SOME APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

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The purpose of this article is to review some approaches to the study of foreign policy and international relations. It must be stated that the purpose of such review is not to prove the validity of one approach over the others. Neither is it the purpose to introduce a new approach to the study of foreign policy and/or international politics. Rather, the main purpose of this review is to familiarize the reader with some of the approaches used in dealing with international politics and foreign policy analysis. **

The author of this article believes in the usefulness of all these approaches. However, the selection of any approach over the others should be consistent with the purpose of one's study, therefore enabling him to reach specific objectives. Thus, it is clear that these approaches vary one from the another in terms of what an author is attempting to tell his reader. William Coplin has clarified this point by saying:

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** In this study, international politics and foreign policy will be used interchangeably.

> In descriptive analysis, the author attempts to make the reader understand the past and the present, in predictive analysis, his goal is to help the reader anticipate the future. The purpose of normative analysis is to convince the reader that certain conditions are good or bad either by getting him to accept the author's value positions or by showing how certain situations threaten or support values held by the reader. Finally, the prescriptive analyst is trying to indicate how to achieve certain goals. (1)

Having shown how Coplin differentiates the purposes of the different approaches, it is now appropriate to discuss some of these approaches in some detail.

As it has been indicated, there are many approaches to the study of foreign policy. But one should point out here, for example, that one cannot use the diplomatic or legalistic approach without also utilizing the descriptive approach. This point will be clarified by the following discussion of the different approaches.

Diplomatic history has been the traditional and dominant approach to the study of international relations through the late 1940's. This approach consisted mainly of the description of international events. This is explained by Kenneth Thompson who says:

> The first phase was the period in which the study of diplomatic history was prevalent. At this point, the significant treaties and monographs, especially in

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1. William Coplin. **Introduction to International Politics: A Theoretical Overview,** Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1971, pp. 3-4.

> England, dealt with concrete diplomatic events which had taken place over the past several centuries. For example, the studies of the conduct of British foreign policy by noted statesmen and diplomatists covering limited historical periods. (2)

An added discussion of this approach shows that, "international relations, insofar as they were dealt with at all, were presented in a descriptive and chronological manner, without much reference to how specific events and situations fitted into the general pattern of international conduct." (3) Horace Harrison added, "the discipline was replete with lucid accounts of particular periods of significant diplomatic events. The diplomatic historian sought to explore fully a given historical event, utilizing a maximum quantity of documentary evidence."(4) However, Kenneth Thompson in another study thinks that diplomatic history embraced the greater part of relevant international behavior because international relations throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were exclusively interstate relations.(5) Thompson's contention is questionable,, for if this is the case, why has not diplomatic history prevailed in recent years since international relations are still interstate relations?

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2. Kenneth Thompson, "The Study of International Politics: A Survey of Trends and Developments", **The Review of Politics,** Vol. 14 (October, 1952) No. 4, p. 434.
3. Horace V. Harrison, ed. **The Role of Theory in International Relations.** New York: D. Van NostrandCompany, Inc., 1964, p. 3.
4. Charles O. Lerche, Jr. and Abdul A. Said. **Concepts of International Politics.** Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970, p. 2.
5. Kenneth Thompson, "Theory and International studies in the Cold war," in **Theory of International Relations: The Crises of Relevance,** Abdul A. Said, ed. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968, p. 30.

Joseph de Rivera argues that foreign policy is usually approached from an historical or a political viewpoint. To him, while the historical approach describes broad trends in a nation's policy and relates them to the social, economic, ideological, and geographic conditions of the time, ... the political approach usually treats foreing policy analytically. (6)

By and large, there is general agreement among the students of international politics on the inability of the diplomatic historical approach to develop a theoretical framework. Some of the reasons for such disability are mentioned by Horace Harrison when he says,

> Because the diplomatic historian usually avoided the study of recent events and refrained from generalizing or formulating any universal principles which might be deduced from his descriptions and analyses of specific events, his contributions, laudable as they were in developing historical research technigues, were not very useful in developing a general perspective, or theory, of international relations. (7)

However, one finds those who sympathize with the historians and feel that diplomatic history is important and relevant to the theory building effort. Within this context another scholar has contended that,

> Historical study is the essential companion of theoretical study itself: not only because history the

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6. Joseph de Rivera. **The Psychologica! Dimension of Foreign Policy.** Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1968, pp. 1-2.
7. Horace V. Harrison.ed. **The Role of Theory in International Relations, op.** cit, pp. 3-4. See also Charles O. Lerche, Jr. and Abdul A. said, Concepts **of International Politics,** op. cit., p. 2.

