Foreign Policy Analysis and Description as Method

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<u>**Overview**</u>

Foreign policy analysis (FPA) is a powerful approach for developing systematic description appropriate for the social sciences.

Political science and international relations scholarship often suffers from research that collapses description into theory building. Scholars face pressures to generate innovative hypothesis testing alongside applied research findings. In turn, they often struggle to separate their theoretical agendas from developing a reliable, widely-accepted descriptive account of, say, a given administration's foreign policy decision-making, a decision makers' treatment of key issues like trade, or the wider conditions shaping a contested phenomenon like a grand strategy. Unfortunately, combining description with causal theory often creates logical and practical problems. Without reliable description, theory can easily fall into familiar traps such as selecting on outcomes and cherry-picked evidence. Like geologists developing reliable descriptive accounts of a landscape or meteorologists building descriptive data sets of local weather patterns, structured or systematic descriptive social and political research carries a utility of its own. Further, description often must precede causal diagnosis and normative prescription.

Descriptive research also offers wider, public benefits. Students, citizens, and policy makers display relatively low knowledge of foreign policy and international affairs, yet they often express interest in access to descriptive research, which can be more easily engaged by nonspecialists. Approachable, reliable accounts, syntheses, and typologies tend to be underdeveloped by scholars, who largely cede the field to journalists and popular writers. Typically, professional incentives direct scholars toward developing novel work approved by their peers. They are professionally rewarded for conceptual precision and causal sophistication. Developing and updating new data, chronologies, and overviews; publishing encyclopedic articles; collecting and developing new, substantive accounts do receive some credit, but they are typically considered ancillary. Of course, teaching is a form of public outreach and description often plays a key role in the classroom to set up further analysis, yet that audience is limited.

Given these shortcomings, FPA offers a well-established framework for developing rigorous, systematic descriptive research. It remains broad-based and might be characterized as much as a topic area as a method; nevertheless, FPA scholarship typically displays a few shared approaches. It is agent-centered, meaning the analytical focus is on decision processes or the individuals and groups who make the decisions and take the actions that define state