analysis of neorealist foreign policy theory politics essay



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According to Kenneth Waltz, the Foreign Policy of a country can be analysed by focusing on either the individual, the state or the international system.

Which one of these levels of analysis do you think gives the most useful perspective from which to explain and understand a country's foreign policy?

Give reasons to support your argument.

Introduction.

Foreign Policy refers to a consistent course of actions followed by one nation to deal with another nation or region, or international issue. A country's foreign policy may reflect broad national objectives or be a very specific response to a particular situation. A country can achieve its foreign policy goals in several ways. It can use diplomacy, that is, peaceful negotiations with other countries. It can employ economic actions such as giving money or other aid to another country, or restricting trade with that nation. It also can resort to military force.[1]A country's foreign policy can be influenced by many different variables, including its historical alliances with other nations, its culture, type of government, size, geographic location, economic ties, and military power. A country's foreign policy is usually aimed at preserving or promoting its economic and political interests abroad and its position in the world.

Kenneth Waltz espoused a neorealist theory which he developed to portend that states seek to survive within an anarchical system. This theory to some great extent explains the foreign policy framework of countries; however other theorists have argued that the neorealist theory is not exhaustive in explaining other foreign policy behaviours. It is noteworthy however, that

although states seek survival through power balancing, balancing is not the aim of that behaviour. Balancing is a product of the aim to survive. And because the international system is regarded as anarchic and based on self-help, the most powerful units set the scene of action for others as well as themselves.

THEORIES OF FOREIGN POLICY

In international relations two dominant theories explain how actors behave in international politics. Generally it is the neorealist and domestic level theories. Following the rule of prudence, these theories tend to be abstract, and as a result leaders are thought to obey the dictates of a theoretical rather than practical rationality. Captivated by the idea of great powers and power politics, realist scholars privilege the role of the sovereign state, which must exist in what Kenneth Waltz calls the “ brooding shadow of violence.” Realists understand the nature of the international system as anarchic. It is argued that anarchy induces states to act rationally, for the sake of survival, which motivates them to maximize security[2]. If all states are assumed to act on considerations of security or power, then all leaders must define their international goals similarly. The realist perspective is reductive and simple; it focuses on conflict and war. States care about their individual welfare above anyone else’s. In an environment where survival is key, the push and pull of special interests in domestic arenas only detracts from an optimal foreign policy. If this is true, then, what foreign policies do leaders consider under these conditions? For realists, realism is state foreign policy.

Commonality defines leaders. The differences usually attributed to

individuals by way of history, moral conduct and political orientations are
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non-factors for a realist statesman. Leaders never relinquish the potential to use violent means and so they shy away from ideologically driven foreign policies, albeit it is customary to cloak foreign policy in ideological language[3]. It is noteworthy that realist leaders act upon circumstances as they present themselves. They look past questions of justice, and hold judgment on good and bad states. For example, during the cold war American statecraft responded to the expansion of Russian imperialism. The realist prescriptions for this encroaching danger consisted in expanding military power to contain existing threats, strengthening and broadening alliances to arrest Soviet expansion (Billington 1986). Conversely, a liberal internationalist approach prescribed that cold war military threats were coupled with other threats. The threat to democratic institutions around the world would also be threatened by non-state dangers, such as poverty, corruption, and problems of global governance. Realist leaders' interests are identical to the state's interest. Anarchy does not produce incessant chaos, but a natural state where the life of free states is uncertain, so they must help themselves. The natural state of the world creates the rules in which states must coexist and act with each other. To use force, or hold it in abeyance, is the rule, and it is always at the discretion of the realist statesman. A realist statesman forms foreign policy on the basis of the state's ultimate concern, to survive by means of increased security or power. However, the question to ask is, can the leadership always keep an internationally minded outlook without concern for domestic repercussions?

Key Tenets Of Neoclassical Realism. Realism, particularly in its classical form, is less a particular theory of politics than it is a philosophical outlook.

