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Foreign Policy Change: From Policy Adjustments to Fundamental Reorientations

Tim Haesebrouck and Jeroen Joly

Abstract

Over the last decades, an increasing number of empirical studies have examined foreign policy change. In this article, we provide an overview of different conceptualizations and understandings of foreign policy change, identify the different drivers and inhibitors of change, and suggest avenues for future research. Most importantly, this review argues that scholarship provides relevant insights in foreign policy change on specific issues, but currently fails to unravel cases of more fundamental change like, redirections of states' entire orientation toward world affairs or broader foreign policy categories (e.g. development aid or defense and security policy). Moreover, while the literature on foreign policy change has arrived at a list of plausible explanatory conditions for change, it has yet to provide a more general theoretical framework that captures the interplay between explanations from different levels of analysis in an integrated model. In consequence, we argue that research on foreign policy change would greatly benefit from comparative research that examines change in a more systematic way across countries, foreign policy domains, and over longer periods of time, with the goal of arriving at a more general explanatory model of foreign policy change.

Keywords

foreign policy analysis, foreign policy change, inertia, policy making

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Introduction

The rise of China, renewed tensions between Russia and the West, and the election of Donald Trump are just a few examples of the increasingly turbulent and changing international environment states have been faced with in recent years. In consequence, we would also expect them to fundamentally change their policies to deal with this environment. Over the last decades, an increasing number of empirical studies have examined foreign policy change. In this article, we survey this body of academic literature and

Ghent Institute for International Studies, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

Corresponding author:
Tim Haesebrouck, Ghent University, Universiteitstraat 8, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.
Email: tim.haesebrouck@ugent.be

suggest avenues for future research. Most importantly, this review argues that scholarship provides relevant insights in foreign policy change on specific issues but fails to unravel cases of more fundamental change. Moreover, while the literature has identified an increasingly long list of conditions that potentially explain foreign policy change, we have yet to arrive at a more general theoretical framework that captures the interplay between explanations from different levels of analysis in a multicausal model. Therefore, we argue that future research would benefit from comparative studies that examine change in a more systematic way across countries and regime types, foreign policy domains, and over time. This would advance the scholarship toward a more general explanatory model of foreign policy change.

The review is structured as follows. The first section discusses different definitions and conceptualizations of foreign policy change. The second section, then, surveys the (types of) cases of foreign policy change that have been examined in the empirical literature. The third section reviews the plausible explanations for foreign policy change. The final section recapitulates the review's major findings and points toward future avenues of research.

Defining and Conceptualizing Foreign Policy Change

Taking stock of the literature on foreign policy change first requires a clear definition of the concept. A number of influential publications on the issue at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s provide very useful building blocks for such a definition (cf. inter alia Carlsnaes, 1993; Hermann, 1990; Holsti, 1991; Rosati et al., 1994).

First, as argued by Gustavsson (1999), a good definition of foreign policy change requires a definition of foreign policy. This definition must be clear on the difference between domestic and foreign policy. Many domestic policies, such as tax or environmental regulations, for example, have an external impact. This review focuses on policies that are explicitly directed toward foreign entities. Hermann (1990: 5) offers a definition that meets this criterion: foreign policy "is a goal-oriented or problem-oriented program by authoritative policymakers (or their representatives) directed towards entities outside the policymakers' political jurisdiction." However, as argued by Goldmann (1982), foreign policy not only refers to a line of action an agent declares to follow, such as in official documents or speeches, but can also refer to a non-verbalized line of action. Patterns of foreign policy behavior can change significantly without (or prior to) the adoption of a formal program (Holsti, 2016). Morin and Paquin (2018: 3) offer a definition of foreign policy that includes both behavioral patterns and plans and programs: "a set of actions or rules governing the actions of an independent political authority deployed in the international environment."

Given that foreign policy is constantly subject to minor adjustments and modifications, scholarship focuses on more fundamental changes in foreign policies (Hermann, 1990). The literature on foreign policy change, however, distinguishes different levels of change. Rosati (1994) offers a categorization that includes four levels of change: intensification, refinement, reform, and restructuring. The differences between these levels are quantitative rather than qualitative in nature, ranging from no or little change, over minor and moderate changes, to major changes. Yet, the most influential categorization of foreign policy change to date has been proposed by Hermann (1990), who differentiates between four gradations of change. The first level of change is *adjustment change*: quantitative changes in the level of efforts that do not change the goals or

methods of a policy. The second level is *program change*, which refers to changes in the methods but not the goals of a foreign policy. Third, *goal change* implies a change of purpose of a foreign policy. The fourth and most *fundamental* form of change pertains to the redirection of the actor's entire orientation toward world affairs, involving a simultaneous shift in many policies.

