

DECISION-MAKING IN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

**Translating Theory into
Practice**

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3 Unitary State Perspective

On Saturday, November 28, 2009, President Barack Obama summoned his key national security aides to the White House to finalize preparations for a new strategy for Afghanistan. Earlier that year, extensive reviews had been conducted in various parts of the US government to assess American interests and the costs and benefits of different potential options – and these items had been debated in a series of high-level interagency meetings. The president had made it clear that he wanted to ensure that all perspectives and alternatives were being considered. Now, at this final conclave, he invited all those present to provide their best judgments, declaring, “I want to hear from you guys one last time.” Following that Saturday meeting, Obama personally summed up what he had concluded to be the best choice in a five-page “terms sheet” that he then circulated to the principals the next day in the Oval Office: 30,000 additional US soldiers would be dispatched to Afghanistan to assist the local government in targeting the most violent, lawless areas, and their mission would be to create conditions whereby control of these regions could be transferred to Afghan forces as soon as possible, with a drawdown of US forces to commence starting in July 2011.

Going around the room that Sunday, the president asked every participant to assent as to whether this decision represented the best option for the United States, “and if you can’t, tell me right now.” Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen declared, “I fully support,” while General David Petraeus, in charge of the Central Command, reiterated, “We’re all committed to this.” A consensus decision point had been reached.

Subsequent reporting would reveal that this reassuring image of deliberation and consensus was at least somewhat misleading. There had been deep division about Afghan policy – differences between the policy positions advocated by different organizations within the US government and among powerful personalities who formed the core of the Obama national

security team. But, for one brief moment, the story that was crafted and released to the public – with all the principals agreeing that “internal deliberations” would be kept internal – was that the US government, having weighed all possibilities and assessed the costs and benefits of different courses of action, had come to a unified conclusion about the way forward for the United States in Afghanistan. In particular, the administration was not eager to publicize that the final terms were not based solely on an objective assessment of the situation, but were the results of a number of compromises. Instead, the Obama team tried to suggest that the final decision had come about as the result of a rational, sober process leading to an optimal choice – and this was the story that the members of the team and the heads of the different departments were expected to deliver, as Obama put it, when speaking “in public, to Congress and internally to your own organizations.”¹

As President Obama’s reassuring public characterizations about the Afghan surge and the process that led to this decision aptly illustrate, policymakers are usually keen to portray their national security decisions as representing the “best” available choice – one that has been arrived at through painstaking and thorough deliberations on all possible courses of action, and motivated only by *the national interest*.² There is always extreme reluctance even to hint publicly that a country’s foreign and national security policies are, at least to some extent, simply a kludged-together assemblage of the competing parochial interests of different agencies, departments, and personalities jostling within the government.³ The American president in particular wishes to be seen as standing above such parochial infighting, always seeking to make wise and informed decisions that advance the best interests of the nation as a whole. This deliberate narrative by policymakers leads to a powerful and pervasive public image of national security decision-making as a highly systematic and dispassionate process to assess and promote the vital national interests of the United States. After all, this

¹ This narrative is taken from Bob Woodward, “Biden Warned Obama during Afghan War Review Not to Get ‘Locked into Vietnam,’” *Washington Post*, September 28, 2010, at: www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/27/AR2010092704850.html?sid=ST2010092805438.

² See, for instance, the advice James Carville gave the political team of President Bill Clinton, in Bob Woodward, *The Agenda: Inside the Clinton White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, [1994] 1995), 255.

³ Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, “The Coordination of Complexity in South Asia,” in *The Regional Imperative: The Administration of US Foreign Policy towards South Asian States under Presidents Johnson and Nixon*, eds. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (New Delhi: Concept Publishers, 1980), 21.

is how we all hope things work. More importantly, this is how government itself actually wants things to work.

This chapter probes the common premise – almost a default assumption – that American foreign and national security policy decisions can be explained purely (or at least mostly!) by reference to the inherent national security interests of the United States. This is nearly always the starting point of any analysis of foreign policy decisions, not only by the United States, but for all countries taking action within the international system. We can readily discern this underlying premise in the ubiquitous anthropomorphic descriptions of foreign policy actions found in press reports and elsewhere, along the lines of “Russia seeks assurances from Germany” or “Washington rebuffs overtures by Havana.” The implicit assumptions underlying such descriptions encapsulate the first of the six analytic lenses that we explore to explain how and why the United States decides on foreign policy actions. We refer to this as the **unitary state perspective**.

The chapter starts by exploring the default premise that *countries* can and do behave as rational actors in pursuing their national interests within the context of the international system. The next section explores the roots of this perspective in rational choice theory from the broader social sciences. After that we examine how and why the unitary state perspective is closely entwined with theories of international relations that seek to understand how the international system works. Next, we look at the structures and functioning specifically of the US government to assess to what extent it approximates the ideal of a unitary state. Finally, the chapter ends by discussing the practical applications and limitations of this perspective.

CONCEIVING COUNTRIES AS RATIONAL ACTORS

The natural tendency of political leaders to explain their foreign policy decisions in lofty terms of national interests corresponds with a parallel proclivity of academics to seek a single “theoretically elegant” paradigm to explain how these decisions are made – resulting from a deliberative process where all options are on the table, where the government comes together, particularly in the person of the president, as a single, unitary actor to conceive and debate options, and where the choice rests on an objective assessment of the “best” available option, which the government then proceeds to execute seamlessly across all departments.⁴ Thomas

⁴ Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS and NSC* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4.

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Schelling wrote, "The advantage of cultivating the area of 'strategy' for theoretical development is not that, of all possible approaches, it is the one that evidently stays closest to the truth, but that the assumption of rational behavior is a productive one. It gives a grip on the subject that is peculiarly conducive to the development of theory."⁵ This is a compelling approach for theorists because it matches empirical observations – countries *do* typically act according to their vital national interests – and it also tracks with the observable intent of governments, which manifestly organize themselves and strive to act in just this manner.

Graham Allison Frames an Academic Model

In developing his seminal models of decision-making based on a detailed study of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Graham Allison recognized that countries acting in their national interests represents what almost amounts to a default supposition. From this he developed a foundational paradigm of national security decision-making (Model I) that he calls the **rational actor model**. This name explicitly evokes a concept that already had an established provenance in the American social sciences, particularly in explaining the decisions taken by business interests and creating standards of assessing economic behavior that could be used in legal matters.⁶ Indeed, the social sciences, in general, think of human behavior as "intendedly rational," meaning that it is "purposive, goal-directed activity."⁷

What Allison had in mind by using this name may not be intuitive to the average person. In academia, however, the words used had very specific formal meanings: the "actor" was a unitary entity (the state) that functioned as a single whole, while its "rationality" was based on the assumption that this "actor" was capable of rank-ordering its preferences and engaging in a cost-benefit analysis of different courses of action. In Allison's usage – echoed by other scholars in the foreign policy analysis (FPA) field, the "rational actor" was the depersonalized conglomerate of the state, not a specific individual. Nor did rationality consequently involve a mental state, as would be the case for specific individuals. Instead, the driving force behind a state's action is not individual will and effort, but

⁵ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1960] 1980), 4.

