

ISSN: 2687-220X

NOVUS ORBIS

Journal of Politics and International Relations
Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi

Understanding US Foreign Policy: A Theoretical Analysis

Amerikan Dış Politikasını Anlamak: Teorik Bir Analiz

Ahmet Ateş

Öğr. Gör. Dr., Iğdır Üniversitesi,
Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü,
ORCID: 0000-0001-5184-7701

Bu makaleye atıf için / To cite this article:

Ateş, A. (2022). Understanding Us Foreign Policy: A Theoretical Analysis. *Novus Orbis: Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi*, 4 (1), 4-27.

Makalenin Geliş Tarihi // Received: 26.01.2022

Düzeltilme Tarihi // Revised: 21.04.2022

Yayına Kabul Tarihi // Accepted: 26.04.2022

www.dergipark.org.tr/novusorbis

ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

UNDERSTANDING US FOREIGN POLICY:
A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Ahmet ATEŞ*

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Abstract

From the point of view of international relations theory, understanding **America and the world** is mostly about the world: The United States (the US) is a vital actor, but it acts mostly in response to international trends. However, from the point of view of theories of American politics and domestic politics theories of foreign policy, **America and the world** is mostly about America: American actions are primarily the result of domestic political institutions and the political processes they help to structure. In that manner, this article surveys three selected theories of international relations, namely, realism, liberalism and constructivism and three selected theories of American politics, namely, mass politics, psychological explanations, and institutional approaches to provide a thorough analysis of US foreign policy studies. Further, it argues that international relations theories usually explain why US foreign policy acts in a particular way while American politics theories explain why US foreign policy specifically acts that way and why it does not act in an alternative way. Hence, this article argues that while international relations theories are useful to explain general trends in US foreign policy, American politics theories are better to capture the complexity of US foreign policy.

* Öğr. Gör. Dr., Iğdır Üniversitesi, Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü, ORCID: 0000-0001-5184-7701, ahmet.ates@igdir.edu.tr

Keywords: Foreign Policy, United States of America, Realism, Liberalism, Public Opinion

Amerikan Dış Politikasını Anlamak: Teorik Bir Analiz

Öz

Uluslararası ilişkiler teorileri açısından, *Amerika ve dünyayı* anlamak çoğunlukla dünya ile ilgilidir: Amerika Birleşik Devletleri (ABD) önemli bir aktördür, ancak çoğunlukla uluslararası eğilimlere yanıt olarak hareket etmektedir. Bununla birlikte, Amerikan siyaseti teorileri açısından bakıldığında, *Amerika ve dünya* çoğunlukla Amerika ile ilgilidir: Amerikan dış politikası öncelikle iç siyasi kurumların ve bunların yapılandırılmasına yardımcı oldukları siyasi süreçlerin sonucudur. Bu bağlamda, bu makale Amerikan dış politika çalışmalarının kapsamlı bir analizini sağlamak için üç uluslararası ilişkiler teorisi; realizm, liberalizm ve konstrüktivizm ile üç Amerikan siyaseti teorisini; kitle siyaseti, psikolojik açıklamalar ve kurumsal yaklaşımları incelemektedir. Yapılan çalışma sonucunda uluslararası ilişkiler teorilerinin Amerikan dış politikasının neden belirli bir şekilde hareket ettiğini açıklarken, Amerikan siyaset teorilerinin Amerikan dış politikasının neden özellikle bu şekilde hareket ettiğini ve neden alternatif bir şekilde hareket etmediğini açıkladığı sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Ayrıca, uluslararası ilişkiler teorilerinin Amerikan dış politikasındaki genel eğilimleri açıklamak hususunda başarılı olduğu, Amerikan siyaset teorilerinin ise Amerikan dış politikasının karmaşıklığını daha iyi analiz ettiği sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dış Politika, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, Realizm, Liberalizm, Kamuoyu

Introduction

From the point of view of international relations theory, understanding *America and the world* is mostly about the world: The United States (the US) is a vital actor, but it acts mostly in response to international trends—security concerns, economic pressures, ideational change, etc. However, from the point of view of theories of American politics and domestic politics theories of foreign policy, *America and the world* is mostly about America: American actions are primarily the result of domestic political institutions and the political processes they help to structure. In other words, the United States is a vital part of the study of politics not only because it is one of the most important actors in the international system but also its unique domestic structure and politics. On the one hand, as an important actor, the United States acts in response to international trends. On the other hand, US politics is mostly

shaped by domestic political structures and processes. In that manner, any comprehensive explanation of US foreign policy should involve both international and domestic politics. However, the tension explains which part of the politics plays more role in determining US foreign policy. I argue that even though international relations (IR) theories explain some part of US foreign policy, theories of US domestic politics and processes have more explanatory power. Put differently, IR theories usually explain why US foreign policy acts in a particular way. However, American political theories explain why US foreign policy specifically acts that way and why it does not act in an alternative way. Hence, I argue that while we can explain general trends in US foreign policy by IR theories, we can capture the complexity of US foreign policy through American politics theories.