Other conceptualizations generally focus on the most fundamental form of foreign policy change. Holsti's (2016) concept of foreign policy restructuring, for example, closely resembles Hermann's (1990) fourth category: simultaneous change in many geographical and functional sectors or the total pattern of a state's external relations. Volgy and Schwarz (1991: 616–617) also focus on foreign policy restructuring, which they define as "a comprehensive change in the foreign policy orientation of a nation, over a brief period of time, as manifested through major behavioral changes encompassing a broad range of activities in the nation's interactions with other actors in international politics." The edited book of Rosati et al. (1994), however, indicates that wholesale alterations of a country's foreign relations are very rare. Instead, the book's conclusions suggest that different levels of change can occur and the scope of change can be limited to specific areas or sectors (Hagan and Rosati, 1994). Moreover, in the concluding chapter of their volume, it is argued that many adjustments are not dramatic departures from previous policies. Rather, the authors conclude that gradual and incremental changes can have the most profound implications for a state's overall international orientation (Hagan and Rosati, 1994).

Early conceptualizations of foreign policy change, thus, suggest that it encompasses a broad range of empirical phenomena that vary on three qualitative dimensions. First, it can refer to changes in the goals of a foreign policy, the means used to pursue these goals or both. Second, the extensiveness of foreign policy change can vary substantially, ranging from a change in a country's policy toward one specific foreign policy issue or in only one sector to a simultaneous shift in many foreign policies. Finally, foreign policy change can involve a dramatic break with past behavior or the cumulative effect of incremental changes.

Studying Foreign Policy Change

Over the last two decades, an increasing number of empirical studies have examined foreign policy change. While changes in goals and methods of foreign policies have been equally covered in the literature, studies have generally focused on dramatic changes on single foreign policy issues.

One of the most studied cases of foreign policy change is Israel's decision to negotiate and adopt the Oslo Accords of August 1993 (Blavoukos, 2019; Blavoukos and Bourantonis, 2014; Rynhold, 2007; Ziv, 2011). This was clearly a dramatic break with Israel's past actions toward the Palestinian territories and involved a change in goals and methods. Although incredibly important for the state of Israel, this was a decision on one specific foreign policy issue rather than a complete restructuring of its foreign policy. Blavoukos (2019) recently used the Oslo Accords to demonstrate the value of Kingdon's multiple streams approach, conceptualizing foreign policy as the intersection of problem, policy, and politics.

Walsh (2006) focuses on the UK's decision to no longer exclusively rely on NATO for multilateral crisis management and establish a strong EU role in military crisis management by signing the Saint-Malo declaration. Although the author mentions several minor

changes in the UK's policy toward crisis management, the signing of the treaty can be considered a dramatic break with the past on a very specific foreign policy issue. Likewise, Lee (2012) examines the dramatic change in Japan's foreign policy toward the specific issue of East Asian financial regionalism at the end of 1997. Kaarbo (2017), in turn, examines two such dramatic changes on relatively narrow foreign policy issues: Japan's adoption of the norm of trade liberalization regarding rice import and the Turkish decision to ban the death penalty during accession negotiations with the EU. Welch (2005: 40), in turn, compares the military intervention of Argentina in the Falklands, the US decision to escalate the Vietnam War, the US decision to withdraw from the latter war and the 1988 free trade agreement between the US and Canada with similar cases without foreign policy change.

Next to these studies on dramatic changes in particular foreign policy issues, there are also a few articles that examine such changes in bilateral relations or in broader foreign policy categories. Yang (2010), for example, looks at US foreign policy toward China and compares a major turning point during the Bush administration with one during the Clinton administration. In a rare study on the absence of change, Breuning (2013) focuses on a broader foreign policy category: development aid. More specifically, she examines the failure of Belgian State Secretary Moreels to incite a major change in Belgium's development policy in the second half of the 1990s. In addition, there are a few studies that have examined more incremental changes in specific foreign policy issues. Peltner (2017), for example, examines how the threshold for conducting a humanitarian intervention was downscaled throughout the 1990s in the UK, which also constitutes a more incremental process of foreign policy change. Likewise, Doeser (2011) examines how Denmark's government ended its so-called "footnote policy" toward NATO in favor of a more active approach toward the alliance in 1988. However, the author argues that "this event was the beginning of a major turning point in Danish support for NATO and the US, which would be fully implemented after the Cold War" (Doeser, 2011: 223). In a co-authored article with Eidenfalk, a subsequent decision that further implemented the change in Danish policy toward the US is discussed: the decision to participate with a warship to monitor UN sanctions against Iraq in 1990 (Doeser and Eidenfalk, 2013). Both events seem part of the same incremental process of foreign policy change that resulted in Denmark taking a more active position in NATO.[1]

