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Steve Smith

Broadly speaking, the history of the development of foreign policy analysis (FPA) can be characterised as having three main phases: an initial period of development from the mid–1950s to the mid–1960s when it arose out of a deep dissatisfaction with the simplistic nature of realist accounts of foreign policy; an explosion of FPA in the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as a tightly bound group of scholars gravitated towards a specific methodology (the Comparative Foreign Policy — CFP — approach); and the period since the early 1970s, which has seen the decline of the CFP approach and the emergence of a much more eclectic and diffuse set of methodologies and approaches. Of course, FPA's development was never quite so simple and straightforward; there have always been many competing accounts of foreign policy, and these have had differing impacts in different academic communities at different times. Nevertheless, to examine where we are now in the study of foreign policy it is useful to have this broad sketch of where we have been.

This three–fold development of FPA in the US was mirrored in Britain, albeit with a lag of a few years in each case; paradoxically, the strong and relatively united school of FPA in Britain at the present stands in marked contrast to its counterpart in the US, where there is every indication that the subject has lost its way. This is because the quest for a general theory of foreign policy behaviour was never as popular in Britain as it was in the US; this, combined with a lag of five years or so between developments in the US and their adoption in Britain, meant that just as FPA was gaining adherents in Britain, its bubble had all too obviously burst in the US. Foreign policy analysis is therefore in a very different situation in the US than it is in Britain, for when positivist paradigms crumble there is little left; the British school of FPA, was always rather sceptical of these paradigms. Instead, attention was focused on less ambitious approaches, for example, those integrating the study of foreign policy with explicit historical methods, or those taking a much more middle–range view of the job of constructing theory. Today in the US, there is still an evident desire to create a general theory of foreign policy, and positivistic, inductive assumptions still characterise most of the self–consciously FPA literature; in contrast, FPA in Britain coheres around middle–range theory or specific case studies — there is simply not the sympathy for the quest for general theory.

If this characterises the relative situations of FPA in Britain and in the US, it must be immediately noted that the vast bulk of literature dealing with foreign policy is not within the FPA approach at all. This fact has crucial consequences, since it obscures the very different assumptions underlying the rather distinct

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approaches that dominate the specialist, and self– conscious, activity of FPA in each country. Nevertheless, it is clear that if we wish to study foreign policy at present then our choice of how to do so is by no means restricted to the specialist work of FPA scholars. Currently, there are five main ways of studying foreign policy: through a domestic politics perspective; international relations theory; comparative foreign policy theory; case studies; and middle–range theory.

Domestic Politics Perspective

Much of the analysis of foreign policy sees it as the external activity of a political system. While no analyst would claim that states are closed entities, the assumption of much of this work on foreign policy treats the state as a self–contained unit (at least in decision–making terms) and sees foreign policy behaviour as determined by processes within the decision–making structures of the formal state apparatus. Such a perspective encourages notions of choice and decision, and implies that decision–makers either act with a certain rationality (even if it is bounded) or represent formally a set of national or societal perceptions and predispositions. The problem with such approaches, which are of considerable importance in the study of foreign policy, is simply that they over–exaggerate choice and freedom, and underestimate both systemic influences on state behaviour and situational impact on decision–making. Furthermore, by stressing choice and decision, they ignore or downplay constraints and non–decisional influences on behaviour; as such they hinder the task of explaining the dynamism of international relations.

International Relations Theory

Just as foreign policy may be the unwanted stepchild of domestic politics and comparative politics, so domestic politics is largely ignored by those who seek to explain foreign policy by the major theories of international relations. Although many writers attempt to include domestic factors in more systemic accounts, the explanatory strength of international relations theory comes from its consideration of systemic causes of state behaviour. Thus, although Realism has much to say about the relative domestic merits of certain kinds of political systems, the work of the Realist theory is done by a systemic mechanism, *regardless* of the domestic values and structure. The popularity of its main concept for analysing foreign policy — national interest — should not obscure the fact that this only has theoretical structure in a systemic, not a sub–systemic context. The same goes for the work of the neo–Realists. The problem, of course, as Singer discussed over a quarter of a century ago in his famous article on the level–of–analysis problem, is that systemic theories lose explanatory power as one moves away from very broad generalisations. Thus, while systemic theory may well be indispensable to a full account of foreign policy, its necessarily narrow definition of the content of the term 'foreign policy' means that other accounts are required to explain the different content of foreign policy in specific situations. International relations theory is simply too general to stand as *the* theory of foreign policy, given the very different empirical content foreign policy has in the contemporary international system.

