Joint Research Seminar CERI-Sciences Po/King's College London

Paris, 11th July 2014

Opening the "Black Box" of the Decision-Maker: some remarks by a FPA student considering history and political psychology

Charles SITZENSTUHL

PhD candidate in political science, Sciences Po-CERI

charles.sitzenstuhl@sciencespo.fr

This presentation will argue that foreign policy analysis (FPA) is in need of a greater number of studies focusing on top decision-makers. In other words, that it needs to consider more systematically the individual decision-maker as a level of analysis in himself. Compared to organizational analysis, system-level analysis or domestic politics analysis all of which are well established within the discipline, individual level analysis appears to be the poor relation in FPA. From a French student's perspective, the situation is clear: the individual decision-maker level of analysis is a neglected perspective in FPA, even if growing (1). Surprisingly, history as a discipline is less reluctant in addressing the issue of the individual in foreign policy (2). However, it is political psychology which offers the most stimulating contributions when attempting to "enter" inside the "black box" of the decision-maker (3).

The aim of the following remarks is to open the debate, rather than close it. This presentation does not present itself as a definitive or exhaustive assessment of the state of FPA as regards the individual decision-maker in foreign policy. Rather, it seeks to present the observations of a PhD student engaging with foreign policy and its ramifications through research in progress for nearly two years on French policy regarding Turkey's accession to the European Union (1995-2012). Because this research is still very much work in progress, my PhD topic will not be discussed here. The only thing which I will mention about it here is the realization that, because of the French decision-making process in the field of foreign policy, and because of the political and media saliency of the subject, this policy regarding Turkey was significantly shaped by the president's own views. It is from this observation that the need was felt to study the influence of political leaders on foreign policy in greater depth.

1. The individual decision-maker level of analysis in FPA: from a neglected to a growing perspective

FPA developed half a century ago as a reaction against mainstream international relations theories (IR) which mainly focused on systems as the way to understand foreign policy. FPA forced analysts not only to look at macro-variables, but also to open up the "black box of the state". The first research agenda of FPA laid particular emphasis on the organizational context of foreign policy making, in order to discover which institutions and bureaucracies most influenced foreign policy. As a result, the role of individuals has been undervalued, or at least only considered within a larger organizational context. The emphasis

laid not on the decision-maker as an individual, but on his being, in fact, within a group or an organization.

Such a view is held by three of the FPA's founding works of the 1960s-1970s, which still remain widely read. The first is Jack Snyder, Henry Bruck and Burton Sapin's *Foreign Policy Decision-Making* published in 1962. Their perspective is embedded within an group paradigm. For them, "the decision-maker is, par excellence, a group actor"[1]. The concept of the decision-maker as an individual does not really come into play. These ideas are again picked up in the second of these works, Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision* first published in 1971. At the beginning of his book, Allison states that "the decision-maker of national policy is obviously not one calculating individual but is rather a conglomerate of large organizations and political actors"[2]. Once again, the individual does not "exist". Finally, the third work is Morton Halperin's *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* first published in 1974.[3] The title of the book is in itself self-explanatory. Furthermore, Halperin explicitly writes in his introduction that he has limited his study to those decision-making processes involving bureaucracy.

This presentation does not seek to deny the significance of organizations, bureaucracies and institutions in the making of foreign policy. Rather, it seeks to highlight the fact that FPA has, so far, over-studied them and has tended to see foreign policy through an organizational lens. We know, however, that, especially in the field of foreign policy, it is heads of state, heads of government and ministers acting in the name of state who take those decisions at the end of the chain of command, have to meet and deal with foreign representatives. Foreign policy's top decision-makers are not interchangeable puppets, but individuals with their own feelings, goals, attitudes, personalities, worldviews, and failures.