In order to provide a thorough theoretical analysis of approaches to understanding US foreign policy, this article proceeds as follows. First, I explain how IR theories help us to understand and explain US foreign policy. Given the limited space, I use three mainstream IR theories, namely, (neo)realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Second, I explain how domestic politics theories help us to understand and explain US foreign policy. I use three different approaches, namely, mass politics, psychological explanations, and institutional approaches. Third, I evaluate contributions, insights, and evidence from two sides.

1) **The World and the US: Selected IR Theories to Explain US Foreign Policy**

Understanding and analyzing international politics has been the central intellectual focal point of international relations studies from the early 1930s. As the four *Great Debates of IR* show, scholars have diverse mindsets, approaches and tools to understand global politics. As a result, there are several IR theories/approaches emerged. However, I use three mainstream IR theories, namely, (neo)realism, liberalism, and constructivism, to explain US foreign policy in this section because, as Walt (1998) and Snyder (2009) argue, these three theories shape both public discourse and policy analysis more than other IR approaches and play a vital role policymakers' foreign policy formulations. Below, for each theory, I provide a brief explanation of the theory and then explain how each theory explains US foreign policy with examples.

a) (Neo)realism and US Foreign Policy

The roots of realism go back to approximately 2500 years ago. From Thucydides (460-c.390 BCE) to today's realists, scholars have been trying to explain international politics (Lebow, 2013, p. 60). Realism in international relations discipline is mainly divided into three groups: classical realism, structural (neo) realism, and neoclassical realism. All approaches try to explain international politics regarding (questioning) order and stability (Lebow, 2013, p. 60). Classical realism outlined the realist approach to international politics and concluded several assumptions. Then, Kenneth Waltz theorized realism in his widely-known book *Theory of International Politics (1979)*. Waltz's book is usually considered a major advance on classical realism (Schroeder, 1994, p. 108). After the end of the Cold War, however, neoclassical realism emerged and included domestic factors in the realist analysis of international politics.

Classical realism has several assumptions about the international system and state behaviour. It can be said that classical realism references the Hobbesian state of nature. In the Hobbesian state of nature, human beings are inherently tending to oppress one another. According to classical realists, the international system is an anarchic, self-help system, and international politics is a struggle for power, and this struggle is inevitable and rational. Asserting national interests are defined with respect to power; all states' main aim is to survive in a competitive international system. Otherwise, the consequences can be devastating. To prevent unfavourable consequences, the balance of power is the key feature of the realist analysis of the international system (Morgenthau, 1948; Holsti, 1989).

Structural realism accepts most of the classical realist assumptions, such as anarchy self-help international system, but there are main points that the two approaches differ. Structural realists define power regarding military might and economic capacity. Also, structural realists focus on the structure of the international system and do not focus on human nature as classical realists do (Mearsheimer, 2013, p. 78). Furthermore, structural realists classify the international system in terms of polarity (Lebow, 2013, p. 67). They claim that system change occurs when the pole number changes and that the change results from shifts in the balance of material capabilities (Lebow, 2013, p. 67).

Structural realism, as a third image systemic level theory, focuses on great powers in the international system. It explains the international system regarding the distribution of power

and pays attention to great powers and their capabilities when they define the international system. It also claims that the bipolar international system is the best because it is stable and easy to predict state behaviour. The main advantages of realism are its parsimoniousness and general applicability. Realist theory has fewer variables with higher probabilities than other theories, which are usually applied to explain the international system. Regardless of the political phenomenon, realists are usually able to explain state behaviour using one of the main arguments: States always seek power, and international politics is all about the struggle for power.

Neoclassical realism, on the other hand, differs from realism and structural realism by combining internal and external factors in evaluating an actor's foreign policy (Rose, 1998, p. 145). In other words, while states are affected by the international system in determining their foreign policies, domestic factors such as policymakers' perceptions and society also play a vital role in foreign policy formulation (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 2016, p. 19; Rose, 1998, p. 152). Per neoclassical realism, since policymakers are key actors in foreign policy decision-making, their perceptions and interpretations of other actors' behaviours and the international system have a considerable effect on foreign policy decisions (Rose, 1998, p. 147). Also, domestic society can constrain foreign policy options for policymakers and leaders (Taliaferro, 2006, p. 489).

Given the brief background of classical, structural and neoclassical realism, US foreign policy in a realist sense is as follows. US foreign policy is a result of the US' struggle for power in an anarchical international system. The US is responding to international trends and threats to survive in the system. Because of the international system, the US declares war or participates in alliances to balance other revisionist states. In other words, US foreign policy is shaped by its relative power, external threats and struggle for power (Nguyen, 2013, p. 22).

