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Critiques of the Rational Actor Model and Foreign Policy Decision Making

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Summary and Keywords

Foreign policy decision making has been and remains at the core of foreign policy analysis and its enduring contribution to international relations. The adoption of rationalist approaches to foreign policy decision making, predicated on an actor-specific analysis, paved the way for scholarship that sought to unpack the sources of foreign policy through a graduated assessment of differing levels of analysis. The diversity of inputs into the foreign policy process and, as depicted through a rationalist decision-making lens, the centrality of a search for utility and the impulse toward compensation in “trade-offs” between predisposed preferences, plays a critical role in enriching our understanding of how that process operates.

FPA scholars have devoted much of their work to pointing out the many flaws in rationalist depictions of the decision-making process, built on a set of unsustainable assumptions and with limited recognition of distortions underlined in studies drawn from literature on psychology, cognition, and the study of organizations. At the same time, proponents of rational choice have sought to recalibrate the rational approach to decision making to account for these critiques and, in so doing, build a more robust explanatory model of foreign policy.

Keywords: foreign policy decision making, rational choice theory, game theory, political psychology

Foreign policy decision making has been and remains at the core of the Foreign Policy Analysis project and its enduring contribution to international relations. The tilting effect generated by the “decision-making turn” (as one may call it retrospectively) on realism and its grip on the study of international relations are mainstreamed now within the discipline. The adoption of rationalist approaches to foreign policy decision making, predicated on an actor-specific analysis, paved the way for scholarship which sought to unpack the sources of foreign policy through a graduated assessment of differing levels of analysis. The diversity of inputs into the foreign policy process and, as depicted through a

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rationalist decision-making lens, the centrality of a search for utility and the impulse toward compensation in “trade-offs” between predisposed preferences, plays a critical role in enriching our understanding of how that process operates.

On closer examination, however, this seminal contribution to the analysis of foreign policy and, concurrently, its continued focus on that aspect of the foreign policy process is open to a number of problems. FPA scholars have pointed out the many flaws in rationalist depictions of the decision-making process, built on a set of unsustainable assumptions and with limited recognition of distortions underlined in studies drawn from literature on psychology, cognition, and the study of organizations. From a different perspective, the emphasis on foreign policy decision making itself also obscures the significance of foreign policy implementation, arguably as consequential in shaping foreign policy and its outcomes. At the same time, while these and other concerns have challenged the ascendancy of rationality in the field, its proponents have sought to recalibrate the rational approach to decision making to account for these critiques.

This chapter will briefly survey rational choice theory and its key assumptions; this will be followed by an examination of the role and application of rationality as a method for assessing foreign policy decision making, the critiques leveled against individual and organizational accounts of rational foreign policy decision making, the efforts to reconcile rationality with these critiques, producing new or revised approaches to analysis of foreign policy decision making, and, finally, offering up some concluding remarks on the enduring influence of rationality.

The Rational Actor Model

Rationality is a cornerstone in the canon of the positivist tradition of social sciences. It informs the problem-solving approach to the study of politics and provides a theoretical framework that allows for generalizable propositions and, in some cases, predictive assessments. The methodological commitment to a particular form of rationality—that is to say a rationalist model of choice in the decision-making process—is meant to be an innovation aimed at strengthening its analytical and predictive capabilities. Disciplines as different as political science, economics, psychology, and sociology all have their proponents who embrace variations of this approach (Zey, 1998, p. 1).

