

**Constraints and
Determinants:
Structure, Purpose,
and Process in the
Analysis of
Foreign Policy**

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CHAPTER 10

CONSTRAINTS AND
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IN THE ANALYSIS OF
FOREIGN POLICY*Arthur A. Stein*

The study of international relations has historically been extraordinarily interdisciplinary and in many ways the least insular subfield in the social sciences. Scholars have drawn models from all of the other social science disciplines and from all of the other subfields of political science, the traditional home of the subfield. In the same vein, the work of scholars whose primary intellectual home is in other fields has been recognized and adopted as one's own by the field.

The very diversity of the social sciences is thus reproduced within the subfield. There are a myriad of analytic approaches within the subfield, ranging from reducing international politics to the personalities of political leaders to assessing the international system as a system and without concern for its constituent components. And so even within the subfield, there is a choice between analytic insularity and crossing boundaries. Crossing boundaries requires some sense of when and how to integrate perspectives. This chapter argues that combining perspectives begins with understanding the differences between constraints and determinants.

International Systems are Constraints not Determinants

The international system generates constraints that operate on the behavior of all states. But unless the constraints are so narrow as to force a specific choice, systemic factors circumscribe a set of possibilities rather than determine a specific one. In such cases, the international system cannot be used fully to explain foreign policy.¹

Systemic theories of international politics represent arguments of constraint rather than determination. Yet confusion about causation leads to the scholarly use of ambiguous terms such as context and factor. Such terms are used to obfuscate; to make it possible for theorists to propose the importance of certain variables without precisely specifying their causal role. Thus, for example, the anarchic state system is described as setting the context within which states interact. Given this anarchic environment, states must be self-reliant in order to survive. Yet international systems theory can only vaguely delineate the resulting patterns of state behavior and can offer no specific deduction about it.

Theories of international politics are rarely delimiting. Even the venerable balance of power theory provides no specific prediction. States can respond to imbalances either by mobilization or by alliance. No specific response is determined by realism, or by any specific balance (Zinnes 1967; Stein 2001). Further, both strategies of containment and war are explained by appeal to balance of power arguments (Stein 2006). Moreover, there is an array of state strategies beyond merely those of deterrence by oneself or with allies. States do not immediately respond to changes in power, or even to threats, by deterring but rather adopt an array of strategies, including ingratiation (Healy and Stein 1973), appeasement (Kennedy 1976), conciliation (Luard 1967), and deterrence.²

Further, more narrowly focused strategic decisions are also not readily explainable by international factors. Whether to match an adversary's forces or offset them in other ways represents a choice. In the postwar era, the need to make this kind of decision has generated both debate and actual shifts in strategic doctrine. At times, the United States has committed itself to deploy forces to respond in kind. Most often, the United States has developed an escalatory strategy, and relied either on horizontal escalation (responding somewhere other than the point of attack) or vertical escalation (relying on nuclear escalation to deter conventional attack).³

Although systems theorists argue that balancing behavior by threatened states is the invariant reaction to a potential threat, it is analytically and empirically clear that this is not readily and typically true. Although, the

system drives behavior, it does not uniquely determine one specific behavioral outcome. There exist a set of behavioral responses all consistent with the causal condition.

Constraints as Incomplete Explanations

Theories of constraints rather than determinants take us only part of the way toward a theory of behavior. To know that elephants cannot fly, for example, is important, but it indicates at best a partial theory of elephant behavior. The only derivable predictions are negative ones. Elephants will not be seen to fly. Any other theory from which we can deduce that elephants can fly is necessarily held suspect. Yet enormous ranges of elephant behavior are consistent with the constraint that they cannot fly.

Constraints are negative influences, not positive ones. They rule out possibilities. Take, for example, the situation in which a nation such as Russia confronts reduced hard currency revenues because of falling oil prices. This circumstance obviously requires a behavioral response, and it constrains that response to be within a certain range. The Russians must either reduce their purchases from the West to the level of the reduced earnings, increase oil or other exports to make up the shortfall in order to sustain their level of foreign purchases, or borrow and accept a higher level of foreign indebtedness so as to sustain foreign purchases. They could also respond with a mix—some reduction in purchases along with increases in both exports and indebtedness. But objective conditions do not determine the exact policy mix, they only constrain the policy to fall within some limited policy space. Indeed, Russian behavior will fall in this constraint space regardless of Russian perceptions and calculations. If the Russians do not recognize the new circumstances and follow their original purchasing plans, they will discover that they are short of cash. They will either have to do without or find some way to pay for or finance the purchases they want. What and how much they know may affect their chosen response, however. Awareness of the dilemma could lead them, for example, to cut back on purchases of nonessentials while maintaining expected food purchases. Unaware, they might end up purchasing nonessentials first, only to discover later that they must buy less food. But their behavior will necessarily fall within the set of constrained possibilities whether they recognize the constraints or not.

Constraints set boundaries for the possible rather than compel the actual. They exclude behavioral responses. In effect, they state “if x, then not y,” or “if x, then some range of y.” They do not state “if x, then y.” They are quite precise in what they exclude. Elephants cannot fly. But an extensive range of behavior can be consistent with the constraints.