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As such, it is best arranged around a number of core principles. First, the state is the most appropriate unit of analysis in international relations. Second, the nature of the international system is anarchic. Even though states take the edge off anarchy through institution-building, fundamentally their relations revolve around the competition for scarce resources in the absence of an external arbiter of disputes. Third, power is the essential tool that those states have at their disposal in that competition, and the most effective types of power are material capabilities.[4]

THE INFLUENCE OF INDIVIDUALS IN FOREIGN POLICY MAKING

From a foreign policy and international politics perspective the role of unique leaders as forces that shape international affairs is routinely invoked. Given the general perception that leaders are powerful actors in international politics their roles are defined and debated by the public, policy experts, political rivals and the media. Due to the public character of these channels, leaders are judged on the basis of their policy aims, effectiveness, international credibility, and the benefits that bounce to their nations and the world through their actions. However, the identification of specific leaders and their particular foreign policy choices plays a minor role in international relations studies. Who leaders are, and how they perform on the international stage, stirs much debate and reflection. For example, the true intentions of George W. Bush's foreign policy were debated intensely; the chances that Hugo Chavez's petrodiplomacy can strengthen a modern "Bolivarian Revolution" are calculated; the control that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad holds over Iran's nuclear ambitions is today being questioned. It is worth noting that the statecraft of individuals is shaped by <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-neorealist-foreign-policy-theory-politics-essay/>

the type of regime they preside over. Political characteristics that we may look at include democracies, dictatorships and liberal governments. For example, in liberal states leaders with distinct characters come into power, remain in power, and flourish. Subject to the rule of law leaders in liberal republics possess institutional awareness, partisan loyalty, and they share in citizens' patriotic commitments. On the other hand, in direct democracies leaders rise through the ranks of the democratic body and must maintain trust between themselves and the fluctuating nature of majority opinion, which is achieved through a combination of rhetoric and policy effectiveness. Further, in direct democracies ambitious leaders that simultaneously define foreign policy on security issues and manage the changeable nature of majority opinion practice what scholars refer to as " Periclean" statecraft. Leaders create unanimity for their foreign policies. Even in a precarious security environment leaders are mindful about the sacrifice of citizens' private good. Thus, " Periclean" statecraft has a public expression, but it benefits citizens on an individual level. For example, the political community's identification with empire is something that indulges citizens materially and strengthens their pride. With lessened security threats leaders' practice statecraft of the " General Will" by attempting to overcome democratic fragmentation. When it is possible for citizens to thwart policy proposals then leaders engage in a process of issue definition, strategic commitment, and coalition building across societal groups. In sharp contrast, leaders in dictatorships achieve power and maintain it by being immoral. Hoping to conquer fortune, a dictator can be rapacious, cunning and shrewd when necessary. The modes of statecraft that leaders practice in each regime depend upon how leaders with domestically defined dispositions

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respond to the level of external threat in the international environment. Given the influence exerted on leaders' characters by their domestic environment, and opportunities and constraints, foreign policy conduct combines rational and moral choices that are not abstract, but political in nature. Further, in dictatorships leaders practice "Machiavellian" statecraft by strengthening their hold on power. Sensitive to total defeat their foreign policy tends to be conflict prone. Leaders also tend to be non-cooperative in international agreements, inflexible in bargaining situations, and cheat or defect from international regimes. The statecraft which is referred to as the "Tin Pot", achieves the bare minimum security for continued survival. With room to maneuver, leaders are more likely to choose foreign policy on individual preferences. Tin pot dictators are conventionally understood as leaders who take on only so much power so as to enjoy the material benefits of office. This is an economic concept of dictatorship, but it can also be used to represent the statecraft of dictators in weak states in non-competitive international environments. Where security from external threat is not a leader's ultimate concern, attention can be paid to the bare minimum need to attain enough security for continued survival in the international system. In this way, tinpot statecraft is akin to Waltz's economical predictions that states maximize security, so as to satisfy survival. Leaders that practice the statecraft of the tin pot may prove "lax" in foreign affairs, but this does not mean that they are strangers to domestic repression and violence. If the international environment provides no opportunity for conflict and the state's limited strategic position inhibits the full qualities of dictatorial rule, leaders can choose foreign policies that are security maximizing. Foreign policy will represent more individualistic preferences. Leaders can focus on

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international relationships and agreements that increase the international prestige of the state, which can be a remunerative benefit for the state and its leadership.

Liberal republics practice Prudential or Deliberative statecraft. “ Prudential” statecraft has the effect of increasing the unilateral decision-making authority in the executive in both military decisions, and international agreements. Leaders gravitate toward the idea that foreign affairs pose exceptional problems for democratic decision-making. Leaders engage the national interest with less domestic interference, yet this is done with an awareness of constitutional expectations, institutional constraints and public opinion. In the mode of “ Deliberative” statecraft leaders must cautiously make use of the logic of two level games. It is deliberative because under lessened external threats, a democratic theory of dual authority draws more attention in policy-making. When security is less of concern, presumptive national interests will be distinctly political or partisan. Strategic interests are debatable, and “ Deliberative” statecraft occurs in a bargaining environment.