Considering structural realism is a theory to explain mostly the Cold War era, it is successful in explaining US foreign policy with the polarization of the international system, motives of containment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the USSR) and creation of alliances such as the NATO. In other words, from a neorealist perspective, US foreign policy was affected by the international system—expansionism of the USSR, its conventional advantage vis-à-vis European countries and so on. However, the end of the Cold War changed the discipline in several ways. New debates and theories

emerged to explain the international system, and some of them also were applied to explain US foreign policy. However, the very nature of realism, the importance of power and the nation-states seem still relevant.

To see a realist explanation of US foreign policy, let us take the 2003 Iraqi Invasion as an example. There are different explanations for this specific US foreign policy decision—invading Iraq. From a realist perspective, however, the Iraqi invasion is an attempt to maximize US national interest. The US invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Regime because it wanted to demonstrate its power to allies and competitors and also to avoid the appearance of declining as a hegemon after the 9/11 attacks (Lieberfeld, 2005, p. 4). Also, the US overthrew Saddam regime to eliminate the Iraqi WMD threat to the US and its allies and also to increase Israel's security (Lieberfeld, 2005, p. 4). In other words, US foreign policy regarding Iraq is a response to the increasing threat to the US and its allies. The US acted to maximize its interest and minimize threats against it. It is also important to note that the then-President George W. Bush's perception of the Saddam Regime and US national security also played a role in determining US foreign policy.

Realist explanations of US foreign policy, particularly regarding the Iraqi invasion, uncover the motives of power and interest in US foreign policy. It also reflects the effects of the nature of the international system. In a unipolar international system, the US acted to maintain its hegemony in a competitive self-help environment. However, even if realist explanations uncover the motives of interest and power in determining US foreign policy, they lack specificity. Questions like why US foreign policy machinery chose a specific policy, invasion, rather than other alternative foreign policy options or how the decision-making process of this particular policy is unanswered by realism. Hence, even though realist explanations of US foreign policy draw the general motives, it is fair to say that realism's explanations regarding US foreign policy seem unsatisfactory in explaining the details of US foreign policy that actually play a significant role.

b) Liberalism and US Foreign Policy

On a general level, liberalism focuses on securing people's freedom and property rights. Locke and Kant are among the most famous liberal thinkers. In the liberalist view, humans are not hostile to one another as they are in realism. Instead, they are equal and usually cooperative creatures.

Liberal IR theory also argues that states are not hostile to one another, and they can increase their interests by cooperation. Liberalism, in contrast to realism, focuses on absolute gains rather than relative gains as in realism (Stein, 1982; Baldwin, 1993). Accordingly, a state can pursue its interests without adversely affecting those other states. It can be said that liberalism does not focus on the war in the international system as in realism; conversely, it focuses on the peace in the system.

Even though Liberal IR theory accepts that the international system is anarchic and states are important actors in the international system, it does not underestimate the power of international organizations and non-governmental organizations. According to Liberal IR theory, international organizations, with their legal personality and sovereignty, can be contributors to peace (Keohane and Martin, 1995, p. 45; Martin and Simmons, 1998, pp. 732-734). In contrast to realism, states are not the only important actors in the international system in liberal international relations theory.

Liberal IR theory defines the concept of power differently than realism. In realism, power is referred to by the military capacities of states. Whereas realists underestimate the potential of benefiting from economic agreements, the liberalist definition of power takes into account the economy as a part of the power. Liberalists claim that the economic power of states is a part of states' power and that states are economically interdependent. Thus, interdependency leads to cooperation among states (Jervis, 1999; Keohane and Martin, 1995).

Liberal theory is a highly explanatory theory regarding global issues compared to realism. Since liberal international scholars argue that human history is progressing linearly, some liberal scholars argue that Liberal IR theory has the ability to explain progressive historical change (Moravscik, 1997).

Liberal scholars also argue that liberal democratic countries do not go to war against each other, which is also called the **Democratic Peace Theory**. There are two main approaches to explaining **Democratic Peace Theory**. Some liberal scholars explain the theory regarding norms and democratic culture, whereas others explain it in terms of democratic institutions. Liberal scholars who explain the theory in terms of norms and democratic culture argue that peace, self-prevention, and material well-being are the true interests of liberal democracies. Liberal democratic states have similar values, and they respect each other because they think that other liberal democracies have a legitimate self-governing and fighting with them is unjust (Owen, 1994).

Another explanation of the **Democratic Peace Theory** argues that the rulers need to protect to support the citizens to be elected. So they are not prone to war. On the other hand, there is a checks and balances system in democracies as a result of the division of power. For example, in a dictatorship, it is easier to decide to go to war, but in liberal democracies, the checks and balances system prevents people from deciding to go to war easily. Some western international relations scholars claim that **Democratic Peace Theory** is a “nearly becoming truism” (Owen, 1994, p. 87).

It is also important to note that liberalism in US foreign policy is strictly intertwined with two notions: the belief in American exceptionalism and the self-assigned divine mission to promote liberal values across the world. These two notions are conceptualized by Walter Mead as the Wilsonian school of US foreign policy, which is one of the four schools of US foreign policy. The other schools are, namely, Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian and Jacksonian. According to Mead (2013, p. 138),

The United States has the right and the duty to change the rest of the world's behavior, and that the United States can and should concern itself not only with the way other countries conduct their international affairs, but with their domestic policies as well.

