

Decision-Making Models in Foreign Policy

- Foreign policies are the strategies governments use to guide their actions in the international arena.
- Foreign policies spell out the objectives state leaders have decided to pursue in a given relationship or situation.
- States establish various organizational structures and functional relationships to create and carry out foreign policies.
- Officials and agencies collect information about a situation through various channels; they write memoranda outlining possible options for action; they hold meetings to discuss the matter; some of them meet privately outside these meetings to decide how to steer the meetings.

- The foreign policy process is a process of decision making.
- States take actions because people in governments—decision makers—choose those actions.
- Decision making is a steering process in which adjustments are made as a result of feedback from the outside world.
- Decisions are carried out by actions taken to change the world, and then information from the world is monitored to evaluate the effects of these actions.
- These assessments will then enter into a future decision-making process.
- It should be noted that Decisions occur when there is *time pressure, task complexity, awareness of the available alternatives and a good alternative assumption that leads to the desired result.*

- ***Graham Allison's 3 Models of Decision Making***

- In his book, *The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis, (1971)*, Allison focused on bureaucracy's effect on foreign policy decision making. .

- Allison identified three models, namely:

- Rational Actor Model (RAM)

- Organizational Processes Model

- Governmental Politics Model or Bureaucratic Politics Model

- ***Rational Actor Model (RAM)***

- In this model, decision makers set goals, evaluate their relative importance, calculate the costs and benefits of each possible course of action, then choose the one with the highest benefits and lowest costs.

- From the perspective of rational choice theorists, any rational actor model assumes that actors (such as decision makers) make choices that the actors believe will lead to the best feasible outcomes for them as defined by their personal values or preferences.



- **Process of Rational Model of Decision Making**

Stage 1

- **Clarify Your Goals** in the situation

Stage 2

- **Order Them** by importance

Stage 3

- **List the Alternatives** for achieving your goals

Stage 4

- **Investigate the Consequences** of each alternative

Stage 5

- **Choose the alternative** that best achieves your goals
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- ***The Organizational Processes Model.***
- In this model, foreign policy decision makers generally skip the labor-intensive process of identifying goals and alternative actions, relying instead for most decisions on standardized responses or standard operating procedures.
- For example, the U.S. State Department every day receives more than a thousand reports or inquiries from its embassies around the world and sends out more than a thousand instructions or responses to those embassies.
- Most of those cables are never seen by the top decision makers (the secretary of state or the president); instead, they are handled by low-level decision makers who apply general principles—or who simply try to make the least controversial, most standardized decision.
- These low-level decisions may not even reflect the high-level policies adopted by top leaders, but rather have a life of their own.
- The organizational processes model implies that much of foreign policy results from “management by muddling through.”

- **Government Politics Model (or Bureaucratic Politics Model),**
- In this model, foreign policy decisions result from the bargaining process among various government agencies with somewhat divergent interests in the outcome.
- In 1992, the Japanese government had to decide whether to allow sushi from California to be imported—a weakening of Japan’s traditional ban on importing rice (to maintain self-sufficiency in its staple food).
- The Japanese Agriculture Ministry, with an interest in the well-being of Japanese farmers, opposed the imports.
- The Foreign Ministry, with an interest in smooth relations with the United States, wanted to allow the imports.
- The final decision to allow imported sushi resulted from the tug-of-war between the ministries.
- Thus, according to the government politics model, foreign policy decisions reflect (a mix of) the interests of state agencies.

- Essentially, the thrust of this model is that government behavior can be understood as outcomes of bargaining games.
- There is no unitary actor but rather many players whose focus is not on a single strategic issue but on multiple diverse intra-national problems.
- Government decisions are therefore not made by rational choice but by political pulling and.
- This Model, therefore, explains deviations from the ideal rational scenario by highlighting the political maneuvering behind the scenes.
- This makes the Model broader in scope, more ambitious in its goals and potentially more fruitful (Welch, 1992).

- John D. Steinbruner's book – ***The Cybernetic Theory of Decision (1974)***– is split into two halves. The first half, titled “Paradigms of the Decision Process”, presents his conceptual models of the decision making process whilst the second half, titled “The Politics of Nuclear Sharing”, describes the development of nuclear sharing proposals between allied European States and the United States during the years from 1956 – 1960.
- The first half focuses on two central tenets of foreign policy decision making: how decision makers cope with uncertainty and how they deal with the inherent conflictual nature of many of the goals of foreign policy.
- Similar to Allison, Steinbruner presents three models of decision making – ***the Analytic Paradigm, the Cybernetic Paradigm*** and ***the Cognitive Processes model***.