THE STATE IN FOREIGN POLICY

The focus on states as the central actors in international politics leads to the view that what happens within states is of little consequence for understanding what happens between states. Although there have always been those who argued against these claims, the view of the state as the central player in the international arena is so strong. Domestic institutional structures, such as the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of governance, the extent to which government is accountable and transparent or personalist

and opaque, and so forth, help shape the domestic and international interplay of leaders, elites, and ordinary citizens, resulting in domestic and foreign policies that create the contours of the international environment. From many of these models, leaders try to maximize their tenure in office rather than trying to maximize national security, national wealth, or some collective notion of the national interest[5].

If our attention is turned to national political leaders rather than to states, then it becomes apparent that fundamental policy choices – even war and peace choices – may be made without regard for citizen welfare or the national interest. One has only to reflect

on Myanmar's ruling junta, North Korea's Kim Jong-il, or Zaire's late Mobutu Sese-Sekoto recognize that many leaders govern for their own benefit at the cost of the welfare of their subjects. So many nations have been beggared by their leaders that it is difficult to see how we can maintain the fiction that the national interest dictates even the most important foreign policy choices.

The central role of states and governments in foreign policy is acknowledged, and emphasis is that this activity is inextricably linked to the societies on behalf of which it is pursued. Hence, Webber and Smith claim that 'foreign policy is composed of the goals sought, values set, decisions made and actions taken by states, and national governments acting on their behalf, in the context of the external relations of national societies. It constitutes an attempt to design, manage and control the foreign relations of national societies'. [6] On the other hand, Carlsnaes perceives the realm of non-state actors, which is located beyond the state's territorial borders, as crucial. Thus, he maintains that 'foreign policies consist of those "actions" <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-neorealist-foreign-policy-theory-politics-essay/>

which, expressed in the form of explicitly stated directives, and performed by governmental representatives acting on behalf of their sovereign communities, are manifestly directed towards objectives, conditions and actors, both governmental and non-governmental, which clearly lie beyond their sphere of territorial legitimacy'.[7]The above definitions taken together emphasise that foreign policy is an activity that takes place across the domestic-statist-external axis. Arguably, therefore, it affects, and is affected by, actors and forces which operate across this axis. It is therefore submitted that, while not losing sight of the pivotal role of states and governments, foreign policy perceived to accommodate the role of domestic and external determinants in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy.

INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM INFLUENCE IN FOREIGN POLICY MAKING

It is noticeable that central decision makers disagree about what the national interest and international context demand when leaders no longer assert realism's state-centric approach. Diplomacy, bargaining, and war waging become strategic affairs. Leaders entertain national interests by taking vying domestic factors into account. Not only do leaders face strategic counterparts and rivals in the international realm, they also consider the domestic effects and the strategic rivals therein, of their policy positions. Theories of how domestic politics affect international relations vary, but they share a common view about leaders across time and across regimes. The domestic story demands strategic rationality from states' leaders; statecraft seeks to lessen the blows of costly international conflict[8]. Leaders' devotion is not to the survival of the state but to themselves and their survival in office. Policy decisions cannot bypass domestic collusion, partisan

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wrangling, and the travails of making decisions on limited information. Leaders may have foreign policy goals but ultimately care about holding on to power and office. This tempts them to act internationally in order to avoid domestic backlashes[9]. Putnam perceives the state as the mediator between domestic and international pressures. This final attribute, Putnam argues, crucially determines the formulation and implementation of foreign policy.[10]The politics of many international negotiations can usefully be conceived as a two-level game. At the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favourable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups. At the international level, national governments seek to maximize their own ability to satisfy domestic pressures while minimizing the adverse consequences of foreign developments. Neither of the two games can be ignored by central decision makers, so long as their countries remain interdependent, yet sovereign. The unusual complexity of this two-level game is that moves that are rational for a player at one board may be impolitic for that same player at the other board, any key player at the international table who is dissatisfied with the outcome may upset the game board, and conversely, any leader who fails to satisfy his fellow players at the domestic table risks being evicted from his seat.[11]

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that foreign policy is the sum of the official external relations undertaken by independent actors (usually a state, and the government acting on its behalf) with the intention of designing and managing the foreign relations of that state and ' its' society. The <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-neorealist-foreign-policy-theory-politics-essay/>

concomitant conduct is the leadership's practice of statecraft. Conventionally understood, statecraft is confined to the strategies developed for foreign policy at any given time, but it remains unexamined in international relations theory. A theory of statecraft can explain foreign policy decisions and outcomes that do not conform to existing realist and domestic theories of international politics.