Constraints upon behavior can vary. Some are quite confining and can, in fact, lead to specific predictions. The international economic behavior of small countries provides one example. Small states are typically described as price takers who have no choice but to accept the prices determined by international market forces. The constraints are quite specific. In addition, environmental conditions may allow a country to produce only certain crops, and global market conditions impose tight and specific constraints. The market, in effect, determines the price because the constraint is a pinpoint one.

The nature and degree of specificity of the constraint posed by any system and the actors on which it operates are all-important issues. In most circumstances, the international system constrains small powers more than great ones; in some, it may constrain great powers more. The question is which states have more room to maneuver under what circumstances. The irony is that the field has ignored as uninteresting the very states that are most constrained by the system, namely small states. International systems and international structure theorists have focused on the very states least constrained by the system, great powers. In either case, maneuvering room is one way to describe the range and specificity of the constraint space.

The specificity of constraints can be related to the nature of the actor and the peculiarities of timing. For example, without technological intervention, women can bear children only between certain ages. Thus, we cannot know how many children a 30-year old woman will have during the years she remains fertile. We can only predict a maximum number given knowledge about the length of gestation and the possibility of multiple births. On the other hand, we can predict with certainty that a postmenopausal woman will bear no more children. In one instance the prediction is precise; in the other it involves a substantial range. For the younger woman, knowledge of her predispositions can lead us to make more specific predictions. If she does not want children, she will probably have none; if she has two and wants three, she will probably have one more. On the other hand, the prediction about the postmenopausal woman is precise and independent of her preferences. She may want another child, or she may not, but she will not give birth to one. The biological constraint generates specific negative predictions in one case, but it is consistent with a range of positive predictions in the other.

Implications of the Constraints-Determinants Distinction

The distinction between constraints and determinants has important substantive implications. Ironically, for example, international relations

theorists argue both that the international system constrains all powers and that great powers determine the nature of the international system. International political economists, for example, argue that because hegemonic powers find free trade to be in their interest, they create a liberal international economic order. Implicit in this argument is that the structure of the system generates an imperative for the hegemonic power. At the same time, however, the argument also has the hegemonic power creating an international order in its own image, an order that reflects its worldview and its interests. The system is thus both something outside the great power and something created by it.

The distinction between constraints and determinants is important in assessing the bases of foreign policy.⁴ The most common analysis, for example, of Soviet foreign policy argues that the Soviet Union's relative growth in power made it a less revolutionary and more conservative power in which the role of ideology waned. Yet in the early decades of its existence, the Soviet Union was beset by enemies and constantly struggled to insure its survival. In its early years, the Soviet Union was more constrained by the international system. Its range of options was quite limited. Soviet ideology had little to do with Soviet foreign policy because Soviet decision makers had few options to choose from. They may have used ideology to rationalize actions for which they had little alternative. Ideology may have helped to sustain the faith in trying times, but it played a minor role in determining policy in an era in which the USSR was constrained by other powers.

Asceticism may be central to explaining why a rich man eats beans, but is largely peripheral to explaining why a poor man does so. A poor man has little choice among foods. His asceticism may rationalize his choice, but it is the condition of limited alternatives that constrains his dietary practices. A rich man, on the other hand, can choose from an unconstrained array of possibilities. That such a man chooses to eat beans would have to be almost entirely attributable to his asceticism. The relative explanatory role of such an ideology (indeed, its status as explanation or rationalization) is related to the constraints operating on the decision maker.

The Soviet Union's evolution into a great power implied that it had a much wider range to maneuver. The latitude for Soviet policy making became greater in that the international system, especially as the actions of other states constrained the Soviets less. These lessened constraints increased the potential role of ideology. Ideology could play a more important role precisely because there was a choice.

Yet Sovietologists argued that there was a secular decline in the role of ideology and offered as evidence the existence of extensive disagreement at

the highest levels of the Soviet elite. Yet it is hardly surprising that a world in which the Soviet Union had more choices led to disagreements among Soviet leaders. Elite consensus should be most expected when environmental conditions are overwhelming; its existence should not be attributed to ideology. Similarly, elite disagreement should not be surprising in an ambiguous world with many options and choices.

Domestic Factors as Constraints and Determinants

The distinction between constraints and determinants also applies to the impact of various domestic factors on foreign policy. Sometimes they act as constraints. The level of economic development, for example, limits the size and scope of the state and the military. Just as the planet has a fixed carrying capacity given extant technology at any point in time, so do nations have fixed capacities for sustaining military establishments. Yet these act as constraints, not as determinants. Similarly, a nation whose population is large enough to provide three million soldiers may choose to maintain only a half-million. The demographic constraint tells us only that it cannot create a military exceeding three million. As pointed out in every intelligence debate, estimates of what another country can do are not the same as estimates of what they will do. Again, such factors operate as constraints, not as determinants. They do not impel behavior, they limit it.

