THE BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS APPROACH: ITS APPLICATION, ITS LIMITATIONS, AND ITS STRENGTHS

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This essay is composed of three sections. Section one reviews *what* the Bureaucratic Politics Approach is. Section two gives an explanation as to *how* the approach can be applied to inform a foreign policy case. In addition, this section briefly provides an explanation of the methodology adopted by the Bureaucratic Politics Approach. Section three provides a critique of the approach, followed by a defence. The article ends with some concluding remarks.

What is the Bureaucratic Politics Approach?

In the Bureaucratic Politics Approach, also known as the Governmental Politics Model –

an approach that gained impetus during and after the Vietnam War, a period when policy was said to have failed because of bureaucratic necessities – the focus is on those players involved in the government. Players are those individuals 'whose roles, expertise, or sheer political power coupled with strong interest allow them to affect bureaucratic outcome'.[1]

Graham T. Allison, arguably the founder of this approach, asserts that it is actor-oriented, not concerned with a structural view of the field, and hence focuses on *interaction* between players representing different bureaucracies, who are involved in

a bargaining game called politics,[2] similar to a zero-sum game in which one bureaucracy's winning is considered the loss of another bureaucracy.

Organisations or bureaucracies (sometimes different offices or individuals within one organisation) are in constant rivalry against each other, proposing solutions and ideas to the problem at hand, and, if one bureaucracy's proposals turn into policy, this would involve utilising its sources and elevating its importance. These organisations/bureaucracies are said to hold different interests and perceptions, and they place their own survival at the top of their list of priorities. The survival is measured by relative influence *vis-à-vis* other organisations ('turf'), by the organisation's budget, and by the morale of its personnel. The organisation jealously protects and strives to increase its turf and strength, and preserves undiluted what it feels to be its 'essence' or 'mission'.[3] Turf gives him or her formal responsibility and authority. Responsibility and authority strengthen position. A strong position breeds more power, and more power in

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bureaucratic politics provides a player with 'effective influence on government decisions and actions'.[4]

In contrast to the Rational Actor Model, which sees the whole government as one *rational* actor (like classical realism, it assumes that policymakers always act in a rational manner and choose the rational alternatives) or the Organisational Model, which sees the action as an organisational *output*, the Bureaucratic Politics Approach, as mentioned above, treats the policymaking process as a game that players from different bureaucracies play. The players' behaviours (statements, actions, bargaining, preferences) are driven mainly (but not *entirely*) by organisational interests and eventually shape foreign policy. They make government decisions not by a single, rational choice but by 'pulling and hauling that is politics'.[5]

Therefore, decisions take the form of *resultant*,[6] and hence it is different from what any person or group initially intended (or *purposive* act); decisions take the form of resultants not in terms of given preferences and strategic moves (as in rational choice thinking), 'but according to the power and performance of proponents and opponents of the action in question'.[7] It is determined in accordance with the position that the individual concerned occupies within the decision-making apparatus (and on their willingness to assume responsibility and, if need be, threaten to resign if they see their turf

threatened), and therefore the golden rule is 'where you stand depends on where you sit'.[8]

The power or authority held by the players is mainly *bureaucratic* rather than personal; that is, the players represent the organisation's interests and the interests of groups close to the organisation. Walter Carlsnaes argues that, unlike in cognitive/psychological approaches, policymakers (or the players) are said not to be influenced by their own ideas and interests.[9] Martin Hollis and Steve Smith go a step further by claiming that the Bureaucratic Politics Approach treats the actors as 'mere puppets [of the organisations that they represent]'.[10]

Allison and Philip Zelikow, however, make it clear that, although in the Organisational Model the identities of the individuals are completely irrelevant, as the organisational routines are designed in a way to achieve this irrelevance, in the Bureaucratic Politics Approach the individuals are the ambassadors of their organisations to the rest of the government and their personal views or judgments (for example, on what is the best choice for them, the organisation and the government), as well as their command of the bargaining skills, *do* matter. Hence Allison and Zelikow, as well as other scholars, make allowance for the personal views/beliefs and skills of the players themselves, as players have different personalities, operating styles and commitments to certain groups but not to others, and they act 'according to various conceptions of national, organisational, and

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personal goals'.[11]

In short, like the Foreign Policy Decision-Making Approach established by Richard C. Snyder and colleagues and the Psycho-Social Milieu Approach founded by Harold and Margaret Sprout,[12] both of which are covered by the author of this paper in another essay,[13] the Bureaucratic Politics Approach is a subjective approach and the personal skills/views/judgments/beliefs of policymakers (and their clashes of personalities) do matter, but what should be taken into consideration is that these personal characteristics are made *within* a structure (bureaucracy).