⁶ For some examples of these uses of the rational actor model, see David Spence, "The Shadow of the Rational Polluter: Rethinking the Role of Rational Actor Models in Environmental Law," *California Law Review* 89(4) (2001): 917–998, or Claire Finkelstein, "Legal Theory and the Rational Actor," *The Oxford Handbook of Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 399–402.

⁷ Graham Allison and Phillip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd edn (London: Longman, 1999), 17.

an inherent “national interest” that is understood and internalized by all government ministers and employees and does not depend on specific individuals to be determined.⁸ The president might be the most important individual within the state, but the “rational actor” was the anthropomorphized and conglomerated state as a whole, which possessed a complete understanding of its national interests.

The problem for everyone else who is not an academic is that the concept implied by the words “rational actor” is easily misinterpreted as meaning “the leader is or is not crazy.” This is a completely understandable misconception – that the “actor” under discussion is a single person or individual (such as a president or prime minister) rather than the anthropomorphized and conglomerated state as a whole; and this misunderstanding is inevitably compounded by extrapolating that the measure of rationality is tied to an assessment of that person’s sanity or reasonableness.⁹ In other words, the academic definition of the rational actor model does not align well with a typical mainstream understanding of what those words mean. While people, over time, can begin to process a definition of “rational” that shifts the focus away from mental health toward the idea of a “process for making choices based on an assessment of interests,” the mental construct of an *actor* as an *individual* playing a role is much harder to alter.

Dispelling a Popular Misconception

The divergence in the scholarly and common understanding of what and who a “rational actor” is represents one example of a trend, noted by Robert Gallucci, a former diplomat and dean of Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service – one of the leading centers for international relations and foreign policy analysis in the United States – where “a theoretical turn across the social sciences and humanities ... has cut off academic discourse from the way ordinary people and working professionals speak and think.”¹⁰ Moreover, things can get even more confusing due to instances where some scholars of FPA use the term “actor” in a different context, to refer to a specific individual. For example, the “actor” who engages in decision-making in Alexander George’s analyses is the national leader, not

⁸ See, for instance, John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 31.

⁹ See, for instance, the January 16, 2013, Intelligence Squared US debate, “Israel Can Live with a Nuclear Iran,” transcript at: www.intelligencesquaredus.org/sites/default/files/pdf/transcript-israel-can-live-with-a-nuclear-iran.pdf.

¹⁰ Robert L. Gallucci, “How Scholars Can Improve International Relations,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 26, 2012, at: <http://chronicle.com/article/How-Scholars-Can-Improve/135898>.

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¹⁴ Ibid.,

the state as a whole.¹¹ Under these circumstances it should not be surprising that, despite the best efforts of educators, generations of students have struggled with the proper definition of the rational actor model, with some incorrectly defaulting to some version of a "not insane" president. Rather than continuing this uphill battle to force formal academic definitions on terms that are widely understood to have different meanings, it may be better to offer a different name for this perspective.

Robert Keohane, in laying out the precepts of neorealism, argues that "states are unitary rational actors, carefully calculating costs of alternative courses of action and seeking to maximize their expected utility."¹² Given that the "rational actor" is meant to be the "unitary state" which is engaged in this process of calculation, it seems clearer and more precise to designate the rational actor model as the **unitary state perspective**. This renaming, moreover, is not entirely at odds with Graham Allison's intent; as he and Philip Zelikow observed, everyday language for discussing foreign affairs usually implicitly recognizes a unitary state approach: "We speak of occurrences not as unstructured happenings but rather as 'the Israeli *decision* to attack,' 'the Chinese *policy* toward Taiwan,' and 'American *action* in the Persian Gulf' ... These concepts identify phenomena as actions performed by purposeful agents."¹³ Allison and Zelikow go on to make explicit the point that the "purposeful agent" in question is the state acting as a unitary whole, "anthropomorphized as if it were an individual person with *one* set of preferences (a consistent utility function), *one* set of perceived choices, and a *single* estimate of the consequences that follow from each alternative."¹⁴

Having established that the focus of the perspective is the unitary state acting within the international system to optimize its national interests, it remains to explore how a state is thought to go about doing this. Put differently, even if we suppose that "Washington" is guided by the first principle of protecting and promoting US national interests, how does "it" go about this? This question brings us to the influence of what is known as rational choice theory in the development of academic paradigms of foreign policymaking.

¹¹ See, for instance, Alexander L. George, "The 'Operational Code': A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making," *International Studies Quarterly* 13(2) (1969): 197.

¹² Robert O. Keohane, "Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond," in *Neorealism and its Critics*, ed. Robert O. Keohane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 164.

¹³ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

BASIS IN RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

The unitary state perspective has its roots in a strand of social science literature known as rational choice theory. At its most basic level, rational choice theory assumes that actors are “capable of making the right decisions” for themselves.¹⁵ In this context, the “right” decision is one that serves the actor’s best interests. When applied to an individual, David Houghton labels this type of decision-maker as *homo economicus* – the “economic person” who can calculate the cost-benefit analysis for any particular course of action.¹⁶ When applied to the unitary state as a whole, “*homo economicus* reappears as *polis strategicos*”¹⁷ – the “strategic polity.”

Rational choice theory assumes that actors have both *preferences* over things that happen in the world and *beliefs* about how their own actions, and the actions of others, affect the world. A rational actor thus combines its beliefs about the external environment and its preferences about things in that environment in a consistent manner.¹⁸ When applied to the behavior of states, as Thomas Schelling pointed out, the guiding assumption is that “of rational behavior – not just of intelligent behavior, but of behavior motivated by a conscious calculation of advantages, a calculation that in turn is based on an explicit and internally consistent value system.”¹⁹ In turn, Allison and Zelikow add, “What rationality adds to the concept of purpose is *consistency*: consistency among goals and objectives relative to a particular action; consistency in the application of principles in order to select the optimal alternative.”²⁰

Considering Preferences

The concept of preferences should be familiar from ordinary language – we say things like “I prefer pizza to pasta” or “I would prefer that you do not open the window.” In expressing any specific preference, we are in effect conveying an opinion about the state of the world we would like to be in. All preferences are not equal – some may be linked to deep and enduring underlying needs, while others reflect passing or marginal desires.