Indeed, intelligence analysts often distinguish between capabilities and intentions. Nations do not always choose to do what they are capable of doing. Implicit in this distinction is that there are material constraints that set the upper boundary on the possible. Yet these do not determine what will actually happen. A range of outcomes is possible, and thus, a knowledge of intentions is necessary to predict which will occur (Freedman 1977; Prados 1982).

Domestic factors can also act as determinants. An example of an imperative comes from North's (1977) argument that states with large populations and a high level of technology but low access to resources must expand abroad. If such societies cannot trade freely to maintain their high levels of industrial production, they will become militaristic and expansionist. In this argument, a system constrains state options by not allowing free trade as a possibility; domestic forces and characteristics impel state behavior. The combination of the systemic constraint and the domestic imperative generates a precise prediction.

Domestic factors act as contextual forces in much the same way as international-systemic ones. National characteristics such as demography,

economy, and natural resource endowments all generate constraints and opportunities. Some of these are so constraining that they effectively become determinants.

When Structure Only Constrains Turn to Decision Making

Structural factors, whether domestic or international, sometimes determine and sometimes only constrain. When they serve only to constrain, they are causally incomplete; they act as necessary, but not as sufficient, conditions (Goertz and Starr 2003). In such cases, scholars in the social sciences turn to decision-making explanations.

Structural explanations are straightforward conjunctions of antecedent conditions and consequent outcomes that do not depend on assessments of human cognition. Conditions explain outcomes without the intervention of human calculation. They do not depend on individual beliefs or perceptions. An example of such an explanation would be the statement that countries without a feudal tradition developed neither a strong right wing nor a strong socialist labor movement. One can lay out a set of intervening steps, but they are epiphenomenal.

Structural explanations can be found at any level of analysis. The antecedent conditions can be systemic, domestic, or can inhere in an individual. The argument that totalitarian states are inherently expansionist is an example of a causal explanation in which the antecedent condition is a domestic political characteristic, that is, the nature of the political system. Such an argument does not depend on any calculations of particular individuals. Another example is the proposition that bipolar systems are more stable than multipolar ones. So is the argument that leaders with a compensatory masculinity problem caused by their having had dominant mothers will be aggressive. Again, the antecedent condition is invariably linked with an outcome, and the intervening argument does not presume to depend on human purpose and calculation. At most, such arguments may depend on some assumption about a general human nature—that all people are concerned with their own survival, for example.⁵

Juxtaposed against structural explanations are decision-making ones. The latter conceptualize behavioral outcomes as human choices determined by the reasons for which, and the processes by which, decisions are made. Decision-making explanations fill the explanatory gap left by the indeterminacy of structural factors. When context does not impel, human choice takes center stage. Thus, crossing boundaries to include decision-making explanations becomes necessary (cf. Lukes 1977).

Decision Making as Purpose

The most basic decision-making explanations are purposive ones. Human behavior is goal-oriented, chosen for a reason. Goals, objectives, purposes, and interests explain behavior. Behavior is a function of purposive calculated human choice. Actors' perceived interests matter. The alternatives actors think important and the calculations they make also matter. Thus, knowledge of aims and the nature of calculation become critical to explaining chosen behaviors. Explanation necessarily depends on the goals actors have and the nature of the calculations that they make. Indeed, such models are often described as rational actor explanations.

Purposive explanations are the staple of the field of foreign policy analysis, indeed, of all policy analysis. Foreign policy is seen as a product of decisions, and explaining the decision is considered equivalent to explaining the behavior. Since policy is nothing more than purposive corporate behavior and cannot be explained without reference to the goals of either the individuals making the decisions or the corporate entity under discussion.

Whereas a purposive explanation treats an actor's choice as the central issue, a structural nonpurposive explanation links circumstances and characteristics with behavior and ignores choice by treating it as fixed. An example described above linked an expansionist militaristic foreign policy with a state's having a large population, a high level of technology, low access to resources, and no ability to trade for its needs. This nondecision-making explanation links the antecedent conditions to the pursuit of an expansionist militaristic foreign policy. A decision-making theorist could retort that such an explanation presumes the interests and choices of individuals. After all, expansionism would not be predicted if people in this country were willing to live with less or reverted to a preindustrial economy or society. In other words, linking antecedent conditions with a behavioral consequence presumes this nation's people both to be interested in maintaining their structure of production and standard of living and to have recognized, considered, and eventually adopted the militaristic and expansionist options.

The purposive model of explanation has its roots in an individual-as-actor approach, but it is applied to states as well. The behavior of collectivities, whether interest groups, parties, or nation-states, is treated, then, as a mere extension of the individual-level model, and the foreign policies of states can be explained by reference to the goals and interests that they pursue.⁶ Indeed, the notion of a national interest has a long and venerable history in the analysis of foreign policy (Rosenau 1968; George and Keohane 1975; Sondermann 1977; Krasner 1978; and Nuechterlein 1978).

Often, purposive explanations are inappropriately equated with the rational actor model, although rational explanations usually entail more stringent assumptions than just the existence of purposive behavior. To say that an actor is rational is to say that an actor has a fixed hierarchy of values and interests, that all possible alternatives are assessed, that the expected utility of every alternative is calculated, and that the actor chooses the best option.