Rational choice theory is a normative approach to analyzing decision making under conditions of risk (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986, pp. 251–254). Its roots reside in the evolution of ideas in the disciplines of classical economics and political philosophy during the late 19th century and early 20th century, which sought to develop a more refined and eventually policy-oriented approach to reconciling the essential driver of individual conduct, self-interest, with the maxim of providing the “greatest good for the greatest number” (Levin & Milgrom, 2004, p. 1). Key concepts such as “optimization” (later recast as “maximization”) of “utility” underpin the scientific study of choices made by rational individuals and collective entities, providing a purposive motivation for action that explains both behavior and outcomes. Schematically, rational choices theorists portrayed the dilemma of choice confronting decision makers as one being between a set of distinctive preferences that are ranked according to their expected utility outcomes. A set of four axioms—ranging from cancellation and transitivity to dominance and invariance—provide a normative framework that shapes our understanding of what are the “rules” determining selection of a given policy (Wang, 1996, p. 32). These choices, while subject to individual and collective knowledge and expectations, nonetheless are seen by rational choice theorists as an accurate depiction of the operational conditions that guide social behavior. The problematic of the ordering of preferences into a hierarchy that illuminates decision making complicates the rationalist account, something acknowledged by scholars working within this approach (Wang, 1996, pp. 31–32).

The appeal of rational choice theory is widespread precisely because it offers social scientists a general tool with broad applicability to human endeavors in arguably every ambit of existence. Moreover, as scholarship actively linked the aggregate of individual preferences to the prospect of improved policy programming, governments found that rational choice models gave them a quantitatively sound interpretive basis for developing public policies that concurrently satisfied normative commitments to aligning these policies more closely to the preferences of the electorate (Levin & Milgrom, 2004, p. 2).

Rationality and Foreign Policy Decision Making

In the case of international relations (IR), the focus on rationality and decision making has been entangled in long-standing ontological and epistemological debates within the discipline that continue to influence scholarship in the subfield of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). Realism and its variants, long the dominant school of thought within IR, proposed that international politics could be adduced through a reading of state conduct at the systemic level without significant reference to the particularities of domestic affairs of state and society.

Indeed, while IR scholars such as Kenneth Waltz famously deny that there is any explanatory purchase to be found through the study of a particular state's foreign policy — “an international-political theory does not imply or require a theory of foreign policy” — he nonetheless went on to claim that this did not detract from Neorealism as theory (Waltz, 1979). Despite this assertion, as John Mearsheimer points out, Waltz's rejection of the rationalism and his unwillingness to even attempt to integrate state conduct into his overarching theory of international politics, leads to a host of inconsistencies that render its explanatory value dubious at best (Mearsheimer, 2009, pp. 241–256). Subsequent efforts by scholars such as Gideon Rose and Fareed Zakaria have sought to ameliorate this oversight by introducing the concept of the intervening variable and other theoretical innovations, giving rise to neoclassical realism, which edges their analysis closer to giving significance to the domestic environment of decision making without formally embracing it as a key variable (Rose, 1998; Rathbun, 2008). Resistance to this key proposition of FPA, all in pursuit of continuing adherence to the integrity of the theoretical propositions of realism, may rightly be considered a logical inconsistency of the first order.

These variants of realist theory assess foreign policy outcomes produced by states utilizing an epistemology rooted in rationality and, on that basis, purport to explain international politics. FPA represents, of course, a calculated break with this approach, aiming to “open the black box” of foreign policy as a means of attaining greater analytical depth and significance. In that respect alone, notwithstanding the problems that form the critiques analyzed in the next section, FPA scholarship demonstrates a stronger commitment to the scientific method than its counterparts in the conventional schools of international relations (with the exception of post-positivists who naturally have no interest in this aspect). Moreover, the focus on foreign policy decision making by first generation FPA scholars was a deliberate effort to apply the dictum of theoretical parsimony as a valued attribute in the development of a more robust theory of international politics (Snyder et al., 1962). Honing in on “actor specific” analysis as the key characteristic of its approach, scholars such as Valerie Hudson highlight how FPA's commitment to multidisciplinary eclecticism gives it greater reach across the social sciences. All of these factors make FPA stand out as a distinctive project best “positioned

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to provide the concrete theory that can reinvigorate the connection between IR actor-general theory and its social science foundation” (Hudson, 2005, p. 1).

