

Alex Mintz and Karl DeRouen Jr., Understanding Foreign Policy Decision Making, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010

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Leaders make decisions to go to war, make peace, form alliances, establish diplomatic relations, take a position on nuclear nonproliferation, impose economic sanctions, or ratify global environmental agreements. The focus of Alex Mintz and Karl DeRouen's book *Understanding Foreign Policy Decision Making* is this broad range of foreign policy decisions. The book presents a decision making approach to foreign policy analysis. The benefits of such an approach are that it analyses not only the outcomes of decisions but also the dynamics and the processes of decision making.

Foreign policy decision making (FPDM) is an important area of research because the processes of decision making can shape the eventual choice i.e. the outcomes depending on the decision making process. Moreover, cognitive limitations can often distort information processing. Some decisions are made after careful calculation, whereas others are

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more intuitive (p. 4). However, the essence of many foreign policy decisions is the process followed in an interactive setting and consisting of a sequence of decisions. As in chess, players learn from prior moves. When playing with the same opponent for many years, they also learn from game to game. This can also result in bluffing behaviour and attempts to mask signals.

Mintz and DeRouen approach this subject from a number of perspectives. They consider among others, the various types of decisions such as: one-

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shot, sequential, interactive, and group; the levels of foreign policy decision making i.e. the individual (the president), the group (Congress) and coalition (parliamentary democracy); the processes and dynamics that lead to the decisions, biases and errors, and, of course, models of decision making such as the rational, the cybernetic, bureaucratic politics, organisational politics, the poliheuristic theory, and the prospect theory. They also examine the determinants of foreign policy decisions such as the decision environment, psychological factors, international factors, and domestic influences.

In addition, they examine a host of psychological factors that shape decisions, such as images and belief systems, emotions, analogies, the personality of the leader, leadership style, miscalculations and misperceptions, and environmental factors such as time constraints, ambiguity, stress, and risk. Then they look at the effect of international and domestic factors such as deterrence, the arms race, the regime type of the adversary, strategic surprise, economic conditions, public opinion, and electoral cycles on foreign policy decisions making. Finally, they conclude with a case study of the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003, which is analysed through five decision models i.e. the rational actor, bounded rationality cybernetic, poliheuristic, prospect theory and bureaucratic politics model.


The main features of the book are: it provides a decision making approach to foreign policy making and a full coverage of psychological aspects of foreign policy decision making. It includes a number of case studies, which are written in an accessible style, of decisions made by the leaders of the United States, Israel, New Zealand, Cuba, Iceland, United Kingdom, and others; and focuses on the biases, errors and models of decision making. Mintz and DeRouen claim that the existing textbooks do not provide such an approach to foreign policy decision making, international relations, American foreign policy, and comparative foreign policy.

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Foreign policy problems, however, are inherently complex. Consequently, making foreign policy decisions is complicated with wide ranging ramifications. Foreign policy decisions are influenced by the personality of leaders, the foreign policy

environment, international and domestic factors, decision setting, and decision dynamics. Decisions affect subsequent decisions and often pave the way for new decisions. Mintz and DeRouen argue that despite these challenges to optimal decision making in the foreign policy arena, state leaders are expected to make good decisions and to be responsible and accountable for the choices they make. Leaders also attempt to market their foreign policy in peacetime and wartime. They do so to garner public support for their policies. Leaders often frame information about the foreign policy event, their good intentions, their opponents' bad behaviour and intentions, to the public, their constituencies, and their opponents (p. 169).

Moreover, given the complexities involved in foreign policy making, a comprehensive understanding of foreign policy behaviour, world politics, and the specific policies of nations is vital.

foreign policy decision making. Mintz and DeRouen have made the theories and data come alive through their deft use of case studies to illustrate their points. And they have selected case studies from around the world, not just the United States, giving insights into how different types of governments and leaders are likely to react to foreign policy problems. The comprehensive coverage of alternative theories and their illustration with a number of historical examples makes this an excellent introduction for scholars interested in studying FPDM processes and their outcomes. The incorporation of state-of-the-art research from social psychology and other fields makes this a valuable resource. It will be very useful for both scholars and professionals. 

Moreover, given the complexities involved in foreign policy making, a comprehensive understanding of foreign policy behaviour, world politics, and the specific policies of nations is vital. FPDM is equipped with theories and models that also help understand how biases and errors, uncertainty, domestic politics, and various decision units can shape decisions. In this sense, the FPDM is a “peek under the hood” at what underlies international affairs.

This book, therefore, attempts to explain how and why foreign policy decisions are made. It provides a comprehensive overview about

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