Indeed, the full-blown assumptions of rationality are often used to avoid analyzing goals, purposes, and calculations and so to transform purposive explanations into structural ones. Economists, for example, posit that firms are profit maximizers. They thus stipulate an invariant goal, assume that firms have full information and assess all alternative means of reaching the goal, and posit that firms maximize expected profits. Because economists take the intervening steps of decision making as given, they conjoin antecedent conditions with behavioral outcomes. The result is a structural explanation that involves intervening purposive steps that remain unanalyzed, unstudied, and untested.⁷ Changes in environmental conditions are used to explain changes in behavior. Systemic explanations of state behavior that posit an invariant national interest are also of this character. The proposition that great powers fill power vacuums is an example of such a structural explanation. The antecedent condition of a power vacuum is invariably linked to a behavioral outcome. The assumed intervening step is that all states are power maximizers.⁸

Truly purposive explanations necessarily presume that the intervening steps of choosing are crucial, determinative, and not invariant. Specific purposes and the nature of calculations matter. Not all actors are assumed to use the same decision criteria or to have the same value hierarchy with identical weights. Actors are assumed to respond differently to similar circumstances. Thus, policy analysis entails a more detailed view in which individual actors and their assessments matter. A microeconomist makes certain behavioral assumptions and deduces price from market supply and demand. An institutional economist, on the other hand, looks at individual firms to explain why some airlines responded to deregulation by expanding and others trimmed their operations as they confronted the same environment. Although the individual conditions of the airlines varied, this did not adequately explain the range of behavioral responses. To explain the corporate policies of specific airlines involved more than a specification of their conditions and circumstances; it also required an analysis of corporate goals and calculations. Such differences characterize the disjuncture between the general theory of microeconomics and the institutional specifics taught in business schools, and such differences also distinguish the general international relations theorist from the country specialist.

Purposive explanations include goals and calculations as important intervening steps. In the language developed earlier, the environmental conditions are not thought to be so constraining as invariably to generate outcomes that make an analysis of the intervening steps unnecessary. Purposive explanations necessarily presume that the intervening steps of calculation are determinative and essential. Policy analysis begins in precisely this way. A knowledge of objectives is as essential as a knowledge of underlying conditions. This is true whether the actor is an individual or a nation-state. The rational actor variant of purposive explanation has come under attack and a variety of alternatives have been offered (Stein 1999). Critics of rational actor explanations point out that the stringent requirements for full-blown rationality rarely occur in the real world. In most circumstances, for example, it is impossible to maximize, because it is impossible to analyze every conceivable option.⁹

Yet many of the proffered alternatives to rational explanation merely weaken some of the assumptions while retaining the essential one of purposive calculated behavior. It is easy, for example, to demonstrate that not all individuals maximize expected utility. There are a variety of decision criteria available to individuals (Stein 1990). People may simply choose to maximize gain, or maximize minimum gain, without calculating odds (Hamburger 1979, 46–47). Or individuals may not analyze every option. No one about to purchase a house looks at every house on the market but hones in on a particular subset. A decision to buy a house may then not be rational; but it is purposive. Further, if not every option is analyzed, then individuals do not maximize. After all, one can only choose the very best if one looks at every option. A person who looks at 60 houses on the market and finally chooses one may be choosing the best of the 60 seen, but this may not be the best on the entire market. Such a person chooses to stop searching and to accept the best item he or she has come across. Such an alternative model of decision making, dubbed satisficing by Herbert Simon, is still purposive and calculating. It is driven by the values and interests of an actor who compares alternatives with an eye to achieving a set of goals. The standard of total rationality may not be met, but the behavior is purposive and can only be explained by reference to goals, and exemplifies bounded rationality.¹⁰

Decision Making as Process

As theorists focusing on the processes by which decisions are made have attacked the purposive model of explanation, a process-based model of decision making has also become prominent (Brule and Mintz, chapter 8,

this volume). First, studies by cognitive psychologists have demonstrated that however purposive and calculating individuals may be, cognitive processes do not resemble a straightforward model of rational decision making (Tversky and Kahneman 1974, 1981; Abelson 1976; Slovic, Fischhoff, and Lichtenstein 1977; Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982; Schoemaker 1982; Slovic and Lichtenstein 1983). Second, studies of organizations have demonstrated that the application of a purposive model of explanation to an aggregate entity is highly problematic. Organizations are made up of competing subunits and groups of individuals with competing interests and assessments such that the final outcome cannot be said to reflect the interests of any organization, subunit, or individual. Rather, the outcome reflects the process by which decisions are made. Just as alternative cognitive processes can generate different choices by an individual in a particular situation, so different organizational processes and procedures can generate different outcomes as well.¹¹