Given the brief background of Liberal IR theory, US foreign policy in a liberal sense is as follows. US foreign policy is a result of increasing cooperation efforts under an anarchical international system. Because a global ruler does not exist in the international system, the US is trying to increase economic and military cooperation with other states to prevent conflicts. US foreign policy also promotes liberal values and international organizations due to the belief in American exceptionalism. To increase the economic gains of the US, it participates in regional and international organizations and agreements. In doing so, the US not only increases its economic gains but also increases its national security.

In addition to the economic side of US foreign policy, there is also an effort to win hearts and minds. By promoting liberal values such as democracy and free trade, US foreign policy aims to expand the US' influence on the global level. During the Cold War, US foreign policy mostly focused on maintaining and expanding the liberal Western order against a communist expansion threat from the USSR. After the end of the Cold War, promoting liberal values is still relevant to US foreign policy.

The **Democratic Peace Theory**, on the other hand, helps us to understand US foreign policy in relation to national

security issues. The US did not declare war on any democratic country in the last century since other liberal countries also share democratic norms and institutions. Also, it would be hard to justify for US decision-makers to declare war on another democratic state. However, as the *Democratic Peace Theory* argues, the US did not hesitate to intervene or declare war on illiberal states (Rousseau, 2005).

Again, take the US invasion of Iraq as an example. Iraq under the Saddam Regime was neither liberal nor democratic. During the decision-making process, the Bush Government could justify invading Iraq, stressing that Iraq lacks liberal and democratic values and is also a threat to liberal democratic countries besides the US. Also, in the early stages of the Iraqi invasion, US policymakers did not face a significant political cost since Iraq was not a liberal democratic state. Even though the decision-making process of the Iraqi invasion was quick, it was still longer than a nondemocratic states' decision to go to war since it included other branches of the US government.

In a nutshell, liberal explanations of US foreign policy are satisfactory for understanding the general motives and values of US foreign policy. US foreign policy is based on promoting liberal values, increasing economic and political relations through regional and global arrangements and organizations and maintaining liberal peace. However, even if liberal explanations uncover the general trends and motives of US foreign policy, they lack a comprehensive explanation of specific foreign policy decisions. Questions like why US foreign policy machinery chose a specific policy rather than other alternative foreign policy options or how the decision-making process of this particular policy are mostly unanswered by liberalism. In that manner, it is fair to say that liberalism's explanations regarding US foreign policy seem unsatisfactory in explaining the details of US foreign policy that actually play a significant role.

c) Constructivism and US Foreign Policy

Criticizing rationalism and previous theories, constructivism brought a different perspective to the IR discipline. It focuses on the concepts such as identity and culture that are mostly ignored by rationalist theories. It also claims that international politics consists of social interactions. Moreover, the constructivist approach asserts that structures are socially constructed, and it defines the power and interests as a result of social interactions (Wendt, 1992, p. 193).

Unlike realism, constructivism does not support the idea that states' only goal is to survive. States' identities and interests are not defined by power; they are constructed in historical progress. On the other hand, constructivism argues that the international system is not only composed of material capabilities but also social interactions (Wendt, 1995, p. 73). Unlike realism and liberalism, the international system is not stable in constructivism. The international system can change according to the interactions of actors. It can lead to security dilemmas or collective security as a result of interactions (Wendt, 1995, pp. 73-80).

Furthermore, Wendt, in his famous piece *Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Politics (1992)*, brought a different perspective to the concept of anarchy. According to Wendt (1992), the self-help system and competitive power politics are not constitutive features of international politics. They are produced by social interaction processes between states and construct anarchy in the system. So, anarchy is not the natural feature of the international system as rationalist theories claim; it is what states make of it.

On the other hand, constructivism focuses on inter-subjectivity regarding explaining state behaviour. States treat their allies and enemies differently. States' threat perceptions can differ regarding previous social interactions. For example, Iran's nuclear development is not the same for Russia and the US. However, rationalist theories do not explain this difference. For another example, Wendt himself says, "500 hundred British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons" (Wendt, 1995, p. 73).

Constructivism claims that interests are based on identities. So, states can construct collective identities as a result of cooperation. For example, European countries created a collective European identity after World War II even though specifically Germany and France were enemies in World War II. Collective European identity leads to the integration of European countries. Unlike neorealism, constructivism pays attention to agents. Waltz focuses on the system and does not pay much attention to agents to explain the change in the system. However, constructivism argues that the agents and the structure are co-determined and co-constructed. Not only does structure affect the agent's decision, as in neorealism, but also the agent's decisions may change the system. So, constructivism gives agents and structures equal ontological status.

