International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis

WALTER CARLSNAES

Although foreign policy analysis (FPA) has traditionally been one of the major sub-fields within the study of international relations (IR), it has suffered a down-period during the past two decades or so. A quick perusal of the table of contents of the major IR journals published during this period is quite clear on this score: very few contain titles in which the concept of 'foreign policy analysis' plays a prominent role. To a considerable degree this reflects a disciplinary development that has put a strong structuralist-systemic stamp on IR, and hence also an effective damper on approaches – such as foreign policy analysis – premised not primarily on the international system as the generator of behaviour but on the importance of unit-level factors and actors for understanding and explaining state behaviour. At the same time interest in the development of IR theory itself has grown exponentially, but most of the time with little or no reference to 'foreign policy', either as an integral part of such theory or as a separate but important approach in its own right. On the contrary, most of the time it is simply ignored in these debates and discussions, or politely dismissed with reference to the distinction between system level and unit level theories, the former pertaining to international politics proper, the latter 'merely' to the behaviour of individual states. As a consequence, the practice of foreign policy scholars has to a considerable degree become one of eclecticism and defensiveness within a larger scholarly mi-

lieu which, on the whole, is not particularly engaged with the issues which are on the forefront of the agenda of foreign policy analysis.

In view of these developments, the major objective of this project will be to bring back FPA to a central position within IR, and to do this by clearly demarcating the substance and boundaries of this field of analysis and to relate these to the broader concerns of IR. A second and equally important goal is to give a systematised overview of the current state of the art in this sub-field, and to place it in a historical context. Both of these major objectives will involve bringing in social and political theory into the analysis, which will be used to structure the various approaches to be found within current FPA in a way which will relate these more closely to the broader concerns and debates within IR theory. This will involve both an analytical and critical dissection of the sub-field – this will constitute the major part of the project – as well as an attempt to overcome current divisions by means of bridge-building proposals intended to overcome the overly dichotomised nature of contemporary FPA. The approach will thus be analytical, comparative, historical, critical and based on substantial doses of social theory.

More concretely, this project is intended to result in a monograph, to be structured as follows. First of all, an *historical overview* of FPA will be presented, essentially stretching from its establishment as an academic subject in the US after World War II to the situation prior to the end of the millennium. This will also contain a comparison of the development of the sub-field on both sides of the Atlantic during this period, including an overview of the growth of FPA in the UK and on the Continent. Major landmarks in this

discussion will include the introduction of behaviouralism to FPA, the ambitions underlying the comparative foreign policy movement in the US, the reasons for its subsequent regression, and why FPA as a whole suffered a decline in the 1980 and early 1990s.

This overview will be followed by a substantial chapter dedicated to *conceptualising* the current domain of FPA, in which fundamental epistemological and ontological issues will enter into the discussion. This will first of all involve a discussion of various debates about the explanandum (or dependent variable) in FPA – that which is to be explained. Here it will be argued that this debate has abated and that a consensus can be found today on this issue, boiling down to a specification of the explanandum which emphasises the *purposive* nature of foreign policy actions, a focus on *explicit policy commitments*, and an emphasis on the role of *state boundaries*.

The second part of this chapter will subsequently lead to a much more controversial discussion within the field: how to *explain* the foreign policy actions of states, that is to say, the question of feasible explanans (or independent variables). In current metatheoretical debate within social theory (and IR) two fundamental issues have dominated this discussion (Hollis and Smith 1990: 155-59, 214-16, 183-260; Guzzini 1998: 190-210; Wendt 1999: 22-40). The first concerns the ontological foundation of social systems, revolving around the question of where the dynamic foundations of social systems are located. This social causality either has its origin in 'the effects, intended or not, of individual action; or from the slowly evolving rules of the self-reproducing structure' (Guzzini 1998:197). This classic distinction in social theory is usually expressed in

terms of the dichotomy between 'individualism' and 'holism', the former holding 'that social scientific explanations should be reducible to the properties or interactions of independently existing individuals', while holism stands for the view 'that the effects of social structures cannot be reduced to independently existing agents and their interactions' (Wendt 1999: 26).