Hence, decision-making studies have come to concentrate on process as well as purpose. In part, the importance of process derives from the foregoing observations about constraints on rationality. After all, if an individual cannot see every house on the market in order to choose the one that maximizes his or her underlying objectives, then explaining the choice of a specific house requires knowledge not only of the goals and the available alternatives but of the order in which the alternatives are assessed and the criteria by which the search is stopped. The incremental model of decision making, for example, argues that policies are assessed sequentially, beginning with those closest to past behavior (Lindblom 1959; Braybrooke and Lindblom 1963). By conjoining the incremental model with the satisficing one, we can conclude that the alternatives closest to those pursued in the past are compared and at some point a minimally acceptable threshold is crossed and the search stops. They are path-dependent and context-dependent arguments of decision making. The choice is explained, then, by the goals, by the procedure for analyzing a subset of possible alternatives, and by the minimally acceptable threshold. In other words, some knowledge of the process of decision making is required along with a knowledge of the purpose. Decision-making studies are thus adjuncts to a purposive model of explanation—not an alternative. They emphasize the causal importance of procedure, but they do not deny the role of purpose.

Studies of decision making are often justly criticized as being descriptive adjuncts to other explanations rather than alternatives to them. They specify the contents of the black box between conditions and behavior, but they are not explanatory. Decision-making studies detail the process by which decisions are made: where the idea originated, who talked to whom,

what groups or governmental agencies took part, and the nature and course of debate and discussion. All of this information clearly describes what happened in a minute and detailed fashion.

For structuralists, the detail provided in studies of decision making is relegated to a black box whose internal workings need not be detailed. If, for example, all hegemonic powers pursue free trade because it is in their interest to do so, then why is it important to know what committees met, who gave testimony, what proposals were considered, or the exact order of votes and decisions that ultimately resulted in the liberal trade policy. Filling in the black box may be descriptively interesting, but it is explanatorily unnecessary.

For the process of decision making to have a causal role, it must be the case that such processes intervene in a meaningful way between conditions and outcomes. Indeed, the analysis of decision making must be justified on the grounds that it matters. And if it matters, then, all other things being equal, different processes of decision making will generate different outcomes. That is, the same actor confronting the same situation would choose differently depending on the decision-making process. If environmental constraints or determinants (whether international systemic or domestic) are seen as so overwhelming and determinative as to force a particular choice, then the process of decision making that intervenes between context and behavior (between stimulus and response) is epiphenomenal—not causal. To argue that decision-making matters is to argue that contextual factors are ambiguous enough to allow a range of potential responses (Most and Starr 1989). Further, even a knowledge of objectives and options leaves enough ambiguity so that even a purposive model is incomplete, and thus, one can argue that the specific response is determined by the process of arriving at a decision. *Ceteris paribus*, different procedures can generate different outcomes.

Many studies of decision making do not meet this stringent requirement of causality. Indeed, they do no more than provide a description of the intervening black box without providing an alternative explanation for behavior. Some, for example, do no more than describe the set of governmental actors involved in a decision, and in so disaggregating the state they add a dimension of subtlety by including a consideration of interests other than just the national interest. Thus, Allison (1971), in his study of the Cuban missile crisis, examines the explanation for American policy that comes from treating the United States as a unitary actor and determining its interests and preferences. He then argues that within the United States a number of organizations and bureaucracies disagreed. Yet he provides no alternative explanation for American behavior. Indeed, his explanation

depends not on process, but on purpose. What he does do is sensitize his readers to the fact that the process of making and, more importantly, implementing a decision included parties with different views. He points out that individuals representing a bureaucracy have personal and organizational interests as well as make their own assessments of the national interest. In the end, therefore, his proffered alternative explanation also turns out to be a purposive one not at all different from that obtained by treating the United States as a unitary actor.¹²

Process arguments also emphasize that governmental decisions are products of internal interaction. Procedure matters not only because of the way in which alternatives are analyzed, but because corporate decisions are products of interactions among individuals and various agencies of government. The house chosen by a couple will depend not only on their individual objectives and assessments and the way in which the realtor organizes the course of their search, but also on the interaction between the couple and how they resolve their disagreements. The end result, the house they choose, can reflect the realtor's list and the couples' debate and neither of their individual preferences. Corporate decisions often reflect peculiarities of the decision process—of the debate—such that even the participants cannot retrospectively reconstruct a preference hierarchy or a consistent set of assessments that would logically result in the course of action adopted. This is especially true of complex decisions that involve compromise. Omnibus congressional bills often reflect this. No single purposive logic explains a bill that includes both tobacco farm subsidies and funds for an antismoking campaign. Political decisions that involve such compromises and concatenate diverse characteristics are neither fish nor fowl.

No consistent hierarchy of objectives explains such outcomes, for no individual actor would have chosen them. Rather, they reflect the compromises of different actors with different goals and assessments. The nature of the political process is conjoined with the objectives of the set of decision makers to explain the actual decision. A knowledge of the players, their objectives, and the likely tradeoffs are all required to explain and predict. The inclusion or exclusion of a set of actors can be the essential component explaining shifts and changes.¹³ Anyone who has witnessed academic politics can attest to the importance of a shift in the cast of characters. The departure or arrival of a colleague can be critical to what decisions are made. Much the same is true of the White House staff and used to be true of the Soviet Politburo, and this is why such personnel changes are often so carefully analyzed.