Another difference between constructivism and rationalist theories is that constructivism can better explain global mutual problems such as global warming, and it can

explain trans-national cooperation to prevent them. Besides states, professionals and experts define the problems, create the norms and try to find possible solutions. Realism does not offer an explanation of cooperation to solve mutual problems. Also, constructivism claims that non-state actors such as NGOs can create norms and can have an impact on state behaviour, whereas realism ignores the importance of NGOs.

Constructivism also offers a different explanation to international organizations than realism and liberalism. According to realism, international organizations can be a tool for enforcing great powers' hegemony and do not affect state behaviour (Mearsheimer, 1994). According to liberalism, states cooperate to reduce transaction costs, but they also cannot be sure whether other states cheat or not (Keohane and Martin, 1995, p. 42). However, constructivism explains uncertainty in the international system. States' identities reduce the uncertainty in the international system because states can predict whether or not their partners will cheat by identifying them (Nugroho, 2008, p. 93). So, unlike realism and liberalism, in a constructivist approach, states can choose confidently whether they cooperate with another state or not.

Given the brief background theories of constructivism and its comparison with other mainstream IR theories, US foreign policy in a constructivist sense is as follows. US foreign policy is a result of its interaction with other states in the international system. The culture and identity of the US that are socially constructed is also a key part of US foreign policy decisions. Furthermore, not only the US' interaction with other states but also its interaction with non-state actors also shapes US foreign policy. Likewise, perceptions of the US and the norms and ideas determine US foreign policy as well.

Not only national high-politics issues but also economic considerations are important for determining US foreign policy. The focus on international economics in US foreign policy has increased after the Second World War as well, which was focused more on domestic economics before. Ideas such as free trade and economic regulations such as the Bretton Woods system affected US foreign policy, particularly in the economic domain. Perceptions are another important part of determining US foreign policy. During the Cold War, US foreign policy was mostly based on the perception of the Soviet threat and containing the USSR (Garthoff, 1990, p. 13).

Another example is nuclear weapons. Because of the threat, ally and enemy perceptions of the US, US foreign policy is concerned with Iran's nuclear developments while it is mostly reluctant to act against Israeli nuclear developments (Wendt,

1995, p. 73). Iraqi invasion, for instance, is related to threat and enemy perceptions that are socially constructed. The Iraq and Saddam regime, in particular, was perceived as a threat to the US. Iraq was not an in-group member of the US. Thus, eliminating the –perceived– threat was understandable for US foreign policy.

In a nutshell, constructivist explanations of US foreign policy focus on the ideational change, the role of norms and perceptions of the US. In other words, US foreign policy is mostly a response to changes in norms and ideas in the international arena.

To conclude this section of the article, it is fair to argue that US foreign policy is mostly shaped by international trends according to mainstream IR theories. Per realism, it is mostly US's security concerns that shape US foreign policy. According to liberalism, US foreign policy is mostly about managing international economics while it is mostly a response to ideational changes in the international politics for constructivism.

2) The US and the World: Selected Domestic/American Politics Theories to Explain US Foreign Policy

Formulation and implementation of US foreign policy is a multi-actor and complex process. It would be fair to argue that there are three pillars of US foreign policy machinery: decision-makers, the public and bureaucracy. Hence, a holistic explanation of US foreign policy should require these three actors. In that manner, and given the limited space, I use three different approaches, namely, mass politics, psychological explanations, and institutional approaches, in this section of the article. On the one hand, by using the mass politics approach, the role of the public in US foreign policy is analyzed. On the other hand, other actors of US foreign policy machinery, decision-makers and bureaucracy are analyzed with psychological explanations and institutional approaches.

a) Mass Politics and US Foreign Policy

The mass politics approach consists of two theories of American politics. These are public opinion studies and interest group studies. In other words, I explain the impact of interest groups within the US political system and public opinion on US foreign policy.

Until the early 1970s, the field mostly argued that **public opinion** does not really matter in determining US foreign

policy. Named after studies of Almond and Lipmann, these beliefs were called the Almond-Lippmann Consensus. According to the Consensus, public opinion is volatile and ineffective since it lacks coherence or structure and also has little if any impact on US foreign policy (Holsti, 1992, p. 439). However, studies after the 1970s show that these arguments are not necessarily true. Several scholars, including Mueller, Page, and Shapiro, challenged the first proposition of the consensus by arguing that public opinion has its rationality and stability; thus, it is not volatile (Holsti, 1992, p. 446). Some other scholars, including Converse, Nie, and Anderson, challenged the second proposition of the consensus by arguing that public opinion on US foreign policy is coherent and has a structure mostly based on ideology, in contrast to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus argument (Holsti, 1992, p. 450). Likewise, several scholars, including Leigh and Hildebrand, challenged the third proposition of the consensus by arguing that public opinion has an important impact on foreign policy (Holsti, 1992, p. 454). Put differently, the impact of public opinion on determining US foreign policy has been heavily studied since the 1970s.