So what are the claims that rational choice theorists make when it comes to foreign policy decision making? As applied to the study of international affairs, its proponents have sought to introduce a more rigorous, methodologically sound approach that could use the basic laws of choice to assess the process and outcome of foreign policy decision making. Individuals are understood to be rational beings and purposive in pursuit of self-interest. From this perspective, the maximization of utility is the ultimate aim of foreign policy, the principle actors that serve as the unit of analysis being authoritative decision makers (an individual decision maker or sometimes characterized as a collective entity or “decision unit”). By maximization of utility, we mean that a foreign policy actor first identifies and prioritizes foreign policy goals; the actor then identifies and selects from the means available to fulfill the declared aims while incurring the least cost. This cost-benefit analysis involves trade-offs between different possible foreign policy positions and, ultimately, produces a theory of foreign policy choice that reflects a calculus of self-interest based on an expectation of utility. In this regard, the focus of this approach traditionally is on blinkered depiction of the foreign policy process and as a result assumes either an individual decision maker or a relatively undifferentiated collective decision-making body for foreign policy (a “unitary actor”) rather than one composed of different decision makers with their attendant perspectives on a given policy preference.

Operationalizing the core assumptions in rational decision making, especially those of motivation (self-interest) and a single purposive decision maker (unitary actor), can produce some compelling explanations of the process and choices pursued in foreign policy. In this context, an assessment of “national interest”—generally defined as enhancing security and wealth maximization (or, to use the rational choice jargon, “preference formation”)—is crucial to determining the actual foreign policy choice under consideration. Choices between differing preferences are seen to be generally made within the same “domain”—that is, the same category of object.

Some rationalist scholars’ consideration of the sources for foreign policy preferences, however, suggests that it is the nature of the international system and the accompanying belief in structural parity between states produced by sovereignty (rather than any particular domestic feature in a given state), that remains the most significant determinant of choice. As all states reside within the same international setting in which the conditions of anarchy structure the “rules of the game” of international politics in a similar fashion for all states, coming to an interpretation of action and reaction should not be out of reach for foreign policy analysts. This perspective is important in enabling rationalists to claim that theirs is an approach that has universal applicability and, as such, even influences the realist perspective in international relations (Hagan, 2001, p. 6). Another expression of the dilemma facing rationalists in explaining the formation of preferences that are uncritically assigned “motivational primacy” but, however, are notoriously difficult to square with empirical studies of actual decisions and the perspectives of those involved. As such the decision-making formulation retains an

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unrecognized commitment to this rationalist model and its narrow application to the decision-making unit, which continues to hold sway over analyses of the decision-making process.

Often neglected in the conventional critiques of rationality is the recognition that original thinkers in rational choice theory gave to the organizational context of decision making. Far from isolating the decision-making process from the larger institutional framework within which such decisions are taken, these scholars are quick to underscore that their epistemology includes an acknowledgement of the embeddedness of the decision maker within an organization (Abell, 2014; Coleman, 1990; Coleman & Fararo, 1993; Zey, 1998). Indeed, accounting for particular settings and circumstances, the collective source of decision making is held to be a valid one under the rational choice rubric. According to Abell:

Organizations are constructed social mechanisms for *controlling* and *coordinating* human activities and symbolic and physical resources in order to achieve certain objectives' ... Control mechanisms are the means by which the activities of actors (individuals or sometimes groups or collections of individuals) are motivated in order to achieve the objectives of the organization. Coordination mechanisms are the means by which the actions of actors (again individual or collective) are brought into alignment (often strategically in the sense of game theory) with each other in order to achieve the objectives of the organization.

(Abell, 2014)

FPA literature shares elements of this focus on the individual and collective character of the foreign policy process, driven by many of the same concerns as well as a concomitant search for understanding the pathologies prevalent within collective forms of decision making.