Viewing decisions as products of the interaction of purposive actors leads to a recognition of the importance of process. Outcome reflects the

procedure by which individual preferences are aggregated to generate the social choice, the preference of the collectivity. Studies of voting mechanisms and their implications make it very clear that different voting schemes can carry immensely different consequences. All other things being equal, the same underlying preferences of individuals will result in different group policies in a winner-take-all electoral system than a system of proportional representation. Indeed, even using a single voting rule does not guarantee an outcome immune to issues of procedure. This is one straightforward implication of Arrow's impossibility theorem, which shows that the use of majority rule to generate a social choice from the set of individual preferences does not necessarily result in a unique result unaffected by process (Arrow 1963). Indeed, a possible result is that of cyclical majorities in which any alternative can emerge as the social choice depending on the agenda—the order in which alternatives are voted upon. The implications of Arrow's work have led to an immense concern with agenda setting. After all, one conclusion to be drawn from Arrow's work is that the aggregate choice of a collectivity using majority rule can be independent of the underlying preferences of individuals, for the agenda determines the outcome.

The existence of a variety of mechanisms by which individual preferences can be combined to arrive at a collective choice, and the fact that even the use of any individual mechanism may still not result in a unique outcome but can be affected by the agenda, reinforce the emphasis on studying the process by which decisions are made. As long as no individual is solely responsible for choosing, and there is no consensus, the process can be determinative.¹⁴

Environmental Ambiguity and Decision Making

Decision-making variables have the greatest impact when the environment is ambiguous enough to generate alternative interpretations, diverse assessments, and different recommendations. One did not need to know much about the United States and its internal politics and procedures to predict its response to Pearl Harbor. One had no need to know the personality and background of the president or the internal alignment of political forces. Only when environmental conditions generate scope and leeway, when they create constraints and opportunities rather than imperatives, does a study of decision-making matter. Thus, an emphasis on process involves the underlying assumption that conditions and alternatives are so ambiguous or unrestraining that a variety of options exists. Thus, explanation requires a more detailed knowledge of the intervening steps in the process of decision making.

There is an empirical as well as analytic logic to thinking of certain variables as residual determinants operative only when other determinants generate ambiguity. Most factors can be made quite broad and inclusive. Personality, for example, can encompass individual characteristics that are also shared, such as cultural values. Thus, to demonstrate the impact of personality on foreign policy, Etheridge (1978) focuses only on a series of cases marked by inraelite disagreement. Because the international and domestic contexts are constant in each case, he can assess whether variation in policy preference is explained by variation in personality. There is an additional analytic logic to confining the explanatory role of personality to instances of inraelite disagreement. After all, there is no reason to see elite consensus as being explained by personality, since personality varies across individuals.

Not surprisingly, the specificity of detail is often at issue. One did not need to know much about the players or the decision-making process to predict a U.S. declaration of war against Japan in response to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. It is not difficult to explain this event. On the other hand, to predict the specific tactical response of the United States does require more detailed analysis. Once Germany declared war on the United States, America's leaders had to decide whether to concentrate on the European or Pacific front and where and when to strike. Such tactical responses can rarely be explained merely by reference to antecedent conditions. Even though antecedent conditions can generate both behavioral imperatives and a consensus on the need for action, there typically remains elite disagreement about specifics that are not fully, if at all, determined by the antecedent conditions. Debates among scholars are often about the tactical level of specificity, about what is to be explained, and what is to be predicted.

Foreign policy can be assessed at various levels of abstraction. The explanatory and predictive requirements for foreign and military policy vary. The Germans expected the United States and Great Britain to launch a cross-channel invasion but wanted to know when and where such an attack would come. In other cases, knowledge of an enemy's intention to launch a surprise attack would in itself be welcome, even without the details of location and timing.¹⁵

Another example of degrees of detail in foreign policy analysis is provided by one nation's assessments of another's defense policy. It is possible to predict another country's aggregate defense spending without being able to specify the distribution of those expenditures. The factors that explain the aggregate may not explain the specifics.

Constraints, Determinants, and Attributions

The distinction between constraints and determinants is at the heart of certain debates about foreign policy. As argued above, the wider the latitude of structural constraints, the greater the explanatory importance of decision-making and process variables. Assessing the degree of constraint and the room available for maneuver is empirically problematic, however. Analysts observe antecedent conditions and subsequent outcomes, but cannot directly observe constraints. Thus, only extended comparison makes possible an assessment of the constraint space within which actors operate and within which they see themselves to be operating. Yet such a study invariably confronts the problem of the disjuncture between the respective judgments of the actor and the observer.

Psychologists have demonstrated the different causal attributions made by actors and observers. Actors feel themselves to be constrained, recognize all the factors affecting them, and tend at times to feel almost as if they are being carried along by overwhelming forces. Observers, on the other hand, often attribute the behavior of others not to structural forces but to actor preferences and choices. In other words, observers attribute behavior to actor choices, actors to structural forces (Jones and Nisbett 1972; Jones 1976; see also Kelley and Michela 1980 as well as Harvey and Weary 1984).