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It was, of course, exactly this problem with both state–level and systems–level accounts of foreign policy that FPA was intended to overcome. This was not only the motivation of the pioneering works of Snyder, Modelski and Rosenau: their work can be seen as an attempt to combine external and internal causes into a generally applicable theory of foreign policy. Nevertheless, as noted above, the CFP approach has declined greatly since its heyday in the US in the early 1970s. Yet it is equally evident that a very large number of those who work in the area of FPA in the US still cling to the epistemological assumptions of CFP: it is still a search for *a* theory, via data analysis, with the current task being to get the search back on the rails again. The problems of the approach are not so much that it is now rather discredited after 20 years of promise, but that its epistemology is so firmly rooted in positivism that there is no real question of amending the approach so as to utilise other accounts of foreign policy; positivism, after all, is not only a methodology but also a clear guide as to the way to construct theory. Added to these problems is the generic difficulty of general theory, namely a lack of empirical content or referents. Just as CFP's independent variable, the state, can be called into question by developments in international relations in the last decade, so can the commonality of the dependent variable, foreign policy. Together these call into question the possiblity of constructing a general theory of foreign policy, given the variety of types of state involved, the very different situational contexts, and the varying salience for these actors and contexts of the components of foreign policy.

Case–Studies

Despite the rather dismissive attitude of many FPA writers to the dominance of case–studies as accounts of foreign policy, they remain overwhelmingly the dominant way of writing about the subject. This is not a problem as long as it is clear that case studies *per se* cannot lead to the construction of theories of foreign policy. To understand empirical events may well require in–depth case studies, and these are certainly likely to be far more illuminating than the products of general theory, but historical case–studies do not FPA make! Further, the crucial issue is the extent of implicit theoretical assumptions within these case–studies. Historians have well–developed ways of attempting to assess the impact of theoretical assumptions on their work, but it is absolutely vital to point out that the examination of human behaviour requires an *a priori* model of motivation and psychology. All too often this remains unstated, thereby not only preventing the cumulative build–up of findings but also having a critical effect on the findings. For these reasons most case–studies remain idiosyncratic, both with regard to the subject and in terms of the view of the analyst.

Middle–Range Theory

The final method of analysis of foreign policy is the use of various middle–range theories that have been developed over the last 20 years. These concentrate on specific aspects of a generalised foreign policy system, such as decision–making structures, belief systems, or implementation. The great advantage of such approaches is that they allow the content of foreign policy and also its causal

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mechanism to vary between types of state and their situational context. Middle–range theories also provide an alternative to the stark choice between general theory (whether inductively to be generated or deductively given) and historical analysis. They therefore offer a meeting ground for historian and social scientist, and there are many examples of historians writing about foreign policy with explicit reference to these middle–range theories. There remain a number of problems, among which the more commonly noted that the theories are almost exclusively US in origin and that there remains a tremendous task in combining the middle–range theories to provide a theory of foreign policy. Finally, it must be noted that the cumulative findings from these middle–range theories are not that extensive: the academic community remains unwilling to test theories of the others.

If this is the range of approaches to foreign policy analysis and if the subject is approached in rather different ways within the US and British FPA communities, it remains the case that most of the work on foreign policy is not within the FPA approach. This is because of the rather obvious reason that virtually every attempt to explain international relations involves an explanation of foreign policy. This should indicate the problems of developing *a* general theory of foreign policy, since all of international relations seems to be about foreign policy. For this reason perhaps the British FPA community has a more realistic view of the way to develop accounts of foreign policy behaviour than do those FPA scholars in the US who continue the search along the road to general theory.

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