¹⁵ Dan Ariely, *Predictable Irrationality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), xix.

¹⁶ David P. Houghton, *The Decision Point: Six Cases in Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

¹⁷ Melania-Gabriella Cior, *Negotiation and Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), 89.

¹⁸ Kenneth A. Shepsle and Mark S. Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior, and Institutions* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 15–35, 19.

¹⁹ Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 4.

²⁰ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 17

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In everyday decision-making, people are frequently forced to make trade-offs – “I like running, but I also like being warm.” Do I go for a run on a frigid January day?

To be considered “rational” in this specific sense, an actor must have preferences over states of the world that are both complete – all possible states of the world can be compared such that the actor prefers one to the other or is indifferent between the two – and transitive, meaning that if A is preferred to B and B to C, A is also preferred to C. Put more simply, they must be able to rank-order every possible outcome from most to least preferred.²¹ When applied at the state level, for instance, we would consider a government to be irrational if it were “to prefer diplomacy over economic sanctions and economic sanctions over military engagement while preferring military choice over diplomacy.”²²

Importantly, rational choice theory does not place value judgments on actors’ preferences. It is perfectly “rational” for a state actor to accept loss of territory, for instance, to avoid engaging in a war that might result in defeat, or for another state to opt for resistance even against overwhelming odds. A state may expend a great many resources to retain title over what appears to be an economically or strategically insignificant piece of real estate, say Britain in the war over the Falkland Islands – but which may have value to that state in other areas that is not immediately apparent or understandable to an outsider. In common language, when we say that someone is “irrational” – say a small child who insists on only ever eating buttered toast for every meal – what we often really mean is that we deem their preferences to be “unreasonable.” This can apply to policy choices as well – the notion, for instance, that China might be willing to risk nuclear war with the United States to forestall a formal Taiwanese declaration of independence, even as China de facto does not control the island at all, might be deemed “irrational.”²³ But if we know what an actor’s preferences are, rational choice theory allows us to make predictions about their actions whether we find those preferences reasonable or not. Thus, US policymakers expect that China would be unlikely to accept a Taiwanese declaration of independence in return, say, for greater access to US markets – even if increasing Chinese exports to the United States is one of the priorities of the current government.

²¹ For an in-depth discussion of rational choice theory as applied to politics, see Shepsle and Bonchek, *Analyzing Politics*, 15–35.

²² Sadra Shahryarifar, “A Defence on the Prominence of Rational Actor Model within Foreign Policy Analysis,” *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 19(1) (2016): 23.

²³ See, for instance, Ivan Eland, “The China–Taiwan Military Balance: Implications for the United States,” *Foreign Policy Briefing* 74 (2003), esp. 2, at: <https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/fpb74.pdf>.

What does this mean in terms of foreign policy decisions? In viewing foreign policy decision-making through a rational choice lens, we assume that the state can be said to have coherent, rational preferences. The state is able to define and prioritize its national interests, and to map these interests on to a rank order of preferences over the projected end-states that could result from any particular foreign policy action. For example, in the Afghanistan surge example discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the United States viewed its national interests, in the abstract, as ensuring security and prosperity for the United States, advancing universal values, and advancing a rules-based international order.²⁴ It translated these interests into preferences over possible outcomes in Afghanistan: the United States most preferred an Afghanistan with a strong, democratic government that was friendly to the United States, in complete control of its territory, and did not require significant US military assistance. Its next preferred end-state would be such a government that could meet all the of the first set of criteria, with the exception of still requiring significant US military assistance. Its next preference would be such a government that was mostly in control of its territory, and so on. Even in a simple example we begin to see how complex the “complete and transitive” requirement is in practice.

Considering Beliefs

In order to make a decision, actors must have not only rational preferences over outcomes, but also beliefs about the processes that generate these outcomes – how will various actions the actor can take (or not take) affect the world around it? In some instances, these beliefs are relatively straightforward – if I am deciding what to do for dinner and my preference is that I eat a cheeseburger, I can be reasonably certain that driving to a fast-food burger restaurant with sufficient money will allow me to achieve this goal. Other cause-and-effect relationships are, of course, far more complex.

Rational choice theory assumes that the decision-maker is able to consider the results of all possible actions available to him or her. As James March and Herbert Simon postulate, “When we first encounter [the actor] in the decision-making situation, he already has laid out before him the whole set of alternatives from which he will choose his action.”²⁵ Thus, an important supposition in rational choice theory – which carries over into the unitary state perspective as a whole – is that “all options are on the table” for consideration.

²⁴ Drawing upon the general precepts as found in the 2015 National Security Strategy of the United States.

²⁵ James March and Herbert Simon, *Organizations*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 158.

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Administration, believing the agreement to be fundamentally flawed in its approach, withdrew from the JCPOA altogether, restoring sanctions in an effort to compel Tehran to returning to negotiate a new and more comprehensive compact.

However, compellence, as with deterrence, assumes that it is possible to calculate the cost-benefit matrix for another state and to come up with a mix of inducements and punishments that will change that state's calculations when it comes to policy.⁷¹ It also requires the compelling state to assess the costs of compellent measures and whether they might prove to be "exhausting of resources"⁷² – and whether they can be sustained in order to pursue strategic objectives. Both deterrent and compellent measures must be backed up by actual capabilities and a demonstrated willingness to use them, otherwise the credibility or the persuasiveness of the government wielding the deterrent or compellent tools will be damaged.⁷³

A state employing policies of deterrence or compellence assumes that for such strategies to be effective, other states in the international arena respond to stimuli in the way that the unitary state perspective argues that they should. This raises the question, to what extent can the precepts of this paradigm be realized in the actual policy world?

DOES THE UNITED STATES APPROXIMATE THE "UNITARY STATE" IDEAL?

The unitary state is the most abstract of the decision-making perspectives – we all know that there is no such thing as a singular state with coherent, automatically prioritized interests, and that true optimization is impossible. In subsequent chapters, we will explore the limitations and deficiencies of the unitary state perspective in explaining US national security decision-making. But one of the most important reasons for studying and appreciating this perspective is the influence that it has had in how the US government has created its decision-making structures. Earlier in this chapter, we noted Amy Zegart's observation about the "theoretical elegance" of this approach. This perspective offers an idealized version of what government ought to be doing in the national security field: that it is able to develop a consistent set

⁷¹ See, for instance, the discussion when it comes to the use of economic sanctions, Stuart E. Eizenstat, "Do Economic Sanctions Work? Lessons from ILSA and Other US Sanctions Regimes," Atlantic Council, Occasional Paper, February 2004, at: www.atlanticcouncil.org/programs/brent-scowcroft-center/emerging-defense-challenges/372.