> laboratory of the social sciences, the source of the material by which general propositions may be verified or falsified, but also because theory itself has a history, and theorists themselves elaborate their ideas with the preoccupation and within the confines of a particular historical situation. (8)

Concluding this discussion it should be noted that diplomatic history has served the discipline of international relations when there was no other sophisticated approach. In other words, the diplomatic history approach was one of the developmental stages of international relations study, and what is diplomatic history is still an important approach in tracing the historical background of treaties and agreements, and in discussing narratively the different pacts and organizations as they were formed. All this reveals the fact that diplomatic history is more historical in approach than it is political.

Two other approaches are closely related to the previous one. The first approach is the legalistic, and the second approach is the descriptive. The legalistic approach has been oriented toward the analysis of treaties and principles of international law. The assumption of scholars in this field is that,

> most disputes were raised to be settled, the 'shrinking' world was making man more 'internalist' and peace and stability could be constructed through the extension of democracy or construction of international institutions, such as a world court, with power to entorce their decisions. (9)

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8. Brian Porter, ed. **International Politics,**: 1919-1969. London: Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 32. ...

9. K. J. Holsti. **International Politics: A Framework of Analysis.** Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967, p. 5.

According to another scholar, this approach

> At its best can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the world community, of the actual role legal norms play in international relations, and of the problems confronting those who would create a more stable world order. (10)

It would be more accurate to speak of this approach as being concerned with theory and practice in a segment of international relations. The theory part is contained in the study of treaties and international law, whereas the practice part is applied in the study of international organizations and institutions. A student of international relation has commented that " in its present state international law affords at best a fragmentary perception of international politics as a whole and is not one of the more dynamic elements of international relations."(11) And regarding the latter part of this approach, Kenneth Thompson has observed that,

> the great contribution of the institutional approach has been to focus on a very vital and significant trend. It has spurred people on to where they would like to be. It has provided at least a few rough guides for practitioners. It has offered clues on the relation between continuity and change. It has suggested to scholars the problems they face in keeping pace with sweeping changes in the world at large.12

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10. Joseph Black and K. W. Thompson, eds. **Fareign Policies in a World of** Change.New York: Harper and Row, 1963. p. 9.

11. Norman J. Padelford and Geogre A. Lincoln. **The Dynamics of International Politics,** New York: The Macmillan Company,1962, p. 27.

12. Kenneth Thompson, "The Origins, Uses, and Problems of Theory in International Relations", **in The Role of Theory, Harace Harrison, ed,** op., cit. pp. 58-59.

The second related approach is the descriptive one. The descriptive approach is related to the diplomatic, historical, and legalistic approches because in using either one of the said approaches one cannot escape using description. The following discussion will delineate this relationship. It was said, earlier, that the diplomatic approach, which certainly has not died out in our generation, seeks to arrive at a theoretical treatment of international relations through description - usually description of diplomatic-military history.(13) Moreover, "articles in scholarly journals contained lengthy descriptions of international conferences and treaties, while popular and academic analysts presented innumerable commentaries on the proceedings of the League of Nations." (14)

William Coplin gives this analysis of the descriptive approach:

> the process of descriptive analysis covers a large variety of techniques and styles. The analyst may use intuition or more systematic methods to develop ideas. He may build a description by making a set of interconnected deductions from one or two pieces of information, or he may take an enormous amount of information and try to make some useful generalizations. The actual presentation of the descriptive analysis may take the form of purely verbal statements, an explanation based on some statastics, or a combination of the two. (15)

Generally, "within this approach one will find some studies which are rigorous and make some attempt to formulate theories

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13. Charles Boasson. **Approaches to the Study of International Relations.** Assen: Van Gorcum and Company. N. V., 1972, p. 24.

14. K. J. Holsti. **International Politics,** op. cit., p. 5.

15. William Coplin. **Introduction to International Politics, cp. cit., p. 3.**

and establish a conceptual framework." (16)

The fourth general approach is classified as the ideological approach. According to this approach, " the policies of the states vis-a-vis the rest of the world are merely expessions of prevailing political, social, and religious beliefs. In this approach, foreign policies are classified as democratic or totalitarian, libertarian or socialist, and peace-loving or aggressive." (17) However, dissenters with this approach,

> contend that one should compare actual behavior, not merely ideological premises and arguments; and that the actual conduct of diplomacy both by Communist and non-Communist governments reveals a considerable area in which similar norms are quite consistently applied and faithfully observed. (18)

The ideological approach has also been called the normative approach, for in the ideological approach one judges other systems and policies according to certain norms or beliefs which he obtained through his interaction with other people socially, politically, and intellectually. This approach "is the application of our values - - whether they be viewed as personal preferences or a consequence of some moral order - - to our view of reality."(19) Kenneth Thompson still believes that,

> normative thinking is still an important feature of

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16. Joseph Black and Kenneth Thompson, op. cit., pp. 9-10.
17. Kenneth Thompson, "Theories and Problems of Fc **Foreign Policy in World Politics.** Roy C. Macridis, ec N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959, p. 351.
18. Harold and Margaret Sprout, **Foundations of In'** Princeton, N. J.: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 196
19. William Coplin, op. cit., p. 3.