How to utilise the Bureaucratic Politics Approach to Inform a Foreign Policy Decision?

Allison and Zelikow dedicate two chapters to the Bureaucratic Politics Approach in their book. In chapter five they introduce Bureaucratic Politics as an Approach,[14] and, in the subsequent chapter,[15] they apply the Approach to inform their study of the Cuban missile crisis. In chapter five, they explain that the basic unit of analysis (or the explanandum/unit of analysis), is

'Governmental Action as Political Resultant'. It is *resultant*, as stated above, because it is not chosen as a solution to the problem 'but rather results from compromise, conflict, and confusion of officials with diverse interests and unequal influence'. It is *political* since decisions emerge 'along regularised channels among individual members of the government'.[16]

Political resultants, or decisions, emerge from the *interaction* between the policymakers. They refer to the policymakers as 'players', and to the interaction between the policymakers as the 'game'.[17] Although they have used different terminologies (for example, 'players', 'game', 'political resultants', 'action', 'interaction', and so forth), it is abundantly clear – both from the description of the Approach in chapter five,[18] and from application of the Approach to the Cuban missile crisis in chapter six[19] – that the focus in the Bureaucratic Politics Approach is essentially on *the decision-making process*: on the individuals, their particularities, their (competing) views, how

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problems were defined, what options were put forward to solve the problems, how options were developed, and the pulling and hauling.[20] They all are important components of the decision-making process, which produce or yield political resultants. The Bureaucratic Politics Approach is argued to be an *extension* of the Foreign Policy Decision-Making Approach.[21]

One issue that Allison and Zelikow emphasise, but Snyder and colleagues seemingly do not, is to discover which player(s) among the many players influenced the resultant, and how and why. In other words, the object of analysis for the Bureaucratic Politics Approach is: who said/did what, how and why, and *what factors enabled him or her to be more (or less) impactful*. The italicised or latter part of the unit of analysis demonstrates why and how a particular policymaker emerged less or more prominent from the game. The latter aspect is, therefore, of much interest to the analyst.

As for the conceptual questions (or the explanan/object of analysis), Allison and Zelikow explain that the organising concepts of the Bureaucratic Politics Approach can be arranged in the answers to four interrelated questions: 'Who plays? What factors shape players' perceptions, preferences and stance on the issue? What determines each player's impact on the results? How does the game combine players' stands, influence, and moves to yield governmental decisions and actions?'[22]

For the first conceptual question, they introduce the players and their positions, and provide background information.[23] They introduce not only policymakers, but also those outside players whose actions have an important effect on the decision.[24] For the second conceptual question, they name a number of factors to be analysed. Personal characteristics, including operating styles, are an 'irreducible part of the mix [game or policymaking]'.[25] Domestic influences play a crucial part, since 'Presidents and their senior appointees rarely fail to consider domestic political consequences of their choices'.[26] Context is another factor. When explanation is 'sought for a specific action, the question arises in context'.[27] Without referring to 'context', they continue, decisions or resultants cannot be explained.[28] They considered all of the above factors when they analysed the 'interaction' between players, which produced the 'blockade–ultimatum' resultant relating to the Cuban missile crisis.[29]

For the third conceptual question, they claim that it is power ('i.e. effective influence on government decisions and actions')[30] that determines a policymaker's impact on the decision, and power is made up of many elements: bargaining advantages; skills and will, especially the ability to persuade other players to choose one's proposed option; control over resources necessary to carry out action; control over information, including knowledge of or expertise in the foreign

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policy area in question; and, most importantly, personal ties or relationships with other players, which enable the player to persuade others to choose his or her desired option.[31] For example, for Allison and Zelikow, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy was the obvious winner simply because he was brother to President John F. Kennedy and had easy access to the President.[32]

For the fourth conceptual question, they focus on the unit of analysis: the process, or the 'game'. They briefly explain the operating style President John F. Kennedy followed: how, when and in what form the National Security Council meetings took place.[33] They then continue to provide lengthy accounts of what advice each member of the Kennedy National Security team provided.[34] It is clear that policymakers had different views and competing judgments about what to be done. The missiles posed 'no single issue', but rather players perceived 'many faces of quite different issues' framed for them by

their characters, responsibilities and experiences.[35] Each player tried to push/be pulled/hauled for their policy choice. Eventually, everyone agreed upon the blockade-ultimatum option. The political resultant of blockade-ultimatum emerged from the pulling and hauling – the game – because the players did not know which option the President and the War Cabinet as a whole favoured from the start.[36]