⁷² D. Robert Worley, *Orchestrating the Instruments of Power: A Critical Examination of the US National Security System* (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, 2012), 17.

⁷³ Patrick C. Bratton, "When is Coercion Successful? And Why Can't We Agree on It?" *Naval War College Review* 58(3) (2005), 99–102.

of preferences as to what it wants to achieve in the international arena; that it is seeking to maximize benefits while minimizing costs; and that all available courses of action are being assessed to determine the most efficient and effective way to achieve these ends. The continued dominance of neorealist themes and thinking among many of the practitioners and politicians in the US national security community, with its concerns about rising and resurging great powers and how the United States can manage regional and global security structures, also helps to structure thinking about how policy is and ought to be made. Since many policymakers hold a view of international affairs shaped by the dictates of the realist approach, this, in turn, makes the unitary state actor perspective more attractive as an explanation for why governments make the policy choices they do – that they are guided by a clear understanding of the national interest and are looking to maximize their power and influence in the world. It provides a clear explanation for how decisions are made, but, more importantly, it provides the outlines of a blueprint for streamlining more effective decision-making.

Centralizing the Decision-Making Process

As a result, there has been a conscious effort to structure the formal decision-making process of the United States to conform, as closely as possible, to the dictates of this perspective. Lower echelons of government are tasked with gathering intelligence and information and formulating courses of action, all of which would be faithfully transmitted upwards to more senior figures who would then be in a position to weigh and process all relevant information and examine the permutations of different policy choices. After due consideration, the optimal policy choice that is believed to be the most efficient way to achieve national interests would be selected, clearly communicated back down the chain and faithfully executed by the US government acting as a unitary whole. This understanding was codified by Robert C. Cutler, President Dwight Eisenhower's national security advisor, in his proposal to institutionalize what he termed "Policy Hill" (see Box 3.1 "Policy Hill").

The creation of the *National Security Council (NSC)* itself (in the 1947 National Security Act, as amended in 1949) was part of an effort to ensure that government operations more closely conformed to the expectations of the model by centralizing decision-making and, in theory, preventing the exclusion of any important or critical voice from the deliberations. The NSC itself was a formal codification of an informal weekly conclave of the secretaries of state, war and the navy during the Second World War. It was designed to ensure that discussion of critical foreign policy issues included all of the so-called "principals" who were charged with overseeing the main executive agencies that handled US national security, as well as statutory military and intelligence advisors, so that the president would be able to have a

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BOX 3.1 "Policy Hill"

In 1953, Robert Cutler, serving as President Dwight D. Eisenhower's national security advisor, presented a report to the president on how the US national security decision-making process ought to be organized. In his proposal, different agencies of government would prepare their recommendations for policy action, which would then be submitted to a National Security Council Planning Board (comprising the assistant secretaries of the relevant departments with appropriate military and intelligence advisors) who would ensure that all options were being placed on the table for consideration. The board would then harmonize these inputs, search for consensus, and alert the principals of the NSC to disagreements. The full NSC, the summit of "Policy Hill," would then meet to consider these policy proposals. After a policy choice was adopted, it would be transmitted to another interagency organization, the NSC Operations Coordinating Board, which would ensure that the decision would be executed and implemented throughout the different parts of the US national security apparatus. "Policy Hill" was a first attempt, which has been followed by efforts in subsequent administrations, to put the postulates of the rational actor model into practice, by ensuring that, on any given issue, the president would have access to all points of view on the question, would be presented with a wide range of options, would be given all the necessary intelligence and background material, and would be presented with the costs and risks of all possible courses of action.

See: Robert Cutler, "The Development of the National Security Council," *Foreign Affairs* 34(3) (April 1956).

Photograph: President Dwight D. Eisenhower conferring with Robert Cutler (Joseph Scherschel/The LIFE Picture Collection, Getty Images).



variety of views and perspectives debated and aired in his presence (see Box 3.2 The National Security Council, *c.* 2018). To preserve its position as a forum where, in theory, all perspectives and options can be presented, the NSC has seen its membership expand to encompass more participants from additional departments and a wider selection of presidential staff.

By tradition, no votes are taken “for fear that the outcomes might constrict the president’s perceived options,” which would inhibit “an exchange of views from the perspective of the president’s closest advisors to help the president reach ultimate decisions.”⁷⁴ In theory, therefore, the existence of the NSC is supposed to ensure “that, simultaneously, agencies get a full and fair hearing and the president can make clear foreign policy choices in a timely manner.” See Box 3.3 Donald Rumsfeld’s Assessment of the NSC’s Role in 1975 for a discussion of differing views of the NSC’s role.

BOX 3.2 The National Security Council, *c.* 2018

The President of the United States chairs the NSC. All Council meetings are required to have in attendance the following statutory members and advisors:

- vice president
- secretary of state
- secretary of defense
- secretary of energy
- chairman of the joint chiefs of staff (military advisor)
- director of national intelligence (intelligence advisor)

Regular attendees (may also attend depending on the specific subject being discussed)

- secretary of the treasury
- secretary of homeland security
- director of the Central Intelligence Agency
- ambassador to the United Nations
- national security advisor
- deputy national security advisor
- homeland security advisor
- attorney general
- White House chief of staff
- White House counsel
- assistant to the president for economic policy
- director of office of management and budget
- deputy counsel to the president for national security affairs

Additional persons may be invited based on the subject being discussed.

See: National Security Presidential Memorandum – 4, April 4, 2017, “Organization of the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and Subcommittees,” as published in the *Federal Register* 82(65), April 6, 2017.

⁷⁴ Donald M. Snow and Patrick J. Haney, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Back to the Water’s Edge*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 112.

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presence (see Box 3.3). Its position as a coordinating mechanism, if presented, the NSC staff participants from other countries.

It comes might contribute to inhibit "an exchange of views" between advisors to help the president. Therefore, the existence of the NSC's agencies get a full range of policy choices in the NSC's assessment of the NSC's role.

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Even when the actual NSC process does not match the aspirations of the model, it has still been seen as moving to make US national security decision-making more "rational." As such, the US NSC has been emulated by other countries in setting up their own national security councils (see Box 3.4 Imitation is the Sincerest Form ...).