The literature on foreign policy change of the last two decades, thus, mainly focused on changes in specific foreign policy issues, rather than looking at more extensive changes in the patterns of the external relations of states. Recent scholarship did not focus on examples of Hermann's fourth and most fundamental form of foreign policy change, and neither were changes in broader foreign policy categories, like defense or development aid, uncovered, or did scholars establish simultaneous changes across several foreign policy issues. This might simply be a consequence of the fact that foreign policy change is a rare phenomenon and simultaneous changes across different foreign policy domains are even more uncommon (Rosati, 1994; Volgy and Schwarz, 1994: 38; Welch, 2005: 40). However, it could also be an artifact of the research designs and foci of most recent publications. Scholarship has mainly selected cases of foreign policy change that were very clear and involved a major break with the past, without trying to link different cases together to establish broader patterns. If we consider that fundamental foreign policy change might manifest itself as the cumulative result of a large number of incremental changes, then scholarship might as well have failed to uncover a number of more fundamental foreign policy changes.

Explaining Foreign Policy Change

Past scholarship has suggested a wide range of plausible explanations for foreign policy change, located at different levels of analysis: (1) the international level, (2) the domestic level, and (3) individual decision-makers.

International Level

Given that foreign policy is explicitly directed toward foreign entities, many of the drivers and inhibitors of foreign policy change are located outside the boundaries of the jurisdiction of foreign policy decision-makers. First of all, foreign policy change can be expected to be influenced by systemic conditions (Gustavsson, 1999; Hagan and Rosati, 1994). Volgy and Schwarz (1994: 32), for example, argue that bipolar systems will restrict the flexibility of states to change their foreign policy, while conditions of multipolarity enhance this flexibility. Systemic changes can, in turn, lead to a "re-conceptualization of security threats and challenges, a re-prioritization of foreign policy objectives, and the emergence of new means of actions and foreign policy options" (Blavoukos and Bourantonis, 2014; Rynhold, 2007). The position of states within the global system can also have an impact on foreign policy change. States that are satisfied with the status quo are less likely to start major changes in their foreign policy (Volgy and Schwarz, 1994).

Rosati (1994) suggests that a number of international-level constraints increase the tendency of foreign policy continuity. More specifically, past agreements, commitments, and commercial relationships reinforce a government's resistance to change. Moreover, foreign policy is constrained by international regimes, law, and norms, imposing standards and expectations on the accepted behavior of countries. However, research demonstrates that international norms can also be the primary generator of foreign policy change, or can also be instrumentalized by domestic political actors to change their countries' foreign policy (Risse and Sikkink, 1999).[2] First, participation in international organizations can incite foreign policy change through processes of socialization, whereby a critical mass of member states within an international regime is able to replace the existing norm and impose a new one (Blavoukos and Bourantonis, 2014: 489; Risse and Sikkink, 1999). The foreign policies of those states that aspire membership in international organizations can also change because the latter often requires meeting a number of conditions. In a similar vein, Volgy and Schwarz (1994: 35) argue that states can change their foreign policy orientation to participate in regional integration efforts.

Next to these more structural conditions, international events are also invoked as major potential drivers of foreign policy change. Hermann (1990) expects most foreign policy changes to result from some change or initiative in the external environment. An important source of foreign policy change are external shocks, which are "large events in terms of visibility and immediate impact on the recipient" (Hermann, 1990: 12). Likewise, Lee (2012: 739) suggests that dramatic foreign policy changes generally occur under conditions of crisis-led (or policy failure-led) uncertainty. Blavoukos and Bourantonis (2014: 489) argue that foreign policy changes might be a consequence of the interactions between states; such interactions can conflict and consequently create crises, which in turn open windows of opportunity for foreign policy change. Walsh (2006: 492–493) argues that policy failures provide decision-makers with an incentive to consider alternative policy options. It is one of their main characteristics that focusing events and crises put the finger on such failing or inadequate policies.

Domestic- and Individual-Level Factors

International-level explanations cannot, by themselves, fully account for foreign policy change. Instead, change also requires the absence of a number of domestic constraints. Moreover, research suggests that domestic-level drivers can incite change even when international-level incentives are relatively minor.

