BRIDGING THE GAP

Theory & Practice In Foreign Policy

ALEXANDER L. GEORGE

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Foreword by Ambassador Samuel W. Lewis

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Foreword

Policymakers and scholars alike have long noted the existence of a significant gap between theory and practice in foreign policy. Indeed, some days the distance between the two seems more like a yawning chasm.

One explanation for this gap lies in a conflict between the two different cultures of academe and government. From the standpoint of the policymaker, the scholar is "too academic," all too often prone to abstraction and jargon. The academic can operate in a more relaxed time frame. The policymaker must nearly always act with imperfect information, before a fully satisfactory analysis is complete. He or she does not have the luxury of saying, "Other things being equal . . . " Scholars, on the other hand, may complain that practitioners are too haphazard and ad hoc in their approaches to situations, and too ready to apply pat formulas or supposed lessons of history in uncritical ways. Practitioners place too much faith in intuitive judgment, scholars say, and may make simplistic generalizations.

This gap between theory and practice in foreign policy is a subject that has long interested us at the Institute of Peace, and we have been especially fortunate to have Alexander George with us for the past two years as a distinguished fellow in the Jennings Randolph Program for International Peace.

In this ground-breaking volume, George provides a penetrating analysis of the many striking differences between the two cultures of academia and policymaking. He argues that while the gap between theoreticians and practitioners cannot be eliminated, it can be bridged. To that end, he identifies specific types of "policy-relevant knowledge" needed by the practitioner, and notes that scholars have not yet provided adequate conceptualization and general knowledge, drawn from historical experience, of many strategies and instruments of foreign policy. The lack of such knowledge, he demonstrates, was in part responsible for failures of U.S. policy towards Iraq in the period leading to the Persian Gulf War.

A point that George stresses is that general knowledge about a strategy cannot substitute for, but can only aid, the judgment of the policymaker, who is often called upon to make difficult choices between competing considerations. Policy-relevant information can play an especially important role during this phase, when the policymaker must weigh various options while at the same time taking into account other factors such as the need to muster public support.

But even after you build a bridge, there's no guarantee anyone will use it. We have a lot of work to do. I say "we" because it should be a shared responsibility—serious and committed scholars and those of us in relevant institutional roles need to work together to promote more meaningful interaction. We at the Institute of Peace can provide forums and catalytic support. The academic community can provide more of the policy-relevant knowledge and intellectual frameworks that are needed. Practitioners can come to the table with an open mind about better utilizing all the resources available to them.

In particular, we must concentrate on reaching the decisionmakers in ways that can get their attention. Scholars need to understand better the types of knowledge needed by policymakers, look for ways to disseminate their research more effectively, and explore ways of conveying its practical impli-

cations to senior policymakers, not just to mid-level analysts. We must together translate theory into practice on the tough new international agenda that lies before our nation. The cause of peacemaking demands nothing less.

Samuel W. Lewis, President
United States Institute of Peace

Preface

This book addresses the task of bridging the gap between theory and practice in foreign policy. This task requires me to identify the types of knowledge about international relations that will be relevant and useful to those who conduct foreign policy. I have been preoccupied with this challenging task during much of my career, first during the years spent as a member of the RAND Corporation and since 1968 as a member of the Department of Political Science at Stanford University.

I am grateful to the United States Institute of Peace for the award of a Distinguished Fellowship, which enabled me to pursue the project in Washington, D.C., from September 1990 through June 1992. I was delighted to find that the Institute shares a keen interest in developing scholarly knowledge for use in policymaking and works in constructive ways to encourage two-way interaction between academic scholars and policy specialists.

My study has turned out to be somewhat different, and I think better, for having been pursued in the stimulating environment of Washington. Closer proximity to the policy world forced me to reexamine and sharpen some of the ideas I entertained in the past. I believe I have a better understanding now, which I have tried to communicate in this book,

of the kinds of knowledge needed in policymaking and how such knowledge, when it is available, can contribute to policymaking.

More important, the preparation of the study and in particular the chapters that assess the strategies the United States has employed toward Iraq since 1988 strongly confirmed a long-standing concern that the state of existing policy-relevant knowledge is inadequate and that much additional scholarly research directed to producing such knowledge is badly needed.

