Personality and International Politics: Insights from Existing Research and Directions for the Future

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Abstract: This article focuses on personalities, or individual differences, of world political leaders. After arguing that international relations theory has experienced a turn toward decision makers, I briefly overview one of the dominant approaches to the study of leader personality in foreign policy: Leadership Trait Analysis. While this research includes a number of important studies that directly challenge traditional understandings of international relations and engage with international relations theory, I argue that the subfield of personality studies in foreign policy is ripe for new theoretical and methodological developments. In the final section of this article, I outline several specific areas for future research, including a connection between foreign policy-personality approaches and the growing body of work on political leadership.

Keywords: Personality, Leadership Trait Analysis, International Relation Theory, Foreign Policy

Introduction

Who leads matters in the foreign policy of states. This statement is supported by numerous studies, as well as by observations by leaders themselves. In an interview, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once stated: "as a professor, I tended to think of history as run by imperial forces. But when you see it in practice, you see the differences personalities make."

1 This paper was originally presented at the Foreign Policy Analysis: Why Psychology and Neurosciences Do Matter conference, Centre des Recherches International-Sciences, Paris, 12 February 2016. The parts of this article on the importance of personality and on Leadership Trait Analysis draw directly from my research with Çuhadar, Kesgin, and Özkeçeci-Taner (see, for example, Esra Çuhadar, Juliet Kaarbo, Baris Kesgin and Binnur Özkeçeci-Taner, ‘Examining Interactions Between Agents and Structures: Turkey’s 1991 and 2003 Iraqi War Decisions,’ Journal of International Relations and Development 20(1) (2017b) 29–54) and from my research on prime ministers (e.g., Juliet Kaarbo, ‘Prime Minister Leadership Style and the Role of Parliament in Security Policy,’ British Journal of Politics and International Relations (20(1) (2018) 35–51). The section on the agent in international relations is a more specifically-focused argument derived from my article Juliet Kaarbo, ‘A Foreign Policy Analysis Perspective on the Domestic Politics Turn in IR,’ International Studies Review 17 (2015), pp. 189–216.

Leaders can significantly affect foreign policy, in both democracies and authoritarian states. As Hermann and Hagan have argued: “state leaders play a pivotal role in balancing international imperatives with those arising from, or embedded in, domestic politics.” Leaders influence the motives, strategies, and policies of their own states and are therefore a critical component of their countries’ diplomatic capabilities. According to Hermann and Hagan:

“Leaders define state’s international and domestic constraints. Based on their perceptions and interpretations, they build expectations, plan strategies, and urge actions on their governments that conform with their judgments about what is possible and likely to maintain them in their positions. Such perceptions help frame governments’ orientations to international affairs. Leaders’ interpretations arise out of their experiences, goals, beliefs about the world, and sensitivity to the political context.”

Leaders and their characteristics may be more important for states’ foreign policies under certain conditions, such as when bureaucratic, domestic or systemic, contexts are ambiguous, complex, uncertain or dynamic, when trade-offs are part of countries’ foreign policies, when foreign policy choices involve symbolism, and when decision making authority is concentrated and restricted to the top leader. The importance of leaders and leaders’ personalities is not limited to presidents and authoritarian rulers. Leaders in parliamentary systems, particularly prime ministers, are also influential. Prime ministers, for example, can shape decision making processes by agenda setting, by choosing advisors, and through their appointments of cabinet ministers.

As others have noted, to continue to debate whether or not leaders matter is unproductive and it is best to focus research on how leadership and the characteristics of leaders influence foreign policies. There are a number of ways to address this question, including a focus on leaders’ representations of ill-defined problems, their beliefs about politics and images of other countries, their risk-orientations, their pathologies and illnesses and leaders’ cognitive shortcuts, misperceptions, and motivated reasoning. 

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5 Hermann and Hagan, op.cit., p. 126.