At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that one variant of rational choice approach, game theory, has gone further in deliberately attempting to model the decision-making process with only limited reference to the institutional (or any other) context. Indeed, for some observers, game theory modeling is the quintessential distillation of a systemic approach to the employment of rationality to the task of understanding foreign policy decision making (Alden & Aran, 2017). In this case scholars have isolated particular dilemmas in foreign policy and sought to frame them within a matrix of choice that illuminates the dilemmas facing decision makers. Game theory is a structured approach that in its original form posits a relatively simple matrix of participants and issues that allows mathematically derived interpretations of decision making. For game theorists, the respective rules of different types of games (cooperative and non-cooperative) frame the possibilities of choice undertaken by the participants and the accompanying strategies employed to achieve best possible outcomes. Securing "zero-sum" wins that favor one

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participant over another are contrasted with “win-sets” that feature trade-offs aimed at allowing all participants to claim a “winning compromise” even if it is suboptimal.

Of the numerous efforts to apply rationalist approaches to differing aspects of foreign policy decision making, Robert Putnam and Thomas Schelling are perhaps most indicative. Putnam, utilizing a simple decision-making matrix to international negotiations, attempts to explain the contrary outcomes found in trade policy (Putnam, 1988). Putnam asserts that the best way to understand the behavior of foreign policy decision makers is to recognize that they are in fact operating in two separate environments, each with a distinctive set of logics that structure choice accordingly. Leaders naturally attend to domestic concerns in developing their position on a given issue. The fact that the international environment is a “self-help system” conditioned by anarchy while the domestic environment functions in accordance with a recognized authority structure and accompanying rules, means that foreign policy decision makers have to operate in two overlapping—and potentially conflicting—games simultaneously. For Putnam, a win-set is only achieved when the outcome reflects the shared interests of all the relevant actors and is in tune with the imperatives of the domestic environment (Putnam, 1988).

Thomas Schelling’s work on game theory and its application to nuclear strategy elaborates upon the classic prisoner’s dilemma schema. Schelling uses the format of strategic bargaining with imperfect information in a non-cooperative game to adduce the conduct of participants facing decisions in a nuclear arms race (Schelling, 1960). He concludes that suboptimal decisions, the by-product of this lack of information, encourages a “balance of threat” that directly led to the formulation of a deterrence policy predicated on “mutually assured destruction” (MAD) between participants.

Much additional scholarship has gone into game theory in subsequent years, elaborating the variety of possible games and delving into aspects of the actors and contexts involved (Rasmusen, 2001). What is notable about the utilization of variants of game theory to assess foreign policy decision making is the degree to which it tacitly relies upon the *perceptions* of decision makers in structuring the context of negotiations and the process that accompanies them. The lack of explicit recognition by rational choice theorists—though superficially acknowledged in some accounts as an “externality”—of the implications that this crucial perceptual factor has on key claims of rationality of the entire process opens up a line of criticism which FPA scholars were to pursue with great vigor.

Opening Pandora’s Black Box—Rational Decision Making and Its Critics

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The “turn” toward foreign policy decision making led by Richard Snyder and others over sixty years ago provided the formative basis for launching FPA (Snyder et al., 1962, pp. 136–160). In this context, scholarship focused on unpacking the “black box” of foreign policy decision making as a key to unlocking the complexities of international politics. As Snyder and his colleagues point out:

information is selectively perceived and evaluated in terms of the decision maker’s frame of reference. Choices are made on the basis of preferences which are in part situationally and in part biographically determined.

(Snyder et al., 1962, p. 177)

At the core of the call for the interpretive value of analysis of foreign policy is a focus on the “definition of the situation” as the framing device that fundamentally shapes the decision-making process in terms of who is involved, what their outlooks are, and the course that intergroup dynamics takes in coming to a policy decision. Interestingly, this echoes the belated recognition by rational choice theorists that “alternative descriptions of a decision problem often give rise to different preferences, contrary to the principle of invariance that underlies the rational theory of choice” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986, p. 251). In fact, a close reading of Snyder, Brook, and Sapin’s seminal FPA work, “Decision Making as an Approach to the Study of International Politics” highlights the sense of a continuing commitment to rationality as a method, unencumbered by direct association with rational choice theory and despite the authors’ discomfort with its shortcomings, while seeking to explore the foreign policy decision-making process in greater depth (Snyder et al., 1962). Making sense of the gap between the declared depiction of foreign policymaking as rational and an empirically rendered assessment of that same policy choice formed the essence of the work of FPA in its first generation and beyond (Hagan, 2001, pp. 6–8).