First, domestic-level factors can keep states from reforming their foreign policies. As argued by Hagan and Rosati (1994: 271), "opponents of change often occupy political positions in the policy-making process within the government and throughout society, and can block and resist initiatives flowing from either changed international circumstances or domestic political realignment." Skidmore (1994) suggests that states with dispersed authority and a lack of autonomy from societal influences will be less responsive to the need for policy adjustment than centralized states. Likewise, Volgy and Schwarz (1994) argue that foreign policy restructuring will be easier in centrist than in pluralistic and democratic political systems.

Several authors also draw attention to the importance of bureaucratic constraints. Several chapters in the edited volume of Rosati et al. (1994) stress bureaucratic incrementalism as an important source of foreign policy continuity. Welch (2005: 33) derives from organization theory that the day-to-day functioning of organizations contributes to foreign policy stability. Not only are organizations heavily scripted, relying on standard operating procedures, but resource pressures also generally make it difficult for organizations to keep up with inputs and demands. In consequence, there will be more stability in organizations charged with responding to the international environment than there will be in the environment itself.

Examining change in foreign aid policies across several OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, Joly and Richter (2019) show that there is more resistance to change in countries with heavier bureaucracies. In addition, within democratic regimes, their framework would suggest that change is more likely in strong, single-party, governments with a prime minister dominating decision making. This is in line with Tsebelis' veto player theory, which argues that the number of veto players in a specific polity, along with their preferences and incentives, determines the conditions for change. Oppermann and Brummer (2019) recently demonstrated the value of veto player theory in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) by examining Germany's foreign deployment of armed forces. Kaarbo (2017), in turn, suggests that coalition governments are certainly not incapable of foreign policy change but may be prone to significant delays in responsiveness to international norms due to the constraints of junior coalition partners.

However, change can also be driven or facilitated by developments at the domestic level. First of all, leadership changes can result in an alternative foreign policy course of action (Volgy and Schwarz, 1994: 27). A change of government can constitute an important source or contributing factor for change. Walsh (2006), for example, concludes that the electoral victory of new Labour was essential for the UK's decision to establish a strong EU role in military crisis management by signing the Saint-Malo declaration. Likewise, Peltner (2017) shows that the promotion of an ethical foreign policy by the new Labour government in 1997 gave state sovereignty a less decisive role in cases of massive human rights violations. Rynhold (2007: 433) shows how the electoral victory of left-wing parties in Israel was a vital precondition for the Oslo Accords.

Hagan and Rosati (1994), more generally, conclude that foreign policy changes can result from domestic political realignments: shifts in the basic distribution of power and

influence among contending elites. Likewise, Hermann (1990) proposes domestic restructuring as an important source of foreign policy change: the politically relevant segment of society whose support a regime needs to govern can become an agent of change. Adopting Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith's (1988) Advocacy Coalition Framework to the US' decision to support the UN's partition plan for Israel and Palestine, Pierce and Hicks (2019) show how actors collaborate to form coalitions and transform their beliefs into policy at the international level.

Blavoukos and Bourantonis (2014: 487–488) draw attention to three categories of advocacy groups that can support an alternative foreign policy course: adherents to an alternative political culture, socioeconomic groups with alternative preferences, and public opinion and policy entrepreneurs. The latter are generally "political figures with special skills, vision and/or leadership capacity, who manage to overcome the inertia of previous foreign policy action." Change initiated by policy entrepreneurs closely corresponds to Hermann's category of leader-driven change and bureaucratic advocacy. The former occurs when an authoritative decision-maker imposes his own vision on the basic redirection of foreign policy, the latter when a group within the government becomes an advocate of redirection.

Finally, cognitive, individual-level, factors might also explain (the absence of) foreign policy change. As argued by Gustavsson (1999: 83), sources of change need to be perceived by individual decision-makers and trigger alterations in their beliefs to have an impact on foreign policy (Gustavsson, 1999: 83). Doeser and Eidenfalk (2013) argue that structural change needs to be perceived by key decision-makers as a window of opportunity to engage in foreign policy change. In this connection, several studies have shown the impact of leadership characteristics on change, such as cognitive openness and complexity (Yang, 2010; Ziv, 2011).

