The Frustrating Study of Foreign Policy Analysis

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The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy is an important book and an important contribution to the general study of the dynamics of foreign policy. In short, Christopher Hill provides a valuable and badly needed synthesis of a large and growing body of thought and work in the area of foreign policy analysis. As Bernard Cohen (1957:2), one of the classic students of the field, noted long ago in The Political Process and Foreign Policy, “while there may be widespread recognition of the desirability of knowing more about how foreign policy is made, it is a far from simple task actually to build up a useful body of relevant knowledge.” Although we have an occasional review article, textbook, or edited volume, no quality-authored book has attempted to provide a synthesis—and thus demonstrate the extent to which we have built up a “useful body of relevant knowledge”—until now.

But Hill’s high aspirations and the difficulty of the task as noted by Cohen also make The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy very frustrating at times. By its very nature this book is not going to satisfy everyone in every way, including probably Hill himself. This frustration helps explain why such a synthesis and multi-dimensional perspective is rarely attempted, and why it is so much easier, and often professionally rewarding, to specialize or hyperspecialize by studying one facet or part of the larger foreign policy process. Overall, Hill deserves to be congratulated for his effort and accomplishment.

Hill lays out a number of objectives in his preface to The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy. First, he seeks to “persuade any practitioners and general readers . . . that there already exists a useful frame of analysis which can help them make sense of particular cases, and problems arising from them” (p. xvii). Second, he intends “to make the case to those in the academic world that foreign policy is an area of the greatest political and intellectual importance, requiring a new phase of study” (p. xvii). Third, the book’s scope is aimed at being comparative and worldwide, not just a focus on North America and Western Europe. For Hill a historical perspective is indispensable, but “the theme of the book is the changing nature of contemporary foreign policy” (p. xviii). As he ultimately summarizes,

Understanding how foreign policy decisions are arrived at, implemented, and eventually changed is not a matter of a single theory, even less of generalizing on the basis of an individual case. It involves doing justice to the richness and complexity of the foreign policy universe, without forgetting the basic premise of social science—that there is order in the world, and it can be systematically observed. This means that there are two sides to the politics of foreign policy [the international system and bureaucratic-domestic politics impacting on policymakers] . . . It is the interplay between the two which constitutes our large, elusive but fascinating subject. (pp. xix–xx)

Thereafter, The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy is organized into four parts. Hill begins with two chapters that provide an overview of foreign policy in international relations and the politics of foreign policy. The second part has four chapters on “Agency”: the first on the responsible decision makers, a second on the bureaucracy
and bureaucratic politics, a third on rationality, and a fourth on implementa-
tion. The third part of the book has two chapters that focus on the role of
the international system, and a third chapter that looks at transnational actors.
The book's fourth part has two chapters on the domestic sources and constitu-
cencies of foreign policy. Hill closes the volume with one chapter that tries
to pull everything together through the concepts of action, choice, and
responsibility.

Among the most important strengths of the book are: (1) it provides a valuable
overview of the scholarly work that has been produced over the years; (2) it
addresses key questions pursued by scholars and practitioners; (3) it provides a
multinational perspective (primarily European and particularly British) in addition
to the traditional US-centric one; (4) it attempts to be cross-cultural and to discuss
patterns that apply to multiple states (not just the United States) as well as to
nonstate actors; and finally (5) it tries to be policy relevant and demonstrate the
importance of normative concerns.

The chapters on bureaucracy, rationality, the role of the international system, and
domestic politics are particularly informative and well done. Unique and most
valuable is the discussion of the foreign policies of nonstate actors (which Hill refers
to as transnational actors). In fact, the study of the foreign policies of transnational
actors is highlighted throughout the book, and it deserves greater attention by
foreign policy scholars and practitioners.

At the same time, The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy suffers from a number
of significant weaknesses. Hill promises more than he is able to deliver. Most
important, he is ultimately unsuccessful in bridging the gap between academia and
the world of practitioners and general readers (his first goal). Although basically
readable, the prose is at times remarkably dense and too academic. He takes too
much time (forty-seven pages) to introduce the topic, engaging in a complicated
conceptual discourse. The meat of his analysis only begins in chapter 3 with his
discussion of agency. Although much of the substantive and theoretical discussion is
very good, the basic points, findings, and conclusions that Hill makes throughout
each chapter are often not clearly highlighted or summarized. It is too easy for the
reader to get overwhelmed by all the issues, patterns, and illustrations. These
weaknesses may be enough to frustrate experienced scholars and students of
foreign policy analysis let alone novices.

Hill's coverage of important perspectives and issues is also very incomplete at
times. For example, the chapter on implementation has the potential to be
particularly important because this topic is typically ignored in the literature.
Unfortunately, Hill spends little time on so-called slippage and actual implementa-
tion, although these topics are briefly discussed earlier. He focuses his discussion
together on capabilities and policy instruments. Therefore, an opportunity to make
a major contribution is missed, and the best work on implementation and foreign
policy remains Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy by Morton Halperin (1974),
written a generation ago.

Several other weaknesses ultimately diminish the value of the book. For example,
Hill spends very little time addressing or providing an overview of the work on
foreign policy change, even though he says he will. He also tends to focus
overwhelmingly on liberal and so-called democratic states, although many other
types of regimes and states require similar attention. Finally, throughout the book
Hill seems to jump back and forth on how to treat the United States. On the one
hand, he often argues that the United States is unique, and therefore one cannot
generalize from it. On the other hand, he frequently treats the United States as a
typical state, using it to illustrate points and thus implying that insights gained from
the US case are generalizable. This is a very important issue given the pre-
ponderance of research on US foreign policy, and it should have been directly,
clearly, and consistently addressed.
Overall, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy* has great strengths and great weaknesses. For example, Hill’s effort to introduce and discuss the normative dimension of foreign policy and the issue of accountability versus the security state constitutes one of the book’s great strengths. Yet, his failure to directly and clearly relate much of the discussion of domestic politics (especially in chapter 10) to the original concepts of accountability and representativeness constitutes a great weakness. It may be that Hill was just trying to accomplish too much.

Given this unevenness, scholars and practitioners interested in syntheses that contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of US foreign policy in particular and foreign policy analysis in general will have to continue to rely on the few significant review articles (such as Hermann 1990; Hudson 1995; Rosati 2000), edited volumes (such as Rosati, Hagan, and Sampson 1994; T’Hart, Stern, and Sundelius 1997; Scott 1998), quality textbooks (such as Wittkopf, Kegley, and Scott 1980; Lebow 1981; Knutsen 1999) that have been produced over the past decade or so. These works represent only partial synthetic efforts, but perhaps partial or limited synthesis (theoretical or substantive) is all that is possible given the huge bodies of knowledge that exist. Nevertheless, truly synthetic works that aim higher are more necessary now than ever. Such works are important scholarly contributions and need to be professionally recognized. In that light, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy* is certainly a worthwhile and valuable undertaking.

**References**


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