Moving for a time in tandem with emergent developments of the study of policy, which were undergoing a period of tremendous innovation and change, FPA scholarship initially drew from the work produced by the “behaviourist revolution” in the social sciences. This was further reinforced a decade later by critiques levelled at rationalist interpretations of the role and relationship between institutions and the foreign policy decision making, led by Graham Allison and Morton Halperin, which took specific aim at the “rational actor model” of foreign policy decision making (Allison & Halperin, 1972).

Challenges to rationalism and foreign policy decision making, therefore, took the following forms. There was a distinctive set of critiques in the FPA literature derived from the findings of behaviorist and cognitive psychology that focused on the leader as decision maker. These include the foundational work of Harold and Margaret Sprout, whose division between the “objective” (or operational) environment of foreign policy decision making and the “subjective” environment of foreign policy decision making paved the way for subsequent scholarship (Sprout & Sprout, 1956). Robert Jervis’s work on perception and misperception across a range of historical case studies demonstrated how

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subjective understandings of reality impacted upon foreign policy decision making (Jervis, 1976). Alexander George went so far as to introduce methodologies, refined and applied by numerous other scholars, aimed at discerning the linkage between leaders' belief systems and their influence on foreign policy (George, 1969; Schafer & Walker, 2006; He & Feng, 2013). Janis and Mann were the first to explore emotional features such as stress on foreign policy decision making, while later authors examined in greater detail through the framework of motivational approaches in political psychology (Janis & Mann, 1977; Stein & Welch, 1997).

Group dynamics and organizational conduct represent another dimension of actor-specific analysis of foreign policy. FPA scholars have thrown the spotlight on how the functioning of small group decision making and coalitions can exercise a determining influence over foreign policy choice (Janis, 1972; 't Hart, 1991; Hermann, 2001). This was important in realigning the critique of rationality away from the singular focus on individuals to their behavior within groups and, ultimately, an assessment of the role that organizations play in the foreign policy decision-making process (Hermann, 2001). Moreover, it reflected more accurately the original concentration of rational choice theory, which maintained that decision making was necessarily embedded within an organizational context as noted above. The aforementioned work by Allison and Halperin on bureaucratic politics spawned a literature aimed at developing a closer appreciation of the part that institutional dynamics played in foreign policy making and, ultimately, raised the question of the impact of implementation on that process (Smith & Clarke, 1985).

More generally, foreign policy decision-making theory is itself predicated on a systems approach. It assumes that there is a feedback loop of information from the "external environment" to policy makers, allowing for readjustment and innovation. Yet the actual analysis of decision making still suffers from some significant shortcomings rooted in its efforts to model the foreign policy process (Alden & Aran, 2017, pp. 34–40). To meet the requirements of an analytical rendering of foreign policy choice, broad sets of variables are produced, which are essentially depicted as being outside of history and its cycles, without much (or sometimes any) reference to previous decisions or the accompanying interpretations by decision makers. As a result, this linear characterization of the foreign policy decision-making process often appears over-read and even deterministic at times while in other instances it seems to lack an appreciation of the fragmented nature of decisions. As Joe Hagan warns us in his historical overview of foreign policy decision making in the 20th century, these policy choices took place within decision-making structures that were "quite dispersed ... (they) channel and focus other influences on governments and are themselves variable across international systems and domestic political structures" (Hagan, 2001, p. 6).