For some scholars, public opinion is rational, stable and has an impact on US foreign policy. Jentleson and Britton (1998, p. 398) showed that public opinion is rational and has good judgment in the use of resources and caution to risks, especially when it comes to justifications for the use of force abroad. Baumgartner, Francia and Morris (2008), on the other hand, argue that public opinion is rational in general, but faith is an important actor in the subgroups of American society's beliefs on rationalizing the use of force in US foreign policy. Having a series of interviews with US foreign policy officials, Powlick (1995) also proved that public opinion is one of the important sources of US foreign policy. Berinsky (2008), on the other hand, asserted that the elites are shaping the public opinion regarding US foreign policy. Whether it is shaped by the public's rationality or by elites, public opinion is an important factor in determining US foreign policy options (Goldsmith and Horiuchi, 2012, pp. 581-582; Soroka, 2003).

Even though public opinion itself may not be necessary to cause an important shift in US foreign policy, it affects the foreign policy decision-making process. Public opinion affects US foreign policy mostly because of political costs. For a hypothetical example, consider a congressman or a financial elite or a terrorism pundit that contradicts the general trends in public opinion after 9/11. They would have faced an extreme amount of political cost. Thus, public opinion can shape US foreign policy options and which specific options to be used and

which are not in some cases. Put differently, public opinion is a resource that can be used by politicians to pursue specific foreign policy decisions, or it can be used against a specific foreign policy issue. In that manner, and given the brief background of public opinion studies in determining US foreign policy, it is fair to argue that American foreign policy is affected by the pressures that public opinion provides.

Another group of studies under the mass politics approach is interest groups. Regardless of their orientation, all interest groups within the US political spectrum seek to affect US foreign policy in parallel with their own interests and agenda. It is a disputable fact that some of these groups are successful in swaying US foreign policy (Risse-Kappen, 1991). Therefore, the literature on interest groups and US foreign policy mostly focuses on exploring how to have a greater impact on US foreign policy. In that manner, Rubenzer and Redd (2010), Saideman (2002), Zarifian (2014) and Franz (2008) focus on the size of interest groups. For all of them, the size of the interest group matters because it affects mobility, funding and focusing on issues.

Other scholars, including Haney and Vanderbush (1999), focus on the effectiveness of interest groups. Arguing that not all interest groups have the same level of influence on US foreign policy and focusing on ethnic interest groups, Haney and Vanderbush (1999) contend that the ability to access the government is vital for interest groups to affect US foreign policy. The success of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) in shaping US foreign policy during the different administrations highlights the importance of the ability to access the government (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2006).

In a nutshell, interest groups play an important role in determining US foreign policy. Even though they usually do not have the capacity to cause major shifts, they can have an impact on US foreign policy on an issue or a region (Paul and Paul, 2009, p. 15).

Mass politics is an important approach to understanding US foreign policy because it usually limits the options and affects US foreign policy decisions. Both public opinion and interest groups are important sources of US foreign policy that not only show researchers the specific foreign policy decision-making processes but also how US foreign policy decision-making has a complex nature that it does not respond only to international trends.

b) Psychological Explanations of US Foreign Policy

The second domestic/American politics approach to explaining US foreign policy is **psychological explanations**. This approach mostly focuses on the psychological conditions of top foreign policy decision-makers. The **psychological explanations** approach is important because it sheds light on the attitude change of high-level politicians that has a vital role in determining US foreign policy. Also, it is important to show how US foreign policy decision-making process is a complex structure that a variety of variables affect.

Larson (1989) provides a different school of **psychological explanations** of attitude change and combines psychology and foreign policy literature. These five schools are:

- The Hovland Attitude Change Approach
- Cognitive Dissonance Theory
- Attribution Theory
- Self-Perception Theory
- Schema Theory (Larson, 1989).

According to these theories, high-level foreign policy decision-makers in the US, personal experiences, scripts and personae, existing beliefs, self-behavioural learning and persuasive communication play a role in changing the attitude of the high level of US foreign policy decision-makers and, therefore, US foreign policy. Put differently, the psychological nature of US foreign policy decision-makers not only affects how these decision-makers interpret a foreign policy issue but also affects how a specific prescription should be followed or not followed regarding a foreign policy issue.

Several examples of **psychological explanations** of US foreign policymaking can be given. For instance, **psychological explanations** are useful to explain the US decision to contain the USSR. High-level foreign policy decision-makers, including former President Truman, former Secretary of State Byrnes, and former US Ambassador to the Soviet Union Harriman's personal experiences, scripts, personae and existing beliefs led to a change in attitude toward the USSR (Larson, 1989). After a change in attitude, the foreign policy change—containment—followed. In other words, the psychological nature of the high-level US foreign policy decision-makers affected US foreign policy towards the USSR.