> international studies. It has lost none of its significance, nor is it any less central to the purpose and direction in which states and the world are moving. The temper and orientation have been altered, however: the spirit is more likely to be analytical and critical than crusading. (20)

Joseph Black and Kenneth Thompson believe "this approach has had the widest appeal," yet they contend that it "precludes the careful evaluation of a multiplicity of factors which must be taken into account by responsible policy makers." (21)

In sharp contrast to the general orientation of the ideological approach stands the analytical approach. This latter approach "differs from the others not only in the method of viewing problems, but also in its general orientation to the field of international politics." (22) The analytical approach is based on the proposition that a country's foreign policy rests on multiple determinants. These determinants are

> delineated in the form of concentric circles: at the core are the permanent material elements; radiating out are the less permanent material factors, and finally, in the outermost circle, there are the human factors--population, national character, social structure, etc. which fluctuate most frequently. (23)

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20. Kenneth Thompson, "Normative Theory in International Relations", **Journal of International Affairs**, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1967), p. 286.
21. Joseph Black and Kenneth Thompson, eds. **Foreign Policies in a World of Change**, op. cit., p. 10.
22. **Ibid.**, p. 11.
23. Michael Brecher, et al, "A Framework for Research on Foreign Policy Behavior", **The Journal of Conflict Resolution**, Vol. XIII, No. 1 (March, 1969), p. 76.

ign Policy", in
Englewood Cliffs,
national Politics.
p. 560.

Kenneth Thompson has this to say about the analytical approach:

> (it) provides a way of thinking about the foreign policy of any country and ordering the factors that contribute to the conduct of foreign relations. If prediction is still beyond the reach of scholars, analysis in the face of varying contingencies may be attainable. In some form or another this method is useful in studying the acts of great and small powers. (24)

A futher contention, in the same vein, by Thompson and Macridis let Michael Brecher and his associates to argue that "Thompson and Macridis appear to advocate empirically-based theorizing about state behavior, yet they reject a 'scientific' approach." (25) they went on to say:

> one of our aims should be to find regularities in the behavior of nations and to develop general propositions... but to attempt generalizations and construction of models that will give us a rigorous scientific understanding and prediction of foreign policy is a among the variables specified. (29)

Often, included in the above approach is the tendency to predict and/or prescribe. Thus, "prediction is frequently one of our prime objectives in the study of a subject as well as a test for ourselves or others of how well we understand the subject." (27)

Therefore, according to K. J. Holsti, "understanding plus data

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24. Kenneth Thompson, "Theories and Problms of Foregn Policy", op. cit., pp. 377-78.
25. Michael Brecher, et al, op. cit., p. 76.
26. Ibid., P. 76.
27. William Coplin, op. cit., p. 3.

always enable one to predict."28 However, he points out that some scholars

> go one step further to argue that the ultimate purpose of scientific analysis is not just explanation, but prediction, and, they maintain, reliable predictions can be made only if the main variables affecting political behavior have been identified and relationships hopeless task. (26)

Still another scholar argues that prediction does not require "a particularly elegant or sophisticated model of the universe," but explanation "demands far more than most of us carry around in our minds." For example, "we can predict with impressive reliability that any nation will respond to military attack in kind, but a description and understanding of the processes and factors leading to such a response are considerabley more elusive, despite the gross simplicity of the acts themselves." (30)

As far as prescription goes, almost any study, explicitly or implicitly, includes some prescriptions. Consequently, I can safely say that in order to reach a good prescriptive conclusion, it is necessary for the scholar to employ a variety of approaches.

The final approach which is discussed in this review is the scientific. This approach grew as a reaction to the earlier approaches which are invariably referred to as the traditional approach.

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28. Keith Legg and James Morrison. **Politics and the International System: An Introduction.** New York: Harper and Row,Publishers, 1971. p. 5.

29. K. J. Holsti, **op. cit.**, p. 8.

30. J. David Singer,"The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Politics", in **International Politics and Foreign Policy,** Revised Edition. James Rosenau, ed. New York: The Free Press, 1969, p. 22.

The main concern of the scientific approach is the development of a scientific theory similar to that of the physical sciences.