- Under *the Analytic Paradigm*, a decision maker's objective is assumed to be the accomplishment of a task under a given set of external limitations.
- In order to reach a decision, the decision maker must make direct calculations which is cognizant of the trade-offs involved.
- The decision maker is guided by the implicit assumptions that alternative states of the world produce differently valued outcomes for the same course of action and that these outcome calculations are continuously updated as new information becomes available (Steinbruner, 1974: 25 – 46).
- Steinbruner somewhat rejects this paradigm because it requires that decision makers have nearly perfect information in order to make their decisions, which they rarely have. In his view, this paradigm stipulates conditions which cannot be met.

- In contrast, his ***Cybernetic Paradigm*** Steinbruner attempted to explain decision making as it occurs in reality, i.e., under conditions of complexity and uncertainty.
- Decision makers operate under conditions of "structural uncertainty" wherein an individual is not able to ascertain the state of the environment, locate available alternatives, or even assess the consequences of a chosen alternative.
- He views the decision maker's primary concern as one aimed at avoiding the complexity of external constraints by avoiding direct outcome calculations and instead dissecting, segmenting and factoring complex problems to simplify them.
- By following this process, the decision maker disaggregates values and utilizes information selectively, thus avoiding the need to have perfect information.
- Basically speaking, he argued that the cybernetic processes of "incrementalism" and "satisficing" used by individuals explained simple and "routine" decisions.

- Steinbruner summarizes the cybernetic paradigm by stating that "[its] major theme is that the decision process is organized around the problem of controlling inherent uncertainty by means of highly focused attention and highly programmed response.
- The decision maker in this view does not engage in alternative outcome calculations or in updated probability assessments."
- The ***Cognitive Processes model*** takes a slightly different approach, modifying the assumptions of the cybernetic model which involve the decision maker's thinking patterns.
- Steinbruner argues that these modifications are necessary because despite operating in conditions of uncertainty most of the time, the mind often operates in a way so as to establish strong beliefs and to act on these beliefs.

- The underlying logic of the ***cognitive processes model*** is that information is often processed prior to and independently of conscious direction and a major contribution of his work is the explication of these processes and their integration into a theoretical framework (Steinbruner, 1974: 88 – 106, 112-139).
- In essence, the cognitive approach expands on the cybernetic paradigm by asserting that top level decision makers often make categorical decisions about what is desirable and attainable and subsequent evidence to the contrary often does not alter these decisions. Decision makers therefore do not construct the careful trade-offs necessary to attain an optimal solution to most foreign policy problems.

- **Irving Janis' Groupthink**
- Although the works of Allison (1971, 1999) and Steinbruner (1974, 2002) represented great advances in the literature, one aspect of the decision making process that was still unilluminated was the effect that group dynamics had on the decision making process.
- It is this gap in the literature that Irving Janis aimed to fill with his seminal work ***Groupthink***.
- The book, published in 1982, is a revised and enlarged edition of his earlier work, ***Victims of Groupthink: A psychological study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*** published in 1972.
- In it he proposes that in group decision making scenarios, participants are often susceptible to “concurrency-seeking”, where they try to conform to the group’s preferences and opinions while suppressing their own dissenting views.

- **Groupthink** is a psychological phenomenon that occurs within a group of people in which the desire for harmony or conformity in the group results in an irrational or dysfunctional decision-making outcome.
- Group members try to minimize conflict and reach a consensus decision without critical evaluation of alternative viewpoints by actively suppressing dissenting viewpoints, and by isolating themselves from outside influences.
- Groupthink requires individuals to avoid raising controversial issues or alternative solutions, thus leading to loss of individual creativity, uniqueness and independent thinking.

- This causes members to strive for unanimity in an effort to preserve group cohesion.
- This is what he referred to as “Groupthink”. In the preface to the 1982 version of his book, he states that his purpose is to “increase awareness of this social psychological phenomena in decisions of historic importance, so that group dynamics will be taken into account by those who try to understand the performance of the leading actors and members of the supporting cast” (Janis, 1982: ix).
- **Janis** defines groupthink as a “mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive group, when the members, striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action” (Janis, 1982: 9).

- In other words, groupthink depicts the situation where groups reach decisions without accurately assessing their consequences, because individual members tend to go along with ideas they think others support.
- Unlike individuals, groups tend to be overly optimistic about the chances of success and are thus more willing to take risks.
- Participants suppress their doubts about dubious undertakings because everyone else seems to think an idea will work.
- Also, because the group diffuses responsibility from individuals, nobody feels accountable for actions.

- By using the term groupthink, *Janis* points out how mental efficiency, moral judgment and reality testing deteriorates due to pressures to conform to group norms.
- As way of preventing groupthink, Janis recommended: breaking larger groups into sub-committees, designating a devil's advocate in committee meetings, and the solicitation of the opinions of members outside the group
- He then goes on to present eight symptoms of groupthink which were common across the case studies of the fiascoes (presented in chapters 2-5) but absent in the cases of the non-groupthink cases (presented in chapters 6-7). He groups these symptoms into three categories – Overestimations of the group (in terms of its power and morality), Closed-mindedness and Pressures toward uniformity.