In a nutshell, there is an interaction between international trends and challenges to the US and the

psychological processes of high-level foreign policy decision-makers. How these policymakers interpret these challenges and how to react to them is crucial to explaining US foreign policy. US foreign policy decisions mostly are a result of policymakers' formulation of challenges and formulation of dealing with these challenges. Hence, **psychological explanations** have an explanatory power of why specific US foreign policy decisions are made and why some others are not. In that manner, the attitudes of high-level foreign policy decision-makers are an important source of US foreign policy. It also helps us to understand the shifts in US foreign policy since the presidents, the most pivotal actors in determining US foreign policy, and other foreign policy officials such as secretaries of state change over time.

c) Institutional Approaches and US Foreign Policy

The third domestic/American politics approach to explaining US foreign policy is institutional explanations. By institutional explanations, I refer to bureaucratic politics, organizational processes and institutional design in the US political system. In this section of the article, I explain the role of bureaucratic politics and institutional design in determining US foreign policy.

The first part of the institutional approach is bureaucratic politics and organizational processes. Put differently, this part mostly covers organizational processes and changes that affect US foreign policy. As a pioneer in the field, Allison (1969) provides three conceptual models to explain US foreign policy decision-making. The first one is called the **rational policy model**. In this model, explaining a foreign policy decision means showing how the government could have rationally chosen that action (Allison, 1969, p. 693). In this model, the governments are seen as unitary rational actors that choose the rational option among other options to maximize national security and national interests (Allison, 1969, p. 694).

The second model is called the **organizational processes model**. In this model, states are not seen as unitary actors; instead, they are seen as a constellation of loosely allied organizations (Allison, 1969, p. 699). Put differently, the government is a machine that has different parts with different expertise. Over time, standard operating procedures developed, and foreign policy decisions are organizational outputs.

The last model of Allison is called the **bureaucratic politics model**. In this model, foreign policy is a result of bargaining along regularized channels among players

positioned hierarchically within the government (Allison, 1969, p. 707). In other words, US foreign policy emerges as collages composed of individual acts, outcomes of minor and major bureaucratic games and foul-ups (Allison, 1969, p. 710). Applying these three models to US decisions in the Cuban Missile Crisis, Allison provides examples that show bureaucratic politics and organizational processes are an essential part of US foreign policy decision-making.

Art (1973, p. 486) criticizes the models, particularly the third model, by arguing that the model undervalues the influence of both generational mindsets and domestic politics on the manner in which top decision-makers approach foreign policy. Likewise, Bendor and Hammond (1992) also problematize the methodology of Allison's model. In addition to the literature on Allison's models and their critiques, other scholars also try to show the effects of organizational features and processes on US foreign policy. Drezner (2000), for instance, evaluates the impact of organizations' embeddedness regarding influencing US foreign policy.

In a nutshell, as in the name of the section, the first part of institutional approaches explains US foreign policy with organizational processes and bureaucratic politics. According to the organizational processes approach, US foreign policy is a result of standard operating procedures and the sum of different organizations' works. For instance, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Air Force, and the State Department played a part in determining US foreign policy towards the Cuban Missile Crisis (Allison, 1969, pp. 704-706). In other words, US foreign policy is an organizational output. However, it is important to note that the organizational processes approach is usually related to foreign policy implementation rather than decision-making. According to the bureaucratic politics approach, on the other hand, US foreign policy is an outcome of the existing bargaining bureaucracy. Rather than international pressures or organizational processes, the bargaining process between the bureaucrats shapes US foreign policy. Interests of different agencies and top-level bureaucrats play an essential role in determining US foreign policy. Again, the bargaining process between the CIA and the military shaped US foreign policy regarding the Cuban Missile Crisis (Allison, 1969, pp. 712-713).

The second part of the institutional approach is *institutional design*. Related to bureaucratic interests and bargaining, *institutional design* is another key factor that shapes not only the US domestic political system but also US foreign policy. Focusing on national security agencies, Zegart

(1999) shows that bureaucratic politics and bargaining between other actors, including the President, interest groups, and Congress, play an important role in the creation and evolution of agencies. Providing the origin and evolution of the National Security Council, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Central Intelligence Agency, she asserts that new agencies not necessarily are designed to serve the US national interests but designed to serve the interests of different political actors and were designed as a result of contending bureaucrats.

At first glance, this approach seems not necessarily related to US foreign policy but related to American domestic politics. However, once founded, these agencies play an important role in determining US foreign policy. In that manner, it is fair to argue that US foreign policy is shaped by different organizations that are created as a result of bureaucratic bargaining. Consider the CIA as an example. It played a vital role in US foreign policy towards Latin America several times. For instance, it was one of the vital actors in the US foreign policy decision-making process in the Cuban Missile Crisis (Allison, 1969).

Institutional approaches explain US foreign policy as a result of organizational processes, bureaucratic politics, and institutional design. Conflict of interests among domestic political actors, bureaucrats, and organizations shape US foreign policy. In that manner, to understand and explain US foreign policy, one should understand and explain the domestic processes behind the foreign policy. Put differently, US foreign policy is determined not by international pressures but by a domestic contest between key political actors and bureaucrats.

Conclusion

Given the brief background and arguments of both sides, namely, IR theory and American politics theories, I evaluate the contributions, insights, and evidence of the two sides in this section. First, I evaluate the contributions and insights of the two sides. Then, I evaluate evidence from both sides.