I was fortunate in preparing the study to have had the opportunity to discuss U.S. policies toward Iraq with ten senior policy officials in the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the staff of the National Security Council. These individuals participated in and are knowledgeable about U.S. policy toward Iraq. They kindly read and commented on earlier drafts of chapters in part two of the study. I asked these policy specialists to tell me whether I had correctly stated the facts and whether my analytical interpretations of U.S. policy toward Iraq were reasonable. Their responses to these questions were generally reassuring, and they offered additional information and useful judgments, which I have attempted to incorporate into these chapters. For understandable reasons, these officials—two no longer in the government—preferred to remain anonymous.

I am indebted to Jane Holl, a specialist on war termination problems, for helpful comments on earlier drafts of chapter 8 and for allowing me to see several as yet unpublished essays on this topic. I benefited also from stimulating conversations with many foreign policy specialists who are not in the government, though many of them previously were. Some of them kindly read and commented on earlier drafts of some of the chapters in the book. In alphabetical order they are Sanjoy Banerjee, Andrew Bennett, Robert Bowie, Dan Caldwell, Arthur Cohen, Eliot Cohen, Chester Crocker, Terry Deibel, Hugh DeSantis, Daniel Druckman, Arun Elhance,

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I wish to express appreciation to Samuel Lewis, president of the Institute, and Michael Lund, director of the Jennings Randolph fellowship program, for their unflagging encouragement of the project and insightful suggestions for improving the study. I also wish to thank Otto Koester and Joseph Klaits, program officers, and Barbara Cullicott, program administrator, for providing so supportive and congenial an environment for serious research; Dan Snodderly for his good-humored and incisive editorial suggestions; Blaine Vesely and Denise Dowdell for indispensable and efficient library services; Mia Cunningham for her careful copyediting; and Anne Cushman, Tarak Barkawi, and William Tanzola for their competent and cheerful research and secretarial services. Finally, as so often in the past, my wife, Juliette, provided indispensable support and understanding as well as insightful suggestions and comments.

Introduction

The central purpose of this study is to encourage better communication and closer collaboration between academic scholars who study foreign policy and practitioners who conduct it. Better communication requires a better understanding by both scholars and practitioners of the three types of knowledge needed in policymaking. In addition to reliable and timely intelligence about situational developments, policymakers need (1) *conceptualization of strategies*—a conceptual framework for each of the many different strategies and instruments available to them for attempting to influence other states. Policymakers also need (2) *general, or generic, knowledge* of each strategy, based on study of past experience that identifies the uses and limitations of each strategy and the conditions on which its effective employment depends. Finally, policymakers need a sophisticated, insightful understanding of each of the state-actors with whom they interact—what I shall refer to as (3) *actor-specific behavioral models*—in lieu of a dangerous tendency to assume that they can be regarded as rational, unitary actors.

These three types of knowledge are discussed in great detail in this study to make the following points:

- Policymakers often operate with inadequate knowledge or erroneous assumptions or both regarding the strategies they seek to employ in the conduct of foreign policy.
- Conceptualization and general knowledge of many foreign policy strategies and actor-specific models are inadequate in important respects and as yet poorly developed.
- Much additional scholarly research in academic centers and within the government is needed to improve the knowledge base for foreign policy.

Many policy specialists have a strong aversion to the idea that theory can have relevance and potential utility for policymaking. In fact, as many scholars have discovered, the eyes of practitioners often glaze over at the first mention of the word "theory" in conversation. I have no desire in this study to convert policymakers into adherents of theory; in fact, I shall point out in some detail the weakness of academic theories of international relations from the perspective of the types of knowledge needed in policymaking. However, it must also be said that good theories provide relevant and useful conceptual frameworks by means of which to understand the general requirements of a strategy and the general logic associated with its effective employment. Such theoretical-conceptual knowledge is critical for policymaking. And, as a matter of fact, all policymakers make use of some such theory and conceptual frameworks, whether consciously or not. That is, in employing a strategy, policymakers rely on assumptions, often tacit assumptions, about the strategy's general requirements and logic. The gap between theory and practice that forms the starting point for this study is not in policymakers' non-use of theoretical concepts, but in the failure to analyze them more critically and to be more aware of the impact of theoretical-conceptual assumptions on policymaking.