For the fourth conceptual decision, as stated above, their focus was on the 'game' by which the blockade emerged as the American Government's choice.[37] The Bureaucratic Politics Approach's 'explanatory power is achieved by displaying the game—the action-channel [a regularised means of taking governmental action on a specific kind of issue], the positions, the players, their preferences [including their personal characteristics], and the pulling and hauling—that yield, as a resultant, the action in question'.[38] They

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add: 'Where an outcome was for the most part the triumph of an individual (for example, the President) or group (for example, the President's team or a cabal) this model attempts to specify the details of the game that made the victory possible'.[39]

Generally speaking, in *any* decision-making approach, the analyst would have to identify who the policymakers are and provide a narrative of the decision-making process (who said what, how and why). To complete the analysis, the analyst would have to go further by analysing those factors that could be shown to have played a part in shaping the policy choice. Thus (again[40]), the first, second and fourth conceptual questions raised by Allison and Zelikow are covered (arguably) by any approach that has a decision-making outlook. Debatably, the most obvious innovation in the Bureaucratic Politics Approach, however, is the treatment of decision-making as a game. Since it is a game, it has a winner(s). The Approach tries to ascertain who the winner is and what factors enabled him or her to be the winner. This innovation is mainly introduced by the third conceptual question (and, of course, as explained above, by the unit of analysis).[41] The third conceptual question requires the analyst to identify which bureaucratic player(s) influenced the ultimate choice (the resultant), and what factors helped him or her to do so. To make it simple, the question can be rephrased as the following: 'to what extent did the particular bureaucratic locations of policymakers play a part in the resulting policy?'

As for methodology, the approach makes it clear that once all official actions (including cables, speeches, statements, and memoirs by policymakers), as well as works by outside actors about the policy in question or policymakers, are analysed, the researcher would be able to find answers to both the unit of analysis and the object of analysis.[42] Another essay by the author elaborates on methodology.[43]

What are the Limitations and the Strengths of the Bureaucratic Politics Approach?

Bureaucratic Politics as a model or approach has been criticised for a number of reasons. The criticism can be summarised as follows. Firstly, in treating the President as one of the main chiefs, who was slightly more powerful than the other bureaucratic chiefs, the Bureaucratic Politics Approach has underestimated the power of the President.[44] The President dominates policy through his authority to select and control both officials and decision–making style. He has the power to sideline an entire bureaucracy. Thus the 'President's style—his level of attention and involvement—is the most critical factor in determining the decision–making structure'.[45] To make matters more complicated, if there is central authority from the top (the President), 'then how much of a difference do the mechanics [pulling, hauling, and bargaining] make?'[46] Robert J. Art is of the opinion that bringing in presidential perspectives (authorities) can make one dubious of the resultant aspects of the Bureaucratic Politics Approach.[47]

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Secondly, the Bureaucratic Politics Approach gives little influence to the role of low–level officials and structures; both can influence policymaking through the control of information and implementation, particularly those decisions in which presidential involvement and organisational involvement are low – that is, when the heads of democracies are less attentive –, low–level officials can play a crucial part.[48]

Thirdly, Jerel A. Rosati implicitly criticises the Bureaucratic Politics Approach for giving little attention to the decision 'context', as context 'not only determines, in part, who will participate in a decision, and thus, whose images count, but also affects the selection and formulation of images'.[49] Rosati continues to claim that the views (belief system and images) of policymakers have a direct impact on the resultants, since they influence the way the decision–making process is set out. He proposes that both context and belief system should be made integral parts of

the Bureaucratic Politics Approach.[50] Robert J. Art makes a similar proposition with regard to the role of domestic influences.[51]

Fourthly, the Bureaucratic Politics Approach is also criticised for ignoring the impact of other nations' actions on the US in order to explain US reactions. Robert J. Art argued that 'we need the systematic perspective in order to avoid the opposite dangers that an uncritical acceptance of the paradigm would bring—looking for things that are not there and seeing things that we should overlook'.[52]

Fifthly, the Bureaucratic Politics Approach overlooks the role the legislative branch and other external institutions can play in decision-making. Allison failed to take into account the role of Congress and numerous other actors in the original (1971) bureaucratic politics case study of the

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Cuban missile crisis. Instead, as was widely argued, the Approach's main focus was on the premise of 'where you stand depends on where you sit'. The criticism assumed that the Bureaucratic Politics Approach treated the premise as 'Miles' law' (must do). The premise was criticised for its 'narrow view of preference formation',[53] as it implied that the players followed those policies that benefited the bureaucracies they represented rather than *collective* interests.