The disjuncture between actor and observer and its implications for foreign policy analysis is perhaps greatest where the object of analysis is the foreign policy of a rival. Indeed, the overlay of affect that necessarily existed in the United States among analysts of Soviet foreign policy made it inherently very difficult for them to study Soviet foreign policy. This was especially true because reconstructing relative causal importance involved an assessment of an inherent unobservable—the room for maneuver in any situation. The practitioners of Sovietology included both Sovietphobes and Sovietphiles. The phobe attributed hostile Soviet behavior to malevolent Soviet preferences. Unambiguously cooperative behavior, on the other hand, was charged instead to structural forces. Sovietphiles, on the other hand, found choice at the root of Soviet cooperation and considered structure to be responsible for Soviet hostility.

The debates among analysts of Soviet foreign policy and the more general scholarly debates about the origins of the cold war both exemplify these tendencies. Those who blamed the cold war on the Soviet Union pointed to its actions and their implications about Soviet interests and preferences as entailing unmitigated and unbridled hostility. Others argued that the Soviets felt encircled and had no choice; the structural conditions they confronted were such that any state would have responded the same way.

In other words, both the basically cooperative and the inherently hostile would have acted identically, since behavior was impelled by structural conditions and did not reflect underlying actor preferences. Those who blamed the cold war on the United States argued that the Americans, rather than the Soviets, had the room to maneuver. In the phrase used by lawyers to assign legal responsibility in accidents, the United States had the last reasonable chance to act before reaching the point of no escape.¹⁶

The problem of misattribution changed as the nature of constraints and determinants shifted with the growth of Soviet power and industry. In an era in which the international system constrained Soviet choices, structurally determined behavior was incorrectly attributed to purpose and vice versa. But as constraints lessened, the problem of attribution became that of assessing the roles of purpose and process—and the problem became that of mistaking purposive behavior as a function of process and vice versa.

The relative importance of structure, purpose, and process also determine the importance of understanding another's point of view. Structural explanations do not depend on the mind set, beliefs, or perceptions of the actors. When goals and calculations are used in a purposive model of explanation, however, and when these cannot be posited, then explanation necessarily requires seeing the world as does the actor whose behavior is to be explained. Structural explanations (and process ones as well) are not only independent of the views of the actor whose behavior is explained; they do not even have to be understood by that actor. Purposive explanations, on the other hand, necessarily resonate with the actor whose behavior is being explained; indeed, they are often synonymous with the actor's own explanation of behavior.¹⁷ Thus, for example, a scholar's assessment of the importance of understanding how others look at the world is related to the relative importance placed upon structure, purpose, and process in determining others' behavior.

Implications of a Constraints/Determinants Perspective

A conceptualization of international politics and foreign policy as the product of constraints and determinants, of structure, purpose, and process, has a number of implications. For example, some scholars argue that the international system must be given some form of causal priority in any analysis of international politics. In this view, one must begin with the system and only then, if at all, proceed to some other level of analysis. But a view of outcomes as a result of constraints generates a different picture. If, for example, international politics is akin to a Venn diagram in which two (or more) circles represent international and domestic factors, and their

conjunction (overlap) determines (explains) state behavior in the international arena, then it is hard to argue that any priority should be given to the systemic level of analysis. The order in which the circles are placed in such a diagram hardly matters for the analysis—there is no a priori reason for starting with one or the other. Indeed, the only basis for arguing that the systemic level is more important would be if it were invariably more constraining, and that analytic case has not been made.

The distinction between constraints and determinants also has important consequences for statistical assessments of relative causal importance. Typically, regression analysis is used to assess the relative importance of causal variables, including the relative importance of international and domestic factors. But constraints and determinants cannot simply be placed in a regression analysis as if they function comparably. The standard regression model presumes that all variables act as determinants; assessments of constraint require alternative specifications.

The debate about the relationship between polarity and war provides an interesting illustration of the implication of the constraint/determinant perspective on rigorous formulation, specification, and empirical estimation. There is a long-standing argument that bipolar worlds are more stable than multipolar ones. Yet the empirical results on the matter are mixed. But the analytic argument is one about constraints: bipolar systems generate tighter constraints on state responses than multipolar ones, and thus produce balances of power more quickly and readily. What this suggests is that the expected mean level of balancing is really the same across systems, but that the variance around that mean is much greater in multipolar worlds than in bipolar worlds. It is not surprising, therefore, that empirical assessments have not generated consistent results—they are based on mean levels of balancing and conceive of systems as determinants rather than constraints.

Important implications also flow from the impact of domestic constraints on a state's ability to undertake the balancing behavior presumed by realism. States incapable of raising the requisite capability (or of making the commitments to extend deterrence) may also opt for an alternative to deterrence and/or an arms race—appeasement and conciliation. Britain's response to continental developments in the 1930s, for example, was constrained by domestic and international financial considerations. Appeasement reflected neither the British elite's admiration of Hitler nor any British misunderstanding of the nature of his intentions, but a financial inability to sustain any alternative national security policy. Britain relied on a policy of short-term appeasement and long-term deterrence—it maintained as strong a national economy as possible in order to confront its

opponent Germany with the prospect of losing a war that included sustained wartime mobilization (Alexandroff and Rosecrance 1977).