Before beginning the evaluation, I want to stress a point. I argue that neither IR theories nor domestic theories can fully explain US foreign policy. The US is one of the most important actors in the international system and has a unique nature in domestic politics. Hence, U.S. foreign policy can only be fully explained by combining IR theory and domestic theories. The US is being affected by international trends and also US domestic politics. Having said that, I argue that domestic

theories are more capable of explaining US foreign policy rather than IR theories.

IR theories are helpful in understanding general features/trends in US foreign policy. In addition, IR theories are useful for having systematic explanations of US foreign policy. (Neo)realism uncovers the motives of power and interest in US foreign policy. It also shows how the nature of the international system affects US foreign policy. The difference between US foreign policy in the Cold War era—bipolar international system—and US foreign policy in the post-Cold War era—unipolar international system—is an example of realism’s contribution to understanding US foreign policy. Realism is also useful to understand most US foreign policy decisions related to war or military intervention at an abstract level. Uncovering the power and interest motives, realism usually offers why US foreign policy acted in a way. However, it lacks explaining the specific decision-making process of US foreign policy.

Liberalism, on the other hand, is also useful for explaining general trends in US foreign policy. The role of international cooperation, economic policies, and international organizations in determining US foreign policy can be explained by liberalism. Altogether, these features of US foreign policy draw the general lines that US foreign policy occurs. From a security-related perspective, the ***Democratic Peace Theory*** offers an explanation of general trends in US foreign policy. US foreign policy is mostly based on promoting liberal values and securing the liberal world order. The records of US foreign policy on security issues show that the Democratic Peace theory is helpful in explaining US foreign policy. ***The United States, A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement 1994-1995*** explicitly states that democratic states are less likely to threaten US interests and more likely to cooperate with the United States to meet security threats and promote free trade and sustainable development (The White House, 1994, p. 2).

Last, constructivism uncovers the importance of other concepts such as identity, culture, and perception in determining US foreign policy. Put differently; constructivism also draws the general lines on which US foreign policy operates. Also, it shows how identity and perceptions are a key part of US foreign policy.

Mainstream IR theories are useful to explore the general frame of US foreign policy—why the US chose a trend in foreign policy and the reasons behind foreign policy decisions. As three pillars of US foreign policy, mainstream IR theories explain the rationale behind US foreign policy—the role of power, interest,

values, identities, and perceptions in US foreign policy. However, it is only one side of the explanation of US foreign policy. IR theory lacks explaining specifics and details of US foreign policy.

Domestic/American politics theories are better for explaining US foreign policy because they offer a more detailed analysis of US foreign policy. The success of American political theories in explaining US foreign policy also shows us the complexity of the US foreign policy decision-making process. Among other factors, American political institutions, mass politics, and the psychology of key policymakers are crucial in determining US foreign policy. Since US foreign policy is shaped as a result of the interaction of different domestic factors, focusing on these factors such as bureaucratic politics, interest groups, and public opinion and exploring their influence in the decision-making process gives us a more detailed and accurate analysis of US foreign policy.

Public opinion and interest groups usually constrain the options and the way of conduct of American foreign policy on a foreign policy issue. Public opinion affects the options, while interest groups usually influence the decision-making process regarding which issues are important and which ways should be followed to solve an issue in US foreign policy. Put differently, mass politics explanations of US foreign policy provide domestic factors that shape US foreign policy. US responses to the international trends but how the response should be explained by mass politics.

Institutional approaches, on the other hand, contribute to the field by showing how US foreign policy decisions are made. The US political institutions, bureaucrats, and bureaucratic and organizational interests play an undeniable role in determining US foreign policy. This approach also shows the complexity of the US foreign policy decision-making process. Again, the US responds the international trends, but the way the US responds is shaped by institutional bargaining. By exploring the challenge of interest and power among the US institutions and bureaucrats, institutional approaches provide a better and more detailed analysis of US foreign policy decisions. In other words, as IR theory is better for explaining broad patterns, institutional approaches are better for explaining more specific actions and policies in US foreign policy.

Lastly, **psychological explanations** are also contributing to the field by showing how attitudes of top-level foreign policy decision-makers shape US foreign policy. The way these top officials interpret a foreign issue strictly affects US foreign policy decisions. Exploring the psychological nature

of key foreign policymakers provides us with a better explanation of specific US foreign policy decisions.

Evidence also supports that domestic/American politics theories are better for explaining US foreign policy. On the IR theory side, the evidence is usually a result of interpretation except for some parts of the literature on Liberal IR. According to a specific IR theory, scholars try to evaluate US foreign policy with their key concepts. On the other side, however, the evidence is usually based on statistical results. Besides the statistical evidence, other kinds of evidence also are more credible, including official US documents from the US political institutions and policymaking processes. In other words, the domestic/American politics side of the debate provides their argument with better and more robust evidence.

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