Finally, since the Bureaucratic Politics Approach has most often applied to studies of crisis decision-making, its usefulness for explaining ordinary decision-making is argued to be questionable.[54]

It is important to mention that a great deal of the above criticism was voiced soon after Allison wrote *Essence of Decision* in 1971. In the revision of the book in 1999, Allison and his co-author, Zelikow, tried to address much of the above criticism by clarifying their approach(s) and, in certain cases, modifying it. 'Where you stand depends on where you sit' is not the only component of the Bureaucratic Politics Approach, argued Allison and Zelikow, as it has other components as well.[55] Moreover, the word 'depends' did not mean 'is always determined by'.[56] The premise was more of relevance if one analysed 'budgets and procurement decision'.[57] Their clarification implied that the premise could be ignored if it did not seem relevant.[58]

They made it clear that the views of the players, the options and how options were

developed were also important components.[59] Moreover, factors such as context (milieu or circumstances), personal beliefs, domestic influences, and the role of external actors including Congress (and, in certain cases, the contribution made by low –level bureaucrats) were other sources of analysis.[60]

They also made clear that the President was a very important player, and his or her thoughts and personal characteristics were crucial in explaining a foreign policy choice.[61] While the President was considered the main player, he nevertheless was informed, influenced, misled and even ignored by officials around him.[62]

Conclusion

Like any other approach or theory, the Bureaucratic Politics Approach has not escaped criticism. However, the Bureaucratic Politics Approach remains an important model of the subfield of Foreign Policy Analysis. It has been widely used, including by the author of this essay,[63] to understand and explain foreign policy decisions.[64]

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Notes:

1. Hudson, Valeria M. 2007. *Foreign policy analysis: classic and contemporary theory*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Pub, pp. 21–2, 90.

2. Allison, Graham T., and Philip Zelikow. 1999. *Essence of decision: explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: Longman, pp. 255–313, p. 300.

3. Smith, Steve, Amelia Hadfield, and Timothy Dunne. 2008. *Foreign policy: theories, actors, cases.* Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, p. 18.

4. Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, p. 300.

5. Carlsnaes, Walter, Thomas Risse-Kappen, and Beth A. Simmons. 2002. *Handbook of international relations*. London: SAGE Publications, p. 338. For the Rational Actor Model and Organisational Model, see Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, chapters 1–4.

6. Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, p. 256; Carlsnaes, Risse-Kappen, and Simmons, *Handbook of international relations*, p. 338; Hill, Christopher. 2003. *The changing politics of foreign policy.* Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 85–92; Hollis, Martin, and Steve Smith. 1990. *Explaining and understanding international relations.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 146–70.

7. Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, p. 256.

8. Halperin, Morton H. 2006. *Bureaucratic politics and foreign policy.* Second edition. *The Brookings Institution*; Hudson, *Foreign policy analysis*, p. 90; Hollis and Smith,

Explaining and understanding international relations, p. 148.

9. Smith, Hadfield and Dunne, *Foreign policy*, p. 95.

10. Hollis and Smith, *Explaining and understanding international relations*, p. 168.

11. Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, pp. 255, 273; Hudson, *Foreign policy analysis*, pp. 91–93; Neack, Laura, Jeanne A. K. Hey, and Patrick Jude Haney. 1995. *Foreign policy analysis: continuity and change in its second generation*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, p. 88.

12. Snyder, C. Richard, H. W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin. 1962. *Foreign policy decision–making*. The Free Press of Glencoe, pp. 22, 33, 85–92; Sprout, Harold, and Margaret Sprout. 1965. *The ecological perspective on human affairs, with specially reference to international politics*, by Harold and Margaret Sprout. Princeton, N. J.: Published for the Princeton Centre of International Studies by the Princeton Univ. Press, pp. 1–18, 203–225, especially, 11, 203–04, 224; Smith, Hadfield and Dunne, *Foreign policy*, p. 14; Hill, *The changing politics of foreign policy*, pp. 109–16; Hollis and Smith, *Explaining and understanding international relations*, pp. 144–45.