Capability and commitment—the two dimensions that underlie the exercise of power—are both subject to domestic constraints. Asymmetric constraints on them generate a set of possibilities beyond that envisioned by realism (Stein 1993). The realist outcome occurs only if changes in both capability and commitment are unconstrained by domestic factors. On the other hand, states do not respond if both dimensions are constrained (see Stein 1993).

Concluding Reflections

International politics and the grand strategies of states reflect domestic constraints and imperatives as well as international ones, economic and political as well as military ones. Constraints do not act as determinants if they do not generate unique point solutions. When structural explanations act as constraints, foreign policy analysis crosses boundaries and turns to purpose and process to complete explanation.

Scholarly debate often reflects this logic of constraints and determinants. Arguments often posed as competitive are not if all or all but one are constraints. Truly competitive arguments must each claim to be determinants. Statistical specification for empirical assessment must also reflect the disjuncture between constraints and determinants. Finally, scholarly debate is often about how tight the constraints imposed by different causal forces. Crossing boundaries and integrating perspectives lead to scholarly debate about relative causal importance.

Notes

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1. One should not conclude from this simply that theories of foreign policy differ from theories of international politics. Since the international system constrains foreign policy, the key to combining the impact of the international system with other determinants of foreign policy is to recognize and understand the theoretical implications of the distinction developed below between constraints and determinants.

2. Jervis (1976, ch. 3) sees these responses as emerging from two rival paradigms of international politics. Unfortunately, Waltz delineated the alternative to balancing (whether by oneself or with allies) as bandwagoning (Waltz 1979, 126). This image from American politics is most unfortunate and generates an inappropriate view of what alternatives to balancing constitute. Walt (1987) dichotomizes state alignments as either constituting balancing or bandwagoning, as either aligning with the source of the threat or aligning with others to balance the threat. But those are not the only options states have, and appeasement and conciliation do not constitute aligning with the threat nor do they represent joining the expected winning side. Nevertheless, the appellation has caught on, see, among others, Jervis and Snyder (1991).
3. The first Bush administration was initially developing “competitive strategies” as ways to offset Soviet power while living within tight fiscal constraints.
4. The argument presented here is largely unrelated to the opportunity and willingness approach developed by Starr (1978).
5. The assumption that all states are minimally concerned with maintaining their physical and territorial integrity is necessary, e.g., to predict the emergence of a balance of power in an anarchic world.
6. Graham Allison (1971) dubs this model I, or the rational actor paradigm; Steinbruner (1974) calls it the analytic paradigm.
7. Note that economics critically depends on conjoining purpose with constraint. At its most basic, microeconomics recognizes that a budget line acts as a constraint, and knowledge of a budget line is insufficient to determine anyone’s spending mix (unless the available budget is a point, zero). Preference, in the form of an indifference curve, must be combined with a budget constraint (when the budget is greater than zero) in order to explain the specific consumption pattern of any individual.
8. It should be noted that in so far as they stipulate objectives, structural explanations contain a purposive element.
9. Lindblom (1977) calls this “synoptic” decision making and argues that it is impossible even with computerized techniques such as linear programming.
10. There have been attempts to reduce satisficing to an expected utility argument by incorporating a term for the cost of information and decision making (Riker and Ordeshook 1973). Yet this differs from the rational actor model as embodied in maximization models. After all, the maximization model makes it possible to delineate an explanation that is independent of the process of decision making. The same maximal outcome is chosen regardless of process. But bounded rationality arguments that do away with the assumption of maximization can lead to the selection of different choices as a function of the path taken in the course of evaluating alternatives. Unlike unbounded rationality arguments, bounded rationality ones are path dependent and thus depend on process.

11. Gronich (1991) develops a theory that uniquely combines cognitive and organizational process models to analyze foreign policy.
12. The bureaucratic politics literature often concentrates on the problem of policy implementation and emphasizes the disjuncture between the policies chosen and those actually implemented, and does not attempt to offer an alternative explanation for the decisions made.
13. Williamson (1974, also see 1979) makes precisely this sort of argument about the origins of World War I.
14. Social-choice theorists emphasize that policies may not reflect a social choice determined by people's preferences but an outcome determined solely by the particular order in which options are compared. Policies thus reflect strategy or serendipity, but not underlying general interests. Others argue that better policies emerge from the democratic process (Lindblom 1965).
15. Work on strategic surprise typically treats all surprises as equivalent and thus conflates various aspects of the phenomenon. Sometimes the attack is itself a surprise, but sometimes only the timing or location comes as a surprise. Various combinations are, of course, possible. The point is that every event has different facets, and there are different degrees of specificity for any prediction or explanation.
16. Russett (1962) uses accidents as a conceptual scheme for understanding war.
17. This argument is related, but not equivalent, to the anthropological distinction between *emic* and *etic* analyses (Harris 1979).