Toward an Integrated Model

While stability and inertia/incrementalism seem to be the general rule in international politics and foreign policy, past scholarship has identified a number of plausible drivers of change, which are located at different levels of analysis. Change can be incited by international-level factors (e.g. systemic changes in the international structure or foreign policy changes in major allies), domestic-level factors (e.g. change or restructuring of a government), and individual-level factors (e.g. policy entrepreneurs or policy learning). However, foreign policy change also requires the absence of inhibitors at the international (e.g. structural constraints), domestic and individual (e.g. veto players) levels. Foreign policy change can, therefore, be expected to result from a complex interplay between drivers and barriers at different levels of analysis. While several studies have examined such drivers and inhibitors, scholarship has largely refrained from developing integrated theoretical frameworks that capture this complex interplay (Blavoukos and Bourantonis, 2014). Moreover, while there is an abundance of—mostly qualitative case—studies aiming to provide (new) explanations of specific policy decisions, little effort has been made to test or falsify these theoretical contributions in a comparative way. In consequence, research has arrived at a comprehensive checklist of plausible explanatory conditions but remains miles away from an integrated theoretical framework that is applicable to a wide range of cases of foreign policy change.

Conclusion

Foreign policy change is a broad concept, which captures a wide range of empirical phenomena. It can be the result of a dramatic break with the past or the cumulative effect of smaller changes. Foreign policy change can be limited in scope to a specific foreign policy issue or a bilateral relation, more extensively involving a broader foreign policy domain like security or aid policy, or pertain to a simultaneous change across different foreign policy domains and relations, amounting to a fundamental redirection of the actor's entire orientation toward world affairs.

As this literature review shows, since Hermann's (1990) and Rosati's (1994) contributions on categories in foreign policy change, most scholars have continued to focus on specific foreign policy decisions and reversals of existing policies in single-country studies. Strikingly, the most fundamental form of foreign policy change has hardly been subjected to academic scrutiny: a redirection of a state's entire orientation toward world affairs. Given the many possible inhibitors on foreign policy change, more fundamental changes can be expected to be the cumulative result of a large number of incremental changes. In consequence, examining more fundamental reorientations would require studying foreign policy over a longer time frame. Another avenue for future research would consist of focused comparisons of similar cases of foreign policy change and continuity. This would allow to identify the core causal conditions of change and develop more general explanatory models of foreign policy change. Rather than examining single explanatory conditions, a future research agenda of comparative studies should aim to result in integrated theoretical models that capture the complex interplay between drivers and inhibitors at different levels of analysis. To arrive at a comprehensive framework, existing work on foreign policy change could be supplemented with conclusions from scholarship that do not narrowly focus on change, but nevertheless provide relevant insights on the issue. Neo-classical realism, for example, provides insights on how great powers deal with a changing balance of power (Taliaferro et al., 2018), while research on strategic culture has, for example, focused on how national norms, beliefs, and ideas on the appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives change (cf. e.g. Longhurst, 2004).

To sum up, the main conclusion of this literature review is that scholarship should start examining foreign policy change in a more systematic way across countries, foreign policy domains, and over time. This would allow us to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of foreign policy change and, ultimately, to identify the core ingredients of causal recipes that lead to change.

Research on foreign policy change is particularly relevant in the changing international environment states are currently facing. After a unipolar moment that lasted two decades, the power structure of the international system is challenged by a resurging Russia and a rising China (Paul, 2018). Moreover, many observers argue that we are witnessing the deterioration of the liberal international order that emerged after World War II and that is based on open trade, multilateralism, and cooperative security (Haass, 2019; Ikenberry, 2018). As argued above, scholarship on foreign policy change has convincingly shown that such international-level incentives are not sufficient for foreign policy change. Not all states will be equally able to adapt to the new international environment. In fact, given the many constraints faced by their political leaders, democracies might be less well equipped to adequately respond to these changing international stimuli. Studying the conditions that allow for successful foreign policy change can, therefore, be expected to be of crucial importance for decision-makers in the years to come.

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ORCID iD


Tim Haesebrouck https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9877-4754

Notes

1. Doeser and Eidenfalk (2013) also discuss the decision of Australia's government to abandon its hands-off approach toward the Solomon Islands by deciding on a military intervention, which constitutes a more clear break with its past behavior.
2. See various examples in the recently published special issue by Brazys et al. (2017).

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Author Biographies

Tim Haesebrouck is a post-doctoral researcher at Ghent University, Belgium. He finished his PhD on European military operations in 2016. His research interests include foreign policy analysis, military intervention, defence burden sharing, and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. His work has been published in *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *Journal of European Public Policy* and *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*.

Jeroen Joly is a postdoctoral researcher at the Ghent Institute for International Studies (GIIS) and is specialized in the domestic influences on foreign policy, including political parties, news media and public opinion. His past work has been published in *Political Communication*, *Cooperation and Conflict* and *Foreign Policy Analysis*, among others.