During this organizational paradigm "period", few studies sought to engage with this individual level and to incorporate psychology into FPA. Two authors do, however, stand out in their treatment of this subject. Firstly, Alexander George's biography of Woodrow Wilson,

[1] Richard C. Snyder, H. W. Bruck, Burton Sapin, *Foreign Policy Decision-Making. An Approach to the Study of International Politics*, New York, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962, p. 142
[2] Graham T. Allison, Philip D. Zelikow, *Essence of Decision. Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, New York, Longman, 1999, p. 3
[3] Morton H. Halperin, Priscilla A. Clapp, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, Washington, The Brookings Institution Press, 2006

published in 1956, remains as a must-read.[4] It perfectly demonstrates the ways in which Wilson's personality influenced US foreign policy under his presidency, in particular regarding the creation of the League of Nations. George further made explicit this influence of the beliefs and worldviews of political elites on IR in a theoretical paper dated 1969, through his use of the operational code approach.[5]

Secondly, in 1972, Michael Brecher published *The Foreign Policy System of Israel*.[6] Brecher emphasised the importance of psychological factors when attempting to understand Israeli diplomacy. Indeed, he incorporated psychological analysis of Israel's top decision-makers, looking at their personalities and attitudes, as well as their views regarding world politics, the Arab people, history or Jewishness. He explains, for instance, that Israel's policy cannot be understood without knowing that David Ben-Gurion viewed the Arab people as Israel's enemies and that he believed that they only understood the use of force. Brecher concludes by observing that the psychological environment of the decision-maker is a major field which the analyst has to investigate.

Recent FPA publications seem to suggest that this role of the individual in foreign policy has become more readily accepted. Indeed, according to Valerie Hudson, whilst the Cold War era focused on systems and downplayed the individual, the 1990s crises, such as Iraq or North Korea, have highlighted the extent to which leaders matter.[7] One seminal article recently articulated the necessity to study top leaders in foreign policy: the famous "Who Leads Matters" published by Margaret Herman and her colleagues.[8] For them, a predominant leader is "when a single individual has the power to make the choice concerning how a state is going to respond to a foreign policy problem, he or she becomes the decision unit and acts as a predominant leader"[9]. This happens in states where the decision-making power in foreign policy belongs to a single individual, which is mostly the case in authoritarian or presidential regimes. Furthermore, such top decision-makers seek to increase their power during non-routine situations or diplomatic crises.

---

[4] Alexander L. George, Juliette L. George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House. A Personality Study*, New York, The John Day Company, 1956

[5] Alexander L. George, "The "Operational Code": A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 2, June 1969, pp. 190-222

[6] Michael Brecher, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel. Setting, Images, Process*, London, Oxford University Press, 1972

[7] Valerie M. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis. Classic and Contemporary Theory*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007

[8] Margaret G. Hermann, Thomas Preston, Baghat Korany, Timothy M. Shaw, "Who Leads Matters: The Effects of Powerful Individuals", *International Studies Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, Summer 2001, pp. 83-131

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 84

In her foreign policy handbook published in 2007, Marijke Breuning states that "individuals and the decisions they make are a major determinant of foreign policy. In order to understand foreign policy decisions and behaviors, then, we must understand leaders – and their personalities, perceptions, and motivations".[10] What is of particular interest in her book is her use of historical examples. She shows, for instance, the extent to which Belgian colonial policy in the 19th century was closely linked to King Leopold II's own interests in colonialism and trade, as well as to his ambition and diplomatic skills.

Another contemporary study is Steve Yetiv's work on the Gulf War. In it, he reveals the extent to which American policy *vis-à-vis* Iraq cannot be understood without knowing the role played by George H. W. Bush.[11] Indeed, Bush came to personify the conflict and was very emotional about it, sometimes against the views of his own advisers. His experience as a soldier in World War II pushed him to make analogies between the situation he was then facing and the Munich Agreement; and between Saddam Hussein and Hitler. His refusal to be a "new Chamberlain" precipitated his decision to go to war. And indeed, in the escalation of the conflict, Saddam Hussein underestimated Bush's bellicosity. Finally, it was Bush's interpretation of the situation that influenced the US administration and its allies. According to Steve Yetiv, this case study shows the extent to which individuals "can alter the course of major historical events" [12].