I have discovered in my conversations with policy specialists that if I avoid the word "theory" and speak instead of

"generic knowledge" about foreign policy, they are much more receptive to the relevance of "generic knowledge" for policymaking. I believe this is so partly because policy specialists recognize that generic problems exist in the conduct of foreign policy—for example, that the task of deterrence emerges repeatedly over time and with different adversaries. Therefore, policy specialists readily agree that general, or generic, knowledge about the uses and limitations of a particular strategy, derived from study of past experience, could be very helpful when strategy must be used in a new situation. Incidentally, whether the empirical generalizations that comprise generic knowledge should also be regarded as a form of theory—or "laws," as some scholars prefer to call this type of knowledge—should not get in the way of recognizing the importance of generic knowledge for policymaking.

I have chosen to demonstrate the importance and relevance of all three types of knowledge in part two of this study in a very concrete manner by calling attention to the weak knowledge base that underlay five of the six strategies the United States pursued toward Iraq in 1988–91 and that contributed to their ineffectiveness.

The reader will want to know why I speak in the title of this book of "bridging" the gap rather than "eliminating" it. The choice of words is deliberate and of considerable importance. I will argue that the gap between the three types of knowledge I have identified (which can be very loosely referred to as policy-relevant theory) and practice can be only bridged and not eliminated. Scholarly knowledge of this kind can have only an indirect and often limited impact on policymaking. Since I also claim that the contribution of these three types of knowledge is often critical for sound policy nevertheless, I need to explain this apparent contradiction.

The types of knowledge identified in this study serve as inputs to policy analysis within the government and as aids to the judgment of policymakers. Such knowledge cannot substitute for policy analysis or for the policymaker's judgment.

Even the best conceptualization of a given foreign policy strategy and the most highly developed general knowledge of that strategy cannot substitute for competent policy analysis within the government, in which analysts must consider whether some version of that strategy is likely to be viable in the particular situation at hand. Similarly, such knowledge cannot substitute for the judgment policymakers must exercise in deciding whether to employ the strategy on a given occasion, since that judgment takes into account other relevant considerations not encompassed by general knowledge of the strategy. It is in this sense that scholarly knowledge has an indirect and often limited impact on policy. It is important that we understand why this is so, and this question is addressed particularly in chapters 2 and 10.

How, then, can policy-relevant knowledge aid policy analysis and the policymaker's judgment? First, it can assist in making a sound diagnosis of a problem situation; second, it can help identify an effective policy response for dealing with that problem. Thus, policy-relevant knowledge contributes to two essential functions in policymaking: the diagnostic task and the prescriptive one. I place particular emphasis on the diagnostic contribution policy-relevant theory and knowledge are capable of making than to their ability to prescribe sound choices of policy. Correct diagnosis of a policy problem and of the context in which it occurs should precede and—as in medical practice—is usually a prerequisite for efforts to make the best choice from among treatment options. The analogy with the medical profession is an apt one, since the policymaker, like the physician, acts as a clinician in striving to make a correct diagnosis of a problem before determining how best to prescribe for it.

* * * *

It may be useful in this introduction to recall the origins, background, and framework of this study. In 1966, while still

a member of the RAND Corporation, I saw the need to supplement efforts to formulate general theories of international relations with theories that are more relevant for the conduct of foreign policy. To this end I initiated a small research project, "Theory and Practice in International Relations." Later, upon moving to Stanford University in 1968, I elaborated the title to "Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy," and this topic has remained the focus of my research program and, in one way or another, of most of my studies since then.

Quite early in implementing this research program I concluded that it would be necessary to move beyond structural realist theory, rational choice theory, and game theory approaches that were (and are still) favored and being pursued by many talented scholars. These deductive approaches to theory development "black-box" both the process of policymaking and strategic interaction between states; that is, they deal with these processes by assumption. Instead, I felt it necessary to engage in direct but admittedly difficult empirical study of policymaking processes and strategic interaction between actors. However, I do not regard deductive and empirical ways of approaching the task of developing international relations theory as antithetical. Rather, like many other researchers, I believe the development of both deductive and empirical approaches to theory development can be improved by trying to link them more closely. Finally, the reader should keep in mind that I use the word *theory* to encompass a broad range of ways of formulating knowledge that come out of the scholarly tradition.