13. It is entitled 'Foreign Policy Analysis as an Analytical Framework: Its Approaches, Its Limitations, and Its Strengths'.

14. Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, pp. 255–313.

15. Ibid., pp. 325–66.

16. Ibid., pp. 294–5.

17. Ibid., p. 295.

18. Ibid., pp. 296–313, 382.

19. Ibid., pp. 333–37, 338–47.

20. Ibid., pp. 386–88.

21. Art, Robert J., 'A Critique of Bureaucratic Politics', in Hays, Peter L., Brenda J., and Alan R. Van Tassel. 1997. *American defence policy*. Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, p. 34; Rynning, Sten, Stefano Guzzini, 'Realism and Foreign Policy Analysis', <isciplinas.stoa.usp.br/pluginfile.php/115684/mod_resource/content/1/Leitura obrigatória Sten%2C Rynning e Guzzini%2C Stefano.Realism and Foreign Policy Analysis. Mimeografado%2C 2002pdf>; Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, p. 382.

22. Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, p. 296.

23. Ibid., pp. 326, 332–36.

24. Ibid., p. 296.

25. Ibid., p. 298.

26. Ibid., p. 298.

27. Ibid., p. 392.

28. Ibid., p. 328.

29. Ibid., pp. 329–31, 335, 337, 339.

30. Ibid., p. 300.

31. Ibid., pp. 300, 333–36.

32. Ibid., p. 346.

33. Ibid., pp. 325–27.

34. Ibid., pp. 332–37, 338–46, 356–61.

35. Ibid., p. 346.

36. Ibid., pp. 346–47.

37. Ibid., pp. 300–13, 325.

38. Ibid., pp. 304–05.

39. Ibid. p. 305.

40. For example, Allison and Zelikow imply some further conceptual questions for the Bureaucratic Approach, which are similar to those raised by the Foreign Policy Decision-Making Approach, Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, pp. 386-387.

41. And by the unit of analysis, which has already been discussed above.

42. Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, pp. 294-95.

43. 'Foreign Policy Analysis as an Analytical Framework: Its Approaches, Its Limitations, and Its Strengths'.

44. Art, Robert J., 'A Critique of Bureaucratic Politics', in Hays, Peter L., Brenda J., and Alan R. Van Tassel. 1997. *American defence policy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 33-42, pp. 33 and 40; Ripley, Brian, 'Cognition, Culture, and Bureaucratic Politics', in Neack, Hey, and Haney, *Foreign policy analysis:* pp. 85-96, p. 88.

45. Rosati, Jerel A., 'Developing A systematic Decision-Making Framework: Bureaucratic Politics in Perspective', *World Politics*, 1981, <http://people.cas.sc.edu/rosati/documents/rosati.decision-making%20framework.wp.1981.pdf>

46. Art, 'A Critique of Bureaucratic Politics', p. 37.

47. Ibid., p. 38.

48. Rosati, 'Developing A systematic Decision-Making Framework'; Durbin, Brent, 'Bureaucratic Politics Approach', *Britannica*, 2007, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1904171/bureaucratic-politics-approach>

49. Rosati, 'Developing A systematic Decision-Making Framework'.

50. Ibid.

51. Art, 'A Critique of Bureaucratic Politics', pp. 36 and 40.

52. Ibid., p. 41.

53. Carlsnaes, Walter, 'The Agency-Structure Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis', *International Studies Quarterly*, September 1992, <http://www.ir.rochelleterman.com/sites/default/files/Carlsnaes%201992.pdf>; Durbin, 'Bureaucratic Politics Approach'. Allison and Zelikow also acknowledge the criticism, in Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, PP. 386-88; Art, 'A Critique of Bureaucratic Politics', pp. 36-37.

54. Durbin, 'Bureaucratic Politics Approach'.

55. Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, pp. 307, 386-87.

56. Allison and Zelikow, *Essence of decision*, pp. 307, 386-87.

57. Ibid., p. 307.

58. Ibid., p. 307.

59. Ibid., p. 386.

60. Ibid., pp. vii-xiii, 296, 297-98, 328, 386.

61. Ibid., pp. 340, 383.

62. Ibid., p. 383.

63. I have employed it in my book – *America in Afghanistan, Foreign Policy and Decision Making from Bush to Obama to Trump* – to analyse American Afghan policy.

64. Ripley, 'Cognition, Culture, and Bureaucratic Politics', p. 88.