This ontological polarity between individualism and holism should be clearly distinguished from the epistemological issue of whether social agency is to be viewed through an 'objectivistic' or an 'interpretative' lens. Using a different metaphor, two choices are available here: to focus on human agents and their actions either from the 'outside' or from the 'inside', corresponding to the classical Weberian distinction between *Erklären* (explaining) and *Verstehen* (understanding). As argued by Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, these two approaches tell two different types of 'stories' about international relations, each with its own view of human nature and a concomitant range of 'appropriate' theories (Hollis and Smith 1990). Although not uncontroversial and hence in need of further discussion, this epistemological distinction will in the present context concern us only by virtue of its implications when combined with the two ontological choices presented above.

The individualistic answer to the ontological question reduces the epistemological issue to a choice between either treating actors from the 'outside' as rational or cognitive agents in social systems, or from the 'inside' as interpretative or reflexive actors in an intersubjective world of meaning. In either case, the individual is viewed as the primary source of social order, and hence all conceptions of the link between agents and social structures are

ultimately reduced to explanations in terms of individual action. Explanations proceeding from a holistic approach to social order treat action either as a function of structural determination in some sense, or with reference to processes of socialisation broadly defined. In both cases the relationship between actors and social structures is tendered in terms of some form of structural determination in which individual action is conceived as a function of a pre-established social order.

The implications for foreign policy approaches of these two dimensions can be summarised in terms of the following fourfold matrix (figure 1), providing us with what will be referred to, respectively, as 'structural', 'agency-based', 'social-institutional' and 'interpretative actor' perspectives.

The types of approaches to be found within each perspective will be discussed systematically and critically in two central chapters of the volume.

The first of these will contain approaches that epistemologically proceed from an 'objectivist' stance, but are based either on a holistic or an individualistic ontology. Within the ambit of structural perspectives I will discuss and critically analyse three current and influential 'schools' in FPA: *realism*, *neo-liberal institutionalism* and *organisational process* approaches. Under the second rubric – agency-based perspectives – I will similarly discuss three such

frameworks: those based, respectively, on *cognitive/psychological*, *bureaucratic politics* and *liberal* approaches.

The second of these analytical chapters will focus on approaches based on an 'interpretativist' epistemology but which are ontologically either holistic or individualistic in character. The first group – those with a social-institutional perspective – contains two increasingly influential (and interrelated) ways of doing FPA: so-called *social constructivism* and *discursive* approaches. The second category will consist of those types of studies – some *historically* and *descriptively* oriented analyses, others more analytically focused on *individual decision-making* processes – which proceed from an interpretative actor perspective. As in the case with the previous chapter, the overriding purpose here is to provide up to date analytical overviews as well as critical discussions of each approach, linking these to the current literature and debate within IR.

The final chapter will proceed from a synthesising or bridge-building ambition, and is also as such intended to constitute my own major theoretical contribution to this discussion. Although I have elaborated on this theme in earlier publications, my intention here is go into more depth than has been the case in the past (Carlsnaes 1986; 1992; 1993; 1994; 2002). The starting point is the claim that while the metatheoretical matrix used above is spe-

Figure 1: Four types of rock-bottom perspectives in the study of foreign policy

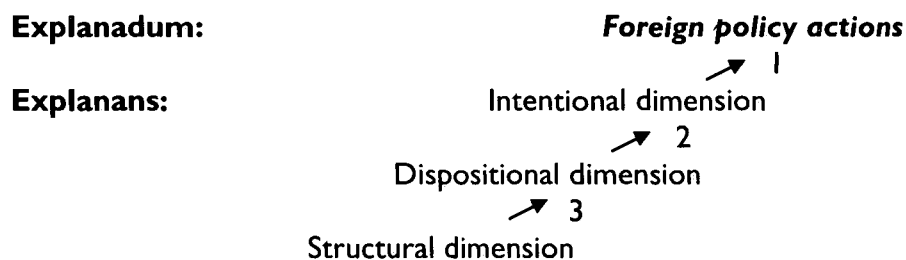|	**EPISTEMOLOGY**	
ONTOLOGY	**Objectivism**	**Interpretivism**
Holism	Structural perspective	Social-institutional perspective
Individualism	Agency-based perspective	Interpretative actor perspective