I found it useful in developing policy-relevant theory, which I regard as the type of knowledge needed for what historians used to refer to as statecraft, to distinguish between two types of theory. *Substantive theory*, the first type, deals with standard foreign policy undertakings and strategies such as deterrence, crisis management, coercive diplomacy, détente, war termination, mediation and dispute resolution, and

security cooperation. In selecting some of these foreign policy activities for systematic study, I was motivated by historical events that led me to believe that U.S. leaders needed a better knowledge base from which to manage Cold War crises so as to avoid war. My interest in studying deterrence, for example, was aroused by the outbreak in June 1950 of the Korean War, which I regarded as a conflict that could have been avoided. Similarly, what seemed to me another avoidable war later that year in Korea—this time with the People's Republic of China—aroused my interest in better understanding the requirements and modalities of crisis management. Later, again reacting to what I regarded as a misguided, flawed American policy, I began to study the limitations of coercive diplomacy after observing the abortive U.S. effort to use air power in early 1965 to intimidate North Vietnam. Some years later, I initiated a large collaborative study to try to gain insight into why U.S.-Soviet efforts to cooperate on security issues since the end of World War II sometimes succeeded and, on other occasions, failed. And more recently, I focused together with others on trying to understand the phenomenon of inadvertent war, that is, a war that occurs although at the beginning of a diplomatic crisis neither side wants or expects war.

Process theory, the second type of theory, on the other hand, focuses on how to structure and manage the policymaking process in ways that will improve information processing and foster sound judgments, thus increasing the likelihood of better policy decisions. My research on these matters was stimulated by studies that pointed to various malfunctions of the U.S. policymaking system that often lowered the quality of policy decisions. My conception of the contribution that process theory should make to improving the quality of policy decisions is a broad one. It rejects placing exclusive reliance on the criterion of *technical rationality* as a basis for arriving at high-quality policy decisions and emphasizes that the policymaking process needs to be sensitive as well to the

broader criterion of *value rationality* and to normative considerations.[1]

Both substantive theory and process theory have important contributions to make to the improvement of foreign policy. Quite obviously, substantive knowledge of foreign affairs can have no impact on policy unless it enters into the process of policymaking. Substantive knowledge must combine with the effective structuring and management of the policymaking process in order to improve the analytic (versus the political) component of policymaking.

The present study deals almost exclusively with substantive theory and the knowledge requirements of foreign policy. However, I have included in chapter 2 a realistic, even sober, view of some aspects of the policymaking process that tend to crowd out or reduce the impact of substantive knowledge. It is important for scholars who are interested in developing policy-relevant knowledge not to overintellectualize policymaking by assuming that it is or should be devoted exclusively to identifying and choosing high-quality policy options based on the criterion of analytic rationality.

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The present study addresses only some of the substantive knowledge requirements needed for the conduct of foreign policy. Not included are a host of important problems that affect the interests of individual nations and their peoples, to which policy specialists must be attentive. Among these problems are proliferation of nuclear weapons and other mass destruction capabilities, environmental and ecological problems, population and demographic trends, problems of food production and distribution, water scarcities, sanitation and health problems, and emergence of nationalistic, ethnic, and religious conflicts. Well-informed, objective analyses of these problems are an essential part of the knowledge requirements for conduct of foreign policy.

Scholars can make a number of other contributions to policymaking that will not be taken up in the present study but that should at least be briefly noted. Among these are the collection and orderly presentation of a variety of data and the identification of trends regarding many different aspects of the international system. Scholars also perform a useful, indeed a necessary, task by developing better concepts and conceptual frameworks, which should assist policymakers in orienting themselves to the phenomena and the problems with which they must deal. Finally, although scholars may not be in a good position to advise policymakers how best to deal with a specific instance of a general problem that requires urgent and timely action, they can often provide a useful, broader discussion of how to think about and understand that general problem—such as, for example, the problem of ethnicity and nationalism.

The present study focuses on a different kind of substantive knowledge that is needed by policymakers for conducting relations with other states. This is the type of knowledge needed for what diplomatic historians used to refer to as statecraft. From this standpoint the essential task of foreign policy is to develop and manage relationships with other states in ways that will protect and enhance one's own security and welfare. This objective requires that policymakers clearly define their own state's interests, differentiate these interests in terms of relative importance, and make prudent judgments as to acceptable costs and risks of pursuing them. (Admittedly, these fundamental tasks of policymaking are often not easily accomplished.) Policymakers must identify, analyze, and deal with conflicts of interest with other states. When an accommodation of their conflicting interests is not possible, policymakers must try to narrow and manage the disputed issues in ways that reduce the potential for destructive conflicts and contamination of the entire relationship. At the same time, the development and management of relationships with other states requires leaders to recognize and