BOX 3.3 Donald Rumsfeld's Assessment of the NSC's Role in 1975

The NSC staff have traditionally been used in one of two fashions. The first is that of a coordinating mechanism. The NSC staff's main function, under this option, would be to make certain that the other components of the National Security Council system meet deadlines, that the options they present to the president are spelled out clearly, that all shades of opinion are accurately represented, and that the president's choices are spelled out in such a fashion as to assist him in making the proper judgments. The second option in using the NSC staff would be to add the formulation of policy to the functions in option one.

See: Memorandum from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to incoming National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, November 25, 1975.

BOX 3.4 Imitation is the Sincerest Form ...

Attempts to realize the precepts of the unitary state as a rational actor continue to beguile policymakers around the world. The 1947 National Security Act and its creation of a National Security Council to act as the central organizing body for US foreign policy continues to find imitators around the world, who see in the legislation a way to cut through the confusion of the bureaucracy by establishing one senior forum where all possible courses of action can be evaluated in accordance with the national interest in the presence of the chief executive.

Forty years after independence, the government of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee established a National Security Council for India on November 19, 1998. The Council consists of a Strategic Policy Group (SPG) – comprising the heads of all the departments and agencies that have national security responsibilities – which is charged with considering all possible policy options that India should consider. To advise the SPG, a Joint Intelligence Board is supposed to ensure that it has access to all relevant and necessary pieces of information and analyses, while a third body, the National Security Advisory Board, is meant to draw in expert voices from outside government to counter the tendency towards groupthink.

To synthesize the work of the Council, to receive all intelligence reports, and to provide direct advice to the Prime Minister, the Indian government also created the new post of "National Security Advisor." Like their US counterpart, the Indian NSA is expected to be the prime minister's alter ego when it comes to foreign affairs.

Regardless of the effectiveness of the NSC system in the United States for approximating the assumptions of the unitary state perspective, the notion of a National Security Council that can allow the state to function as a unitary actor and that has the capacity to evaluate all possible courses of action remains hard to dispel – and such structures are still seen as the mark of a responsible power.

See: For instance, Bibhu Prasad Routray, *National Security Decision-Making in India*, RSIS Monograph 27 (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2013).

The so-called “whole of government” trend in US national security is yet another echo of the precepts of the unitary state perspective. For example, a 2009 Pentagon memorandum called for the US government to institutionalize a single, shared approach to addressing national security challenges that would provide authoritative guidance to all parts of the US government. In essence, it called for formalizing procedures so that, in national security matters, the United States would indeed function as if it were a unitary actor.

The National Security Strategy

At the core of the unitary state perspective is the assumption that the state’s national interests are known, clearly understood, prioritized, and capable of effectively guiding policy decisions. This rests on the belief that we can, in fact, define national interests and capture them in strategic documents.⁷⁵ In turn, such documents can be distributed throughout the entire national security apparatus as a type of “operating system” which should ensure that the US government can, in fact, function as close as possible to a unitary actor by defining beliefs and assessments that ought to be held in common throughout the entire state.⁷⁶ The US Congress began to mandate the development of national strategy documents which were supposed to set “prioritized objectives” and thus “provide guidance to departments and agencies” on how their specific tasks would align and nest with the overall national interest. Furthermore, it was meant to clearly communicate to other states how the United States conceived of its national interests.⁷⁷

The 1986 Goldwater–Nichols Act mandates the president, every year, to issue a “National Security Strategy of the United States” (United States Code 50, section 104a). Among other things, this document must lay out “the worldwide interests, goals, and objectives of the United States that are vital to the national security of the United States,” and articulate the “uses of the political, economic, military, and other elements of the national power of the United States to protect or promote the interests and achieve the goals and objectives” as defined by the strategy. This mandate came about because of the recognition, as then-Secretary of State Colin Powell

⁷⁵ James F. Miskel, “National Interests: Grand Purposes or Catchphrases?” *Naval War College Review* 55(4) (2002): 96.

⁷⁶ The “operating system” analogy is found in Nikolas K. Gvosdev, “New US Security Strategy is a Clear Bureaucratic Victory for the ‘Russia Skeptics.’ Has the President Read It?” *Russia Matters*, December 21, 2017, at: www.russiamatters.org/analysis/new-us-security-strategy-clear-bureaucratic-victory-russia-skeptics-has-president-read-it.

⁷⁷ Catherine Dale, *National Security Strategy: Mandates, Execution to Date, and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report R43174, Washington, DC, August 6, 2013, 2.

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would later note, that there must be a way to "translate" the articulation of interests "into policies ... that are coherent," which, in turn, "requires the establishment of priorities."⁷⁸

The production of the National Security Strategy, as Stephen Walt observes, "conforms to an idealized view of what the policy process should be. First, the administration identifies vital US interests, and then sketches the various intermediate objectives that must be met in order to advance or protect them. Then it lays out the specific policies it intends to follow to achieve these goals, and then (supposedly) goes ahead and implements them."⁷⁹ Practitioners are divided on what actual value the drafting and publication of the strategy has on policy decision-making. Walt observes that the strategy often does not guide actual policy; but others note that the process of developing the document helps to forge and cement an "internal consensus" among the different parts of the US government.⁸⁰

Confidence-Building Measures

Beyond the creation of councils and processes, and mandates to produce national security strategies, another area where the assumptions of the unitary state perspective have had an influence on government action has been the push to create *confidence-building measures* (CBMs) – steps taken to give states greater confidence that moves they (or the other side) make would not be misinterpreted as a prelude to an attack. In other words, CBMs are explicitly intended to lessen the chances of miscalculation. In particular, by encouraging states to make their behavior – particularly in military matters – predictable, transparent, and regularized (for instance, through a system of prior notification for military maneuvers and movement of naval, land, and air forces, thereby creating demilitarized zones and allowing for the exchange of observers).⁸¹ CBMs were intended to prevent the escalation of tensions that might lead to unintended conflict. CBMs were based on the assessment found in the unitary state perspective that decision-makers needed clear and accurate information, and that

⁷⁸ Remarks by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell at the Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University, Washington, DC, September 5, 2003.

⁷⁹ Stephen Walt, "Why We Don't Need Another 'National Strategy' Document," *Foreign Policy*, September 28, 2009, at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/09/28/why-we-dont-need-another-national-strategy-document>.

⁸⁰ Don M. Snider, *The National Security Strategy: Documenting Strategic Vision*, 2nd edn (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 1995), 5–6.