Lijphart says that "The scientific revolution in international relations theory broke out in the 1950's when a host of new approaches began to emerge that challenged the hegemony of the traditional paradigm." (31) The scientific method is generally described as a succession of deliberate, intellectual activities: observations, then statement of the problem, then formulation of a hypothesis to solve the problem, then a test of that hypothesis, and finally validation or rejection of the hypothesis on the basis of that test. (32)

To clarify the difference between the scientist and the traditionalist, two analysts have observed that:

> In order to achieve his goal of developing findings whose validity do not depend on his perception of them, the ideal scientist is self-conscious and explicit about both his methods for acquiring data and the intellectual steps by which he arrives at his conclusions. He prefers to use quantitative procedures whenever possible because such procedures can be precisely described and duplicated by others who may wish to verify or extend his findings. In contrast, the traditionalist, satisfied that he has exercised the best judgment of which he is capable, is not concerned about whether his findings can be replicated or refined under varying conditions. Therefore, he sees no necessity for incorporating his intellectual processes

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31. Arend Lijphart, "The Structure of the Theoretical Revolution in International Relations", **International Studies Quarterly,** Vol. 18, No.1 (March, 1974), p. 59.

32. David Edwards. International Political Analysis, Atlanta, Georgia: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969, pp. 20-21.

> into his reports and views quantification as an unnecessary and seriously limiting procedure. (33)

Another analyst gave another important difference between the two approaches by referring to "N/V ratio" in which N represents the number of cases under study and V the number of variables examined. This analyst contends that,

> the traditional researcher tends to look at a very few cases (and often only one) at a time, producing a very small N (number of cases) while trying to cope with and analyze a fairly large V (number of variables) .... The modern social scientist, on the other hand, tries to limit himself to a few variables (V) at a time, but seeks to measure their role in the largest feasible number of cases (N), seeking an N/V ratio with maximum organizing efficiency. (34)

The differences between the proponents of the scientific and the traditional schools have not been resolved, "each school considers the other's results to be not just wrong, but absurd." (35) Hedley Bull condemns the behavioral paradigm not so much for leadnig to incorrect conclusions as for its congenital inability to deal with the crux of the subject and its devotion to peripheral subjects.(36) As a result, Hedley Bull is convinced that "the scientific approach has contributed and is likely to contribute very little

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33. Klaus Knorr and James Rosenau, eds. **Contending Approaches to International Politics.** Princeton, N. J: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 16.

34. J. David Singer, "The Behavioral Science Approach to International Relations: Payoff and Prospects", in **International Politics and Foreign Policy.** James Rosenau, ed., (1969), op. cit., p. 66.

35. Arend Lijphart, op. cit., p. 62.

36. Hedley Bull, "International Theory", **World Politics,** Vol. 18 (April, 1966), pp. 361-77.

to the theory of international relations, and insofar as it is intended to encroach upon and ultimately displace the classical approach, it is positively harmful." (37)

By and large, the traditionalists still hold the idea that international politics is incalculable and quantitative theory-building, therefore, is an escape from reality. According to one of the leading scholars in this field,

> the social scientists - - especially students of international relations - - cannot usually control the conditions of the societies they study; consequently prediction must proceed, as it does in astronomy, geology, and meteorology, from observations of the past deemed to be relevant and important. (38)

One of the advocates of the scientific approach cautions us that "science is not a substitute for insight, and methodological rigor is not a substitute for wisdom. Research which is merely rigorous may well be routine, mechanical, trivial and of little theoretical or policy value." (39)

Despite the existence of general difficulties 40 in applying the

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37. **Ibid.,** p. 366.

38. Quincy Wright, "On Predicting International Relations the Year 2000", University of Denver, **Monograph Series in World Affairs,** (1969-70), No. 1, p. 3.

39. J. David singer, **op. cit.,** p.67.

40. These general difficulties are mentioned here briefly as follows: First identifying what is of central significance. Second, the fact that our hypotheses are largely lacking in precision. Third, the symbiotic relationship between the observer and what is observed in the social world which cannot be as readily identified and discounted as it can be in the natural sciences. Fourth, the very limited scope for experimentation. Finally, discontinuity, inconsistency, and irregularity permeate the whole realm

scientific approach to human behavior, this approach "with rigorous and systematic research, the gathering of significant data, and the use of models and imaginative concepts is cleary gaining ground."41 However, sometimes the problem with the scientific approach seems to be that it seeks to predict the unpredictable and/or to complicate the uncomplicated.

In conclusion I would state that the selection and use of more than one approach in the analysis of foreign policy behavior would help the analyst in avoiding the pitfalls of each individual aproach. The combination of two or more approaches may give more fruitful results. By borrowing from and adapting several approaches to his own needs, the researcher would gain the benefits of the selectd approaches, both new and old. For example, the use of the descriptivc analytical approach is far better than using the descriptive or the analytical alone. The problem to be studied should determine the methodology to be used and not the reverse.

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of social sciences· For detailed discussion see **International Relations and International Studies** by Geoffrey Goodwin, The Yearbook of World Affairs (1973). London: Steven & Sons, p. 390.

41. Joseph Black and Kenneth Thompson, op. cit., p. 14·