Two French works, in particular, are worth mentioning here. The first is Samy Cohen's decision-making analysis of French foreign policy.[13] His numerous examples perfectly demonstrate the ways in which the president imposes his will on the French foreign policy system. Despite the work's popularity, there is a sense that the French political science community has not yet really learned from his conclusions. Cohen's works are, indeed, quoted in several public policy analysis handbooks, but, as Patrick Hassenteufel admits, the personal dimension continues to be unvalued in policy analysis.[14] The second French reference is a recently published handbook by Jean-Frédéric Morin on foreign policy. In it, he dedicates a chapter to the decision-maker and demonstrates the concept's revival in IR

[10] Marijke Breuning, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Comparative Introduction*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 11
[11] Steve A. Yetiv, *Explaining Foreign Policy. U.S. Decision-Making in the Gulf Wars*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011
[12] *Ibid.*, p. xii
[13] Samy Cohen, *La monarchie nucléaire. Les coulisses de la politique étrangère sous la Ve République*, Paris, Hachette, 1986
[14] Patrick Hassenteufel, *Sociologie politique : l'action publique*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2011, see chapter 3

theory.[15] If the state of the art in political science is surprising, surprising is also the fact that history has less problem to consider that the statesman matters in foreign policy.

2. The contribution of history about the statesman

When using history, political scientists generally look for chronological data and course of events. History is, therefore, perceived as the raw material which the political scientist sculpts with the help of theoretical frameworks. The aim of this presentation is not to open a "political science vs. history" debate; but rather to highlight the role of history within the field of foreign policy. Historians seem less reluctant to consider the role of the statesman in international politics than political scientists.

The seminal *Introduction à l'histoire des relations internationales* published by Pierre Renouvin and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle in 1964 is often remembered for its first part, written by Renouvin, about the "profound forces" that shape international relations (i.e. economy, demography, geography). More interestingly, the second half of the book, written by Duroselle, is entitled "the statesman", and its first chapter deals with "the personality of the statesman". Duroselle's contribution to the incorporation of political science concepts on the decision-making process into IR history in France is well-known; however he was also acutely aware of political psychology literature. Indeed, in one of his footnotes, he lamented political scientists' neglect of the psychological dimension of foreign policy.[16] Duroselle went on to observe that, once one engaged with those profound forces affecting the statesman, certain aspects of the decision became clearer by considering the statesman's role.[17] He himself established a classification of historical figures according to their characters using characterologists works.

In an edited book by IR historians published in 2012, Robert Frank calls historians to follow Duroselle's statesman-centered perspective. Indeed, Frank observes that historians are not afraid of the biographical exercise.[18] According to Pierre Milza, a good biography is a total biography. Since the decision-maker is an entity in himself, a complex human being,

[15] Jean-Frédéric Morin, *La politique étrangère. Théories, méthodes et références*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2013, see chapter 8
[16] Pierre Renouvin, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Introduction à l'histoire des relations internationales*, Paris, Pocket, 1997, p. 285, footnote no. 1
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 284
[18] Robert Frank (dir.), *Pour l'histoire des relations internationales*, Paris, PUF, 2012, p. 473

who is both public and private, a political biography is useful only if it includes private elements. Indeed historians know that personality, family or health influence the statesman. Milza does, however, go on to add that not all aspects of private life are useful in such a case; but only those which help us understand political choice.

To illustrate my point about the need to include both private and public elements of the life of the decision-maker in such works, I will mention two well-known historical biographies of political leaders which provide particularly stimulating insights. Both works do not focus solely on the individual's foreign policies, but are interested in the individual's personal influence on political events. The first of these is Jacques Le Goff's biography of Saint Louis, published in 1996, considered by many a masterpiece of medieval history. In it, Le Goff explains what he considers to be a biographical work. According to him, a statesman does not have a preordained destiny. Destiny is a chaotic and unpredictable force, with some contradictions that the historian does not have to hide. Le Goff writes that Saint Louis "shape[d] himself and shape[d] his time as much as he [wa]s shaped by it. And this construction is made of chances, hesitations, choice."[19] Chapter by chapter, Le Goff perfectly demonstrates the extent to which Saint Louis' political action was the result of a combination of structural variables (such as society, domestic and international politics, and economy) and deeply personal variables. Regarding the latter category, of particular significance is the year of his birth, the year of the Battle of Bouvines (1214); as well as the fact that he was the first French king to know his own grandfather (Philip Augustus). To this can be added his close relationship with his mother (Blanche of Castile); his piety and humility; his fear of the Last Judgment; and, finally, his vision of a Christendom spreading from the West to Jerusalem. Le Goff shows the extent to which these elements unquestionably influenced his foreign policy, notably his Crusading policy.