Beyond this issue, the role of foreign policy implementation as a neglected component of the foreign policy equation also remains barely examined; this is especially true with respect to varieties of actors, their articulation of the boundaries of foreign policy within the confines of states and sub-state institutions, and how the foreign policy decision-

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making process operates under these circumstances (Smith & Clarke, 1985). Agents on the ground, their parochial interpretation of national foreign policy directives and the form these take when translated into local actions is a feature of the feedback loop that arguably is as consequential a part of the decision-making process as the original policy formulation itself. Studies of other types of subnational foreign policy actors such as provinces remain few and far between as well, rendering the capacity of FPA to provide an interpretation of the globalizing international system far less credible.

Reconciling Rationality

A number of efforts to reconcile rationalism in its various forms with foreign policy decision making have followed in the wake of these critiques.

Christopher Hill's contribution to rehabilitating rationality is based on concepts that sought to account for the constraints on foreign policy decision making. In particular, Hill distinguishes between "pure rationality" and "procedural rationality," suggesting that the former is unattainable while the latter conforms to the basic tenets of rational policy selection without fully embracing the methodology and its axioms (Hill, 2003, p. 1).

Moreover, drawing from the seminal work of Herbert Simon, he employs the concept of "bounded rationality" and "satisficing" as expressions for the conduct of decision makers within the conditions of imperfect knowledge (Hill, 2003, p. 103).

John Steinbruner's "cybernetic theory" is an ambitious effort to integrate the insights of what he calls the rational-analytic and the cybernetic-cognitive approaches to a theory of foreign policy. In contrast with the former decision-making model, Steinbruner claims that the cybernetic-cognitive model incorporates the more subjective features of the foreign policy decision making (Steinbruner, 1974, pp. 327-342). Concurrently, behaviorist critiques within FPA have become more elaborated over time. For example, Janice Stein's delving into the role of neurological patterns, a descendant of the original work on cognition and its constraining impact of foreign policy decision making, offers another explanation of the process and its outcomes (Stein, 2008, pp. 104-109). FPA academics working in this tradition such as Jerel Rosati and Deborah Larsen continue to elaborate upon the behaviorist school's critique of rationalist accounts of foreign policy decision making, using "schema theory" as a comprehensive approach to understanding the complex and fragmented relationship between individuals, their beliefs, and foreign policy choice (Alexrod, 1973; Rosati, 1995; Larson, 1994).

Concurrently, behavioral economists working within the rationalist school have themselves been grappling with the anomalies produced by rational choice theory. Following Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, the difficulties in developing a generalizable set of propositions from these and other accounts is intertwined with the underlying lack of transparency of the process for participants and the inadequacies of capturing the human dimension of decision making (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986, pp. 272-273). Interestingly, their admission that "the introduction of psychological considerations (i.e. framing) both enriches and complicates the analysis of choice," includes an acknowledgment of the idea of "bounded rationality" while Coleman attempts to account for such behavioral anomalies by invoking the phrase that actors are "rational in their own terms" (Coleman, 1990). Other scholars, writing within the framework of new institutionalism, employ the term "logic of appropriateness" to capture the constitutive

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set of rules and practices that prescribe conduct for individuals and groups (March & Olsen, 2008, pp. 5-7).

The use of “prospect theory” provides another example of the re-occurring influence of rational choice theory in FPA. Tversky and Kahneman adopt a two-stage approach to the capture the dynamics of the decision-making process (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Accordingly, the first stage (which they characterize as a “framing and editing” phase) establishes a reference point against which perceptions of loss and gain are measured while the second stage consists of a conventional evaluation and weighting of possible choices in light of the prior framework. Prospect theory essentially demonstrates that individuals tend to give greater weight to their fear of expected loss than expected gains when confronted by choice. FPA scholars such as Jack Levy and David Welch have seized upon this idea as one which has direct relevance for the study of foreign policy decision making (Levy, 1997; Welch, 2005).