⁸¹ See Shiping Tang, *A Theory of Security Strategy for Our Time: Defensive Realism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 129–130; Rachel M. MacNair, *Psychology of Peace: An Introduction* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 180.

misunderstandings would lead to sub-optimal outcomes.⁸² In contrast, increased information and reduced uncertainty would facilitate improved understanding of the situation and lead to better policies.⁸³

The first, halting steps toward creating CBMs in the late 1950s between the Western and Soviet blocs accelerated after the Cuban Missile Crisis, guided in part by the understanding that such measures served both political and psychological purposes in helping to create space for dialogue and substantive negotiations on security issues. While some CBMs were initially proffered on a unilateral basis, over time diplomatic efforts were undertaken to institutionalize them in reciprocally binding agreements. They formed a critical part of the so-called “first basket” of items covered during the talks of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and enshrined in the 1975 Final Act. Subsequent CSCE meetings sought to move CBMs from voluntary measures to mandated procedures enshrined in treaty commitments designed “to promote military as well as political confidence.”⁸⁴

In addition, the establishment of “hotlines” (first between the United States and the then-Soviet Union, now broadened to include similar links with rising powers like China) is predicated on the assumption that it is important to have direct, unimpeded, and uninterrupted communications links between major powers to ensure that misunderstandings are avoided and decisions are not being taken on the basis of assumptions about what another state may be thinking or reacting (see Box 3.5 Hotlines around the World). Moreover, the original US–Soviet hotline set up in 1963 was not based on voice-to-voice communications, which would test the ability of translators to provide extremely accurate renditions of statements – opening the possibility of misunderstanding – but the transmission of written texts. As Kelsey Davenport has concluded, “Such a design prevented spontaneous verbal communications, which could lead to misunderstanding and misperceptions.”⁸⁵ Hotlines grew out of a recognition – based not only on theory but also on the practical experience of the Cuban Missile Crisis – that important decisions made in the absence of accurate information could lead to disaster. To the extent that the unitary state perspective is based on

⁸² Hans Günter Brauch, Czeslaw Mesjasz, and Björn Möller, “Controlling Weapons in the Quest for Peace,” in *The Future of the United Nations System: Potential for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Chadwick F. Alger (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1998), 28.

⁸³ Jacob Bercovitch and Richard Jackson, *Conflict Resolution in the 21st Century: Principles, Methods and Approaches* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 94.

⁸⁴ John Fry, *The Helsinki Process: Negotiating Security and Cooperation in Europe* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1993), 74.

⁸⁵ Kelsey Davenport, “Hotline Agreements,” *Arms Control Association Issue Briefs*, November 12, 2012, at: www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Hotlines.

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BOX 3.5 Hotlines around the World

The original US–Soviet hotline is still in existence as the "Nuclear Risk Reduction Center" and, while it is mainly used to transmit data verifying compliance with arms control treaties, it still functions as an emergency channel between the White House and the Kremlin.

After the establishment of the original Washington–Moscow hotline in 1963, a Paris–Moscow and a London–Moscow line were created, in 1966 and 1967, respectively. In 1987, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to upgrade their long-standing hotline arrangements by opening Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers in their respective capitals.

In 1998, China agreed to the creation of two "nuclear hotlines," one with Russia and one with the United States. The Sino-Russia hotline was augmented, in 2008, with the creation of a hotline connecting the Russian and Chinese defense ministries. China has also set up hotlines with South Korea, Vietnam, and India – the latter two of critical importance given past border skirmishes between those countries and China.

India and Pakistan created a telephone hotline between their foreign ministries to guard against any accidental nuclear incidents in 2004; seven years later, this hotline was expanded to also provide an early-warning network on terrorist attacks.

See: Kelsey Davenport, "Hotline Agreements," *Arms Control Association Issue Briefs*, November 12, 2012.

Photograph: Moscow's Nuclear Risk Reduction Center in 1988 soon after opening (TASS, Getty Images).



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assumptions that better and more information improve decision-making, instruments like the hotline would help to reduce foreign policy mistakes. And, as with the imitation of the US NSC by other states, the institution of the hotline has also spread around the world.

These types of measures were undertaken to avoid the issue that Robert Jervis had identified as a major problem facing policymakers, especially when matters of the use of force (including the possible use of nuclear weapons) arose: "The room for misunderstanding, the pressure to act before the other side has seized the initiative, the role of unexpected defeats or unanticipated opportunities, all sufficiently great and interacting so that it is rare that decision-makers can confidently predict the end point of the trajectory which an initial resort to violence starts."⁸⁶ Mechanisms like CBMs and hotlines were designed to reduce the possibility of miscalculation by ensuring that open lines of communication and clear understanding of intentions were made available to policymakers on all sides.

APPLYING THE UNITARY STATE PERSPECTIVE

The overarching insight that the unitary state perspective brings is not only that states do have hierarchies of inherent national interests, but also that they tend to try to organize themselves in ways that optimize decisions relative to these interests. Certainly, this has been the case for the United States, given its formal processes for interagency coordination, strategy development, and so forth. In many ways this corresponds to scholarly expectations based on rational choice theory and other predictive constructs. It is in fact an elegant explanation of foreign policymaking with evident explanatory power.

At the same time, we also know that the unified, anthropomorphized, conglomerated conception of the state is a fictionalized ideal. Indonesia and Nigeria are abstractions. One cannot sit down with them for a nice chat. Of course, their leaders can do so, but that is not precisely the same thing. Moreover, foreign policy mistakes – in the sense of decisions that produce outcomes that manifestly do not maximize the national interest – are far too common to rely exclusively on the explanation that countries act always and only based on rational assessments of their national interests. For all its elegance and strengths, the unitary state perspective is necessary

⁸⁶ Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 140.

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⁸⁷ Allison

⁸⁸ Ibid., 2

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to understand foreign policymaking, but it is not in itself sufficient. This raises the question of under what circumstances this perspective is likely to have more or less explanatory relevance.

Key Questions for the Analyst to Ask

- What are (or were) the *state* actor's goals and objectives?
- What actions are (or were) available to the state actor?
- Which action would best help the state actor achieve its goals?
- What goal might the foreign policy action have helped the state actor achieve?

Frequently, in applying the unitary state perspective, analysts find themselves reasoning backwards from an observed action. Given that the Soviets put missiles in Cuba, what could their goals have been? For analysts applying the unitary state perspective, "explanation consists of showing what goal the government was pursuing when it acted, and how the action was a reasonable choice, given the nation's objectives."⁸⁷

A difficulty in applying the unitary state perspective is that "an imaginative analyst can construct an account of preference-maximizing choice for any action or set of actions performed by a government" by inventing a creative utility function for the actor. Thus, the analyst "must insist on rules of evidence for making assertions about governmental objectives, options, and consequences."⁸⁸ In other words, the analyst must be careful not to rely exclusively on logic, or their own reasonable guesses about what they would have done in the state's situation. Instead, they must search for "evidence about what the actor's objectives, options, and estimates actually were."⁸⁹

Importantly, there is a tendency for states to apply the unitary state perspective to one another. Jervis notes "actors tend to see the behavior of others as more centralized, disciplined, and coordinated than it is ... Seeing only the finished product, they find it simpler to try to construct a rational explanation for the policies, even though they know that such an analysis could not explain their own policies."⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of Decision*, 15.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 26

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 49

⁹⁰ Jervis, "Hypotheses on Misperception," 476. In a footnote, Jervis references examples of this dynamic from labor-management disputes and Congress.