cifically designed for the purpose of classifying approaches to foreign policy analysis in terms of their most fundamental ontological and epistemological presuppositions, it is less suitable for *empirical* analysis itself as distinguished from *metatheoretical* dissection. Arguably, in the 'games real actors play' (Scharpf 1997) action is always a combination of purposive behaviour, cognitive-psychological factors and the various structural phenomena characterising societies and their environments, and hence explanations of actual foreign policy actions must perforce be able to give accounts which do not by definition either exclude or privilege any of these types of explanans. Insofar as the matrix used above does have such implications (albeit for good analytical-cum-pedagogical reasons), it simply will not be able to deliver the goods in this respect.

Thus, rather than thinking in terms of a logic of mutual exclusion, I will here elaborate on the argument that we should instead conceptualise such an analytic framework in terms of a tripartite approach consisting of an *intentional*, a *dispositional* and a *structural* dimension of explanation, as follows in figure 2.

Although analytically autonomous, these three dimensions are conceived as closely linked in the sense that they can be conjoined in a *logical, step-by-step* manner to

render *increasingly exhaustive* explanations of foreign policy actions qua explanandum as defined earlier. This means, first of all, that a teleological explanation (arrow 1) in terms solely of the intentional dimension is fully feasible, based either on strict rationality assumptions or on more traditional modes of intentional analysis. It also means, however, that one can choose to 'deepen' the analysis by providing a causal determination (arrow 2) of policy – as opposed to an explanation wholly in terms of given goals and preferences – in which the factors characterising the intentional dimension are themselves explained in terms of underlying psychological-cognitive factors which have disposed a given actor to have this and not that preference or intention. The distinction between these two levels can also be described in terms of an 'in order to' and a 'because of' dimension, the former referring to the intentional sphere, the latter constituting the link between this intention and the having of it: how a particular intention has become a particular actor's intention. Finally, the third layer is based on the assumption that in so far as intentional behaviour is never pursued outside the crucible of structural determination, factors of the latter kind must perforce be able to figure causally (arrow 3) in our accounts of the former. As conceived here,

Figure 2. Three dimensions in foreign policy explanations

Explanadum: ***Foreign policy actions***

                                                    ⬈ 1

Explanans: Intentional dimension

                                                ⬈ 2

                            Dispositional dimension

                                        ⬈ 3

                    Structural dimension

132

this link between structure and agency can be conceived as both of a constraining and of an enabling kind, causally affecting policy actions via its effects on the *dispositional* characteristics of the agents of policy. Although not indicated in the figure above, it will also be argued in the final section of this chapter that foreign policy actions in turn affect – either by intention or unintentionally – both the structural and dispositional dimensions, thereby providing the dynamic interaction *over time* between agential and structural factors which is characteristic of all open social systems. This focus will introduce the *agency-structure problematique* to the analysis of foreign policy in this volume, as well as the question of how to explain *change*, both of which have been contentious issues in FPA (see Carlsnaes 1992; 1993).

References

Carlsnaes, W. (1986). *Ideology and Foreign Policy: Problems of Comparative Conceptualization.* Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

Carlsnaes, W. (1992). "The Agency-Structure Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis." *International Studies Quarterly* 36: 245-270.

Carlsnaes, W. (1993). "On Analysing the Dynamics of Foreign Policy Change: A Critique and Reconceptualization." *Cooperation and Conflict* 28: 5-30.

Carlsnaes, W. (1994). In Lieu of a Conclusion: Compatibility and the Agency-Structure Issue in Foreign Policy Analysis. *European Foreign Policy: The EC and Changing Perspectives in Europe.* W. Carlsnaes and S. Smith. London, Sage: 274-87.

Carlsnaes, W. (2002). Foreign Policy. *Handbook of International Relations.* W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse and B. A. Simmons. London, Sage: 331-349.

Guzzini, S. (1998). *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy.* London, Routledge.

Hollis, M. and S. Smith (1990). *Explaining and Understanding International Relations.* Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Scharpf, F. W. (1997). *Games Real Actors Play: Actor-Centered Institutionalism in Policy Research.* Boulder, Westview Press.

Wendt, A. (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.