Bruce Bueno de Mesquita’s employment of “expected utility theory” represents a further application of rational actor theory to the task of understanding foreign policy decision making. In this case, Bueno de Mesquita seeks to explain the decision-making process behind the choice to go to war by elaborating upon the conditions under which a given state’s power is “the central determinant” to such decisions to initiate conflict (Bueno de Mesquita, 1980, p. 930). Among his findings is an interpretation of the rationale for the launching of wars by weaker states and the onset of conflict between once-allied states.

Alex Mintz’s work on “polyheuristic theory” is arguably the most innovative contribution to a revival of rationalist interpretations of foreign policy decision making in recent years. Mintz took up the challenge of reconciling the critique posed by behaviorists and reconciling it with a rational choice approach to decision making (Mintz, 2004). He suggests that this can be done by breaking foreign policy decision making into two separate stages. The first phase involves “non-compensatory” and cognitive factors are given consideration by the decision maker, which in practical terms means reflecting upon the impact of a particular foreign policy choice on the prospects for the leader’s political survival (Mintz & Geva, 1997, pp. 82-87). The second phase resembles more conventional rational choice approaches, involving the weighing of policy options that are deemed to be “compensatory” and within the same dimension in conformity to maximizing utility. Interestingly, in certain respects “polyheuristic theory” resembles the approach adopted in “prospect theory,” embarking on a two-stage sequencing of the decision-making process to allow for the incorporation of a cognitive component to the model (Levy, 1997). Mintz’s “polyheuristic theory” has gathered a solid following among FPA scholars studying decision making and with that a steadily growing literature (Mintz & Geva, 1997; Mintz, 2004; Dacey & Carlson, 2004; DeRoen & Sprecher, 2004; James & Zhang, 2005; Min, 2007).

Conclusion: The Enduring Influence of Rationality

In spite of a sustained and often well-substantiated critique, aspects of rationality and rational approaches to the understanding of foreign policy continue to hold an appeal for FPA scholars. This generates a periodic reproduction of some fundamental discussions conducted in the first generation of literature around the saliency of rationality and how to account for and theorize about the now recognized problems associated with it. In light of this, it is arguable that the most enduring influences of rationality are twofold.

The first is founded in the continuing emphasis on foreign policy decision making as a crucial source of analytical meaning for the study of international politics. Given that that decision-making analysis forms the core concept within rational choice framework, the pull of that particular approach and its utilitarian assumptions has over FPA is bound to persist for scholars working in this tradition as they attempt to derive meaning from the act of decision. New developments in rational choice theory will therefore find their way into FPA as a matter of course. The adoption of “prospect theory” and integration of “polyheuristic theory” into the FPA canon is but the latest examples of this phenomenon.

The second is in the tacit mirroring of the classic ontological division adopted by positivism between the systemic (macro) and collective organizations (micro), but crucially all based on an elaboration of a rationalist-utilitarian theory of the individual. This has the effect of raising questions and problems that are familiar to and within the domain of other positivist disciplines, for instance making sense of the gap between the systemic interpretations derived from macro-economics and “firm level” accounts in micro-economics as to the sources and conduct of forces and actors in the economy. The divide between IR’s systemic approach to understanding international politics and FPA’s focus on “state-level” analysis presents a similar quandary. What is perhaps distinctive about FPA when set against these other academic fields is that its concerns are those of a self-described “boundary discipline” poised between the domestic-international divide and consequently forced to consider multiple platforms for policy making, its impact and accompanying feedback.

In the end, the discomfort threaded through the findings of FPA on rational choice theory chimes with more generalized critiques of rationality and decision making emanating from other branches of the social sciences (Green & Shapiro, 1994). With its commitment to foreign policy decision making as the analytical touchstone for understanding foreign policy and more generally international politics, deliberations around rationality are set to continue to feature in the literature. In this respect, far from being outside the mainstream of social sciences, FPA is contributing its own insights into these contemporary debates.

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