Understanding Foreign Policy Mistakes

The unitary state perspective sees foreign policy “mistakes” as the result of a lack of information, miscalculation, or simple bad luck.⁹¹ If a state has mistaken beliefs about how its actions will translate into outcomes, it may choose the wrong outcome. As suggested in the above discussion of CBMs, the unitary state perspective assumes that such mistaken beliefs are based on a lack of information, or incorrect information. In Chapter 4, we will discuss ways that an individual’s beliefs are systematically biased.

The final possibility is that the unitary state actor was simply unlucky. We live in an inherently probabilistic world. That is, we cannot accurately predict with 100 percent certainty the consequences of our actions. The United States could have correctly calculated that surging troops in Afghanistan had an 80 percent chance of achieving US objectives, and was thus the best option. But, even with those odds, there remained a 20 percent chance that this policy would fail to achieve its aims.

One area where the unitary state perspective does not anticipate mistakes is when a state actor does not understand the “rationality” of other actors – either misunderstanding their preferences or their cost-benefit calculations. In particular, one area that can be difficult to grasp is when a state pursues a seemingly irrational policy but is guided by rational concerns. Schelling noted that “it is not a universal advantage in situations of conflict to be inalienably and manifestly rational in decision and motivation.”⁹² Being known to be “rational” opens the actor up to manipulation by other rational actors. As George Friedman has noted, a rational actor is “transparent and predictable.” As a result, their “rationality betrays them.”⁹³

Consider a kidnapper holding a hostage for ransom: she is counting on her victim’s loved ones to behave rationally, exchanging money for the return of their relative. A reputation for irrational behavior might deter kidnappers from targeting one’s loved ones – they cannot be sure the target will respond to incentives in expected ways. The family might engage in what on the surface would be seen as “irrational behavior”; as Schelling notes, “In principle, one might evade extortion equally well by drugging his brain, conspicuously isolating himself geographically, getting his assets legally impounded, or breaking the hand that he uses in signing checks.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ Mearsheimer, “Reckless States and Realism,” 244.

⁹² Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 18.

⁹³ George Friedman, “The Use of Irrationality in Foreign Affairs,” *Geopolitical Futures*, January 7, 2016, at: <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/the-use-of-irrationality-in-foreign-affairs>.

⁹⁴ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 18.

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Another illustration of the benefits of irrationality is the game of chicken, in which two drivers racing toward each other each desire to stay on their current path, but also do not wish to die in a fiery crash. Being able to credibly commit to making the irrational decision to crash instead of swerving at the last minute – for example, by detaching the steering wheel and tossing it out of the window – improves a player's odds of winning the game.

When the United States imposed heavy sanctions on Pakistan for pursuing a nuclear weapons program, the underlying logic was that Pakistan, as a developing country, would prioritize its economic development and improving the welfare of its citizenry – as well as US conventional security assistance that was crucial to maintaining its deterrent balance with India. Those sanctions ultimately did not lead to the outcomes the United States expected, as the Pakistani state had assessed the possession of working nuclear weapons and their delivery systems to be more important for the country's national interest. In the end, the United States waived many of these sanctions when Pakistan's cooperation in the "war on terror" was deemed to be more important for US interests than pressuring Pakistan to denuclearize.⁹⁵

Challenges for the Unitary State Perspective

The most obvious challenge for the unitary state perspective is that states are not, in fact, unitary actors. They are made up of individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions. As will be discussed in depth in later chapters, the United States is particularly complex in this regard. As a democratic republic, citizens elect representatives to govern them. Elected representatives delegate decision-making and implementation to unelected civil servants and military personnel. The Constitution divides power between the federal and state governments, and between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the federal government. The reality of the United States both as a government based upon separation and division of powers among three co-equal branches of government and as a federal system with power shared between a national government and those of the fifty states (and associated territories and commonwealths) precludes any chance that the US government could function as a single organism. Within a large national security establishment, such as that of the United States, different organizations will cleave to different interests and sets of priorities. This diffusion of power is complemented by the sprawling nature of

⁹⁵ A summary of the sanctions, their initial motivations for imposition, and the logic behind the waivers can be found in Alex Wagner, "Bush Waives Nuclear-Related Sanctions on India, Pakistan," *Arms Control Today*, October 1, 2001, at: www.armscontrol.org/act/2001_10/sanctionsoct01.

US national security commitments and the length and breadth of American global engagements.⁹⁶

For a unitary state actor to make decisions *rationally*, it must have a coherent set of national interests to pursue. The perspective assumes that the interests that guide the state are sorted in terms of priority and that the state, as a collective entity, understands those interests and how they are to be applied in terms of policy. There is no sense that there can be competing and even contradictory interests, only that the unitary state is capable of coming to closure about what constitutes the core or vital interests versus subordinate secondary interests.⁹⁷ Yet in reality the US government demonstrates that a multiplicity of political actors within the state can have very different conceptions of the interests of the country and how they ought to be prioritized.⁹⁸ There are often competing factions within the state, each with its own definition of the national interest. Even though documents like the National Security Strategy are intended to provide common definitions, in reality, such documents usually end up as the result of negotiated compromises between different organizations within government, or with strategic guidance that is left deliberately vague and open to interpretation.

Moreover, while all may agree that security and prosperity are important national interests, they may disagree about how to make trade-offs between these and other interests, and how these national interests translate into real-world outcomes. Is it worth imposing sanctions on another country to harm their weapons programs, increasing the security of the United States, if doing so harms US companies and therefore economic prosperity? How much does the existence of violent extremist organizations in the Middle East threaten US national security? How should the state make trade-offs between short-term and long-term interests? Some may determine that short-term losses (for instance, going to war) to defend principles or values may, even in the absence of an immediate threat, be important for preserving a beneficial world order or to prevent a problem from metastasizing over time into a more existential threat.⁹⁹ There is a tension between policy options developed to achieve limited, short-term objectives versus those designed to bring about more dramatic change

⁹⁶ Derek S. Reveron, Nikolas K. Gvosdev, and Mackubin T. Owens, *US Foreign Policy and Defense Strategy: The Rise of an Incidental Superpower* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 111–117, 241–243.