The second work which I want to briefly mention is the famous biography of Hitler published by the British historian Ian Kershaw in 1998; especially since Kershaw explains that he was firstly a structuralist historian. It was this work on Hitler which pushed him to reconcile structural level explanations with individual level explanations.[20] As he makes clear, without Hitler, history would have been different; but Hitler was a product of the society and the time he was living in. Historians remind us that there is no "great man theory" of history:

[19] Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Louis*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 22
[20] Ian Kershaw, *Hitler. 1889-1936: Hubris*, Paris, Flammarion, 1999, in particular first chapter "Réfléchir sur Hitler"

both the context and the individual have to be taken into consideration. Political psychology is thus incredibly helpful in helping us to precisely open the "black box" of the individual.

3. The contribution of political psychology: going "inside" the decision-maker

Political psychology examines the "interaction of psychological processes and political outcomes"[21], with the conviction that "individual people exert decisive impact on the outcome of world history and political events"[22]. The discipline developed in the 1930s, notably thanks to Harold Lasswell, now widely considered to be the founding father of political psychology. In *Psychopathology and Politics*, Lasswell explains that political scientists overanalyze politics through the use of institutional categories and "have little to say about the personal influences which modify the expected behavior of legislatures, executives, and judiciaries"[23]. He encourages political scientists to consider the individual as a unit of analysis and to take a look "behind" the public politician. That is why biographical insights are important. Though Lasswell's work is, at times, outdated, he has given to political psychology its direction: the analysis of the impact of psychology on politics.[24]

Despite Lasswell's contributions, the institutionalization of political psychology as an academic discipline only emerged in the 1970s. Within its wide spectrum of inquiry, IR and FPA have a substantial part.[25] According to Madeleine Grawitz, there are three levels in the application of political psychology to IR: the relations between citizens and IR; the relations between politicians and IR; and, finally, "the most important: the influence of personality of heads of state on their conception of international politics and the way they execute their job: inquiring, negotiating, deciding".[26] Jack Levy, on the other hand, believes that political psychology had little influence on IR until the publication of Robert Jervis's book on perception which "mark[ed] the beginning of a systematic "cognitive paradigm" of foreign

[21] Rose McDermott, *Political Psychology in International Relations*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2004, p. 3
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 20
[23] Harold D. Lasswell, *Psychopathology and Politics*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1930, p. 2
[24] Elisabeth Meur, Marjorie Legendre, "La psychologie politique internationale" in Thierry Balzacq, Frédéric Ramel (eds.), *Traité de relations internationales*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2013, p. 935
[25] Morton Deutsch, Catarina Kinnvall, "What is Political Psychology?" in Kristen Renwick Monroe (ed.), *Political Psychology*, Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002, pp. 15-42
[26] Madeleine Grawitz, "Psychologie et politique" in Madeleine Grawitz and Jean Leca (eds.), *Traité de science politique, 3, L'action politique*, Paris, PUF, 1985, p. 85

policy analysis"[27]. It is, however, worth mentioning here a number of pioneering studies published before Jervis', even though their impact on mainstream IR remained low at the time. In 1968, psychologist Joseph de Rivera published *The Psychological Dimension of Foreign Policy*, noting that he "felt that psychology […] should have something to contribute to foreign policy"[28]. De Rivera contextualised his thought within the frame of reference developed by Snyder *et al*. regarding the "definition of the situation". He sought to understand how reality is constructed by leaders; how the personality of decision-makers determines foreign policy; how interpersonal relations between world leaders are important; and how groups influence decisions. On the latter point, Irving Janis' *Victims of Groupthink* published in 1972 was another step towards the incorporation of psychological concepts into FPA.[29] In it, Janis reminds us that even powerful individuals are part of small groups, surrounded by advisers and other world leaders; and as such, group dynamics are to be considered.

The big shift was indeed, as Jack Levy observed, the publication of *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* by Robert Jervis in 1976. In order to precisely analyze foreign policy, Jervis noted the importance of understanding the perceptions of the leaders involved in the decision-making process. The other levels of analysis (i.e. the international environment, domestic politics, bureaucratic politics) do not permit such psychological insights. He brilliantly showed that, without this use of psychology, FPA misses something.