- He asserts that pressures towards uniformity can be viewed as an indicator of excessive concurrence-seeking among group members whilst the other two categories ensure that this concurrence-seeking will occur in a setting where bad policies are likely to result (Janis, 1982: 174- 175).
- He then models groupthink in terms of the antecedent conditions which lead to concurrence seeking behavior, resulting in observable consequences which ultimately yield low probabilities of making sound, well-reasoned decisions.
- Janis then concludes by providing recommendations aimed at preventing groupthink. These included breaking larger groups into sub-committees, designating a devil's advocate in committee meetings, the solicitation of the opinions of members outside the group (Janis, 1982: 262 -271).

- **Prospect Theory**
- Prospect theory was first introduced by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), and has since become one of the leading alternatives to rational choice as a theory of decision under conditions of risk.
- The theory describes how individuals evaluate and choose between available options, and is used to explain why people consistently deviate from the predictions of rational choice.
- The most commonly utilized finding of prospect theory in the international relations literature is the so-called ***framing effect***.

- Simply put, Prospect theory assumes that losses and gains are valued differently, and thus individuals make decisions based on perceived gains instead of perceived losses.
- Also known as "loss-aversion" theory, the general concept is that if two choices are put before an individual, both equal, with one presented in terms of potential gains and the other in terms of possible losses, the former option will be chosen.

- Individuals tend toward risk acceptance when confronted with choices between losses (losses frame) and risk aversion when confronted with choices over gains (gains frame).
- Prospect theory posits that individuals evaluate outcomes, not from net asset levels, but instead as a function of deviations from a reference point.
- They also overweight losses relative to comparable gains, and are risk-acceptant in the domain of loss but risk-averse in the domain of gain.
- Their identification of this reference point is a critical variable, and they react to probabilities in a nonlinear fashion.

- Instead of evaluating net asset levels, individuals tend to think in terms of gains and losses, specifically choosing among options in terms of deviations from a reference point (ibid.). Reference dependence is the central analytic assumption of prospective theory.
- The prospect theory provides a thorough situational analysis: risk-taking behaviour is based not only on the individual predispositions of a leader, but derives from a cognitive response to a situation that restricts how the options are interpreted and how the choice is made.
- It is a theory of the decision-making process and of reasoning.
- Decisions are based on judgments that are subjective in nature. As a result, decision-makers are likely to be influenced in their judgment even before they intervene in the decision-making process.

- **Poliheuristic Theory**

- Alex Mintz created Poliheuristic Theory. Poliheuristic theory concentrates on the "why" and "how" of decision making which makes the theory relevant to both the contents and the processes of decision making.
- The term poliheuristic can be subdivided into the roots *poly* (many) and *heuristic* (shortcuts), which refers to the cognitive mechanisms decision makers utilize in attempts to simplify complex decision tasks (Geva, Redd, and Mintz 2000; Mintz and Geva 1997; Mintz et al. 1997).
- The poliheuristic theory of decision making proposes that policy makers employ a two-stage decision process where in the first stage decision makers initially screen available alternatives utilizing cognitive-based heuristic strategies.

- In the second stage, when the decision matrix has been reduced to a more manageable number of alternatives and dimensions, policy makers resort to analytic, expected utility, or lexicographic rules of choice in an effort to minimize risks and maximize rewards.
- The first phase in the decision process typically involves a non-exhaustive search wherein decision makers process information across dimensions in an attempt to select "surviving" alternatives before the completion of the consideration of all alternatives along all dimensions.
- The second phase, then, consists of a lexicographic or maximizing decision rule used in selecting an alternative from the subset of "surviving" alternatives.

- Another key premise of the poliheuristic theory is its reference to the political aspects of decision making in a foreign policy context.
- The assumption is that the policy maker measures costs and benefits, risks and rewards, gains and losses, and success and failure in terms of political ramifications above all else (Mintz 1993).
- Furthermore, politicians are concerned about challenges to their leadership, their prospects of political survival, and their level of support (Kinne 2005). Domestic politics is the essence of decision.

- Because loss aversion (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Levy 1992a, 1992b) outweighs all other considerations, leaders are driven more by avoiding failure than by attaining success (Anderson 1983).
- As Mintz and Geva (1997, 84) assert "the political dimension is important in foreign policy decisions not so much because politicians are driven by public support but because they are averse to loss and would therefore reject alternatives that may hurt them politically."
- The theory, then, suggests procedures for eliminating alternatives by adopting or rejecting courses of action based on this political heuristic (a commonsense rule) in a two-stage decision process (Mintz et al. 1997).

- In essence, Poliheuristic theory focuses on both the process of decision making and the outcome of decisions and explains why and how decisions are made by world leaders.
- A key premise of poliheuristic theory is that policy makers use a mixture of decision strategies when making decisions, including strategies that are suboptimal (Mintz et al. 1997).