⁹⁷ Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Impasse of American Foreign Policy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 191.

⁹⁸ See, for instance, Reveron, Gvosdev, and Owens, *US Foreign Policy and Defense Strategy*, 236.

⁹⁹ See, for instance, Stanley Hoffmann, "In Defense of Mother Theresa: Morality in Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 75(2) (1996), esp. 175.

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over a longer period of time.¹⁰⁰ These disagreements most often are solved not by optimization, but by the ordinary process of politics. The unstated assumption of the unitary state perspective – that differences give way in the face of the realities and pressures of the international system – does not hold up against the actual observations of how the US government approaches, conceptualizes, and executes policy.

Furthermore, even when individuals and groups within the state agree on national interests and the preference ordering of outcomes, they may differ in their beliefs about how best to achieve those outcomes. In an uncertain and complex world, different parties can reasonably arrive at different conclusions about the probability that airstrikes will change a regime's behavior, or the likelihood that diplomacy will defuse tensions in a region.

The unitary state perspective also tells us nothing about *how* states form their preferences and beliefs. Even if we accept the realist proposition, advanced by Hans Morgenthau, that the overriding interest that supersedes all others is the pursuit of power in the international system to safeguard state survival,¹⁰¹ it does not follow that every state has interpreted this dictum in the same way or pursued identical policies. In spring 1939, both Czechoslovakia and Poland faced an existential threat from Nazi Germany, yet the Czech government under Emil Hácha, having assessed the low probability of effective outside aid, chose to accept protectorate status under Germany, while the Polish government, especially under the influence of Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły and Foreign Minister Josef Beck, chose to fight even at the cost of military defeat. Thus, the mindset of leaders and of their advisors can matter a great deal in terms of interpreting the national interest and the courses of action that are chosen.

The analyst needs some other mechanisms for determining how the state conceives its interests, and updates its beliefs if they are to make meaningful predictions about state behavior. "The organizational and social environment in which the decision-maker finds himself determines what consequences he will anticipate, what ones he will not; what alternatives he will consider, what ones he will ignore. In a theory of organization these variables cannot be treated as unexplained independent factors, but must themselves be determined and predicted by the theory."¹⁰²

These observed deficiencies in the unitary state perspective spurred scholars to pursue other avenues of inquiry in order to better understand

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, C. A. J. Cody, *The Ethics of Armed Humanitarian Intervention*, Peaceworks 45 (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 2002), 30.

¹⁰¹ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, rev. 5th edn (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 4–15.

¹⁰² March and Simon, *Organizations*, 160.

the dynamics driving a state's foreign policy – and led to the emergence of additional perspectives. In the next chapters, we turn to perspectives that allow us to consider additional factors, including the mindset and attitudes of the state's leader, the ways national interests are frequently reinterpreted as bureaucratic or personal interests, and instances in which no real decision seems to be made at all.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Conceiving Countries as Rational Actors

- The unitary state perspective assumes that the key actors in foreign policy decision-making are unitary states, who make rational decisions about foreign policy actions based on inherent national interests.
- The underlying idea of unitary states as rational actors was a foundation of international relations theory and foreign policy analysis. Graham Allison formalized the idea in a conceptual model he named the rational actor model.
- It is important to note that in this context the actor is the state, not the leader, and rational means the consistent pursuit of national interests.

Basis in Rational Choice Theory

- The concept of rationality is based on assumptions about an actor's preferences, beliefs, and decision-making process.
- An actor is rational in this sense if they can consistently rank-order their preferences, have consistent beliefs about how their actions and the actions of others affect the world, and update these beliefs based on new information.
- A rational actor chooses by optimizing – picking the action most likely to result in the best outcome.

Relationship to International Relations Theory

- The unitary state perspective does not tell us *what* a state's preferences or beliefs are. These assumptions can be supplied by broader theories of international relations, including realism, liberalism, and constructivism.
- The assumptions of the unitary state perspective are foundational to structural realism (sometimes called neorealism), which is a dominant paradigm within the US national security establishment, but this perspective can also be used with international relations theories.

Does the United States Approximate the "Unitary State" Ideal?

- Continuous deliberate attempts have been made to structure the US government to behave as if it were a rational actor.

Further Reading

- These presidents and their policies

DISCUSS

- Since the 1950s, it has been common for countries to make rational decisions about their foreign policy process.
- What is the evidence for this process?
- What is the evidence for this process? Why might it be optimized?
- What is the evidence for this process? What are the theoretical implications?

FURTHER READING

Graham Allison, *The Essence of Diplomacy: A New Version of the Rational Actor Model* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994). This book provides a panoramic view of the world of international relations, charting a course through the complexities of the field. Knud Erik Jørgensen, *The Rational Actor Model in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). This book provides a comprehensive overview of the rational actor model and its application to international relations. They explore the model's strengths and weaknesses and its association with policy-making in states and actors.

- These reforms have included centralizing decision-making under the president, providing formal mechanisms for interagency coordination, and requiring the creation of a National Security Strategy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Since countries are abstractions and *not* conglomerated rational actors, does it make sense to explain or predict foreign policy decisions in terms of countries acting in “their” national interests? Why or why not?
- What does it mean for an actor to make a rational decision? What evidence would suggest that the actor is pursuing a rational decision-making process?
- What is a foreign policy mistake according to the unitary state perspective? Why might states make foreign policy mistakes despite their best efforts to optimize decisions?
- What does it mean when we describe the unitary state perspective as “theoretically elegant”? How and why is this perspective appealing to international relations (IR) theorists? To foreign policy analysts? To policymakers?

FURTHER READING

Graham Allison and Phillip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd edn (London: Longman, 1999). This is the updated version of the initial conceptualizing of the models of decision-making from which this textbook largely derives the unitary state perspective and five other analytic lenses. It is *essential* reading for anyone who wants to delve deeper into these decision-making models.

Derek S. Reveron, Nikolas K. Gvosdev, and Mackubin T. Owens, *US Foreign and Defense Strategy: The Evolution of an Incidental Superpower* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014). This book offers a panoramic account of the strategic contours of how America has approached the world since becoming a superpower. It paints an overall picture of remarkable consistency over these decades. This suggests that the United States has charted a steady course in the pursuit of its enduring national interests.

Knud Erik Jorgeson, *International Relations Theory: A New Introduction* (New York: Macmillan, 2017); and Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 4th edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). These recent textbooks provide comprehensive introductions to the cognate field of international relations theory. They explore competing explanations of how the international system works and associated ideas about the role and importance (or otherwise) of foreign policymaking, for example, the underlying assumption of some schools that states act in predictable ways as unitary rational actors.