The success of political psychology in IR and FPA lies in the fact that it participates in the unresolved debate about rationality in decision-making.[30] Such a debate would necessitate more time than this paper possesses. Janice Gross Stein explains that the cognitive revolution of the 1970s in FPA confirmed that rationality was bounded, since people need simplicity and consistency, are poor estimators, and are averse to loss.[31] That is why FPA not only needs to fully accept its psychological legacy, but also to follow the deep shift that political psychology is living thanks to neuroscience discoveries which prove the important role of emotions and preconscious thinking on decision-making.

---

[27] Jack S. Levy, "Political Psychology and Foreign Policy" in David O. Sears, Leonie Huddy, Robert Jervis (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 260

[28] Joseph H. de Rivera, *The Psychological Dimension of Foreign Policy*, Columbus, Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1968, p. iii

[29] Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink. A psychological study of foreign-policy decisions and fiascoes*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1972

[30] Elisabeth Meur, Marjorie Legendre, "La psychologie…", *op. cit.*, p. 939

[31] Janice Gross Stein, "Foreign policy decision making: rational, psychological, and neurological models" in Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, Tim Dunne (eds.), *Foreign Policy. Theories, Actors, Cases*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 133

Bibliography

ALLISON Graham T., Philip D. Zelikow, *Essence of Decision. Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, New York, Longman, 1999

BRECHER Michael, *The Foreign Policy System of Israel. Setting, Images, Process*, London, Oxford University Press, 1972

BREUNING Marijke, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Comparative Introduction*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007

COHEN Samy, *La monarchie nucléaire. Les coulisses de la politique étrangère sous la Ve République*, Paris, Hachette, 1986

DE RIVERA Joseph H., *The Psychological Dimension of Foreign Policy*, Columbus, Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1968

DEUTSCH Morton, Catarina Kinnvall, "What is Political Psychology?" in Kristen Renwick Monroe (ed.), *Political Psychology*, Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002, pp. 15-42

FRANK Robert (ed.), *Pour l'histoire des relations internationales*, Paris, PUF, 2012

GEORGE Alexander L., "The "Operational Code": A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 2, June 1969, pp. 190-222

GEORGE Alexander L., Juliette L. George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House. A Personality Study*, New York, The John Day Company, 1956

GRAWITZ Madeleine, "Psychologie et politique" in Madeleine Grawitz and Jean Leca (eds.), *Traité de science politique, 3, L'action politique*, Paris, PUF, 1985, pp. 1-139

GROSS STEIN Janice, "Foreign policy decision making: rational, psychological, and neurological models" in Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, Tim Dunne (eds.), *Foreign Policy. Theories, Actors, Cases*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 130-146

HALPERIN Morton H., Priscilla A. Clapp, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, Washington, The Brookings Institution Press, 2006

HASSENTEUFEL Patrick, *Sociologie politique : l'action publique*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2011

HERMANN Margaret G., Thomas Preston, Baghat Korany, Timothy M. Shaw, "Who Leads Matters: The Effects of Powerful Individuals", *International Studies Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, Summer 2001, pp. 83-131

HUDSON Valerie M., *Foreign Policy Analysis. Classic and Contemporary Theory*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007

JANIS Irving L., *Victims of Groupthink. A psychological study of foreign-policy decisions and fiascoes*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1972

KERSHAW Ian, *Hitler. 1889-1936: Hubris*, Paris, Flammarion, 1999

LE GOFF Jacques, *Saint Louis*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996

LEVY Jack S., "Political Psychology and Foreign Policy" in David O. Sears, Leonie Huddy, Robert Jervis (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003

MCDERMOTT Rose, *Political Psychology in International Relations*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2004

MEUR Elisabeth, Marjorie Legendre, "La psychologie politique internationale" in Thierry Balzacq, Frédéric Ramel (eds.), *Traité de relations internationales*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2013, pp. 933-987

MORIN Jean-Frédéric, *La politique étrangère. Théories, méthodes et références*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2013

RENOUVIN Pierre, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Introduction à l'histoire des relations internationales*, Paris, Pocket, 1997

SNYDER Richard C., H. W. Bruck, Burton Sapin, *Foreign Policy Decision-Making. An Approach to the Study of International Politics*, New York, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962

YETIV Steve A., *Explaining Foreign Policy. U.S. Decision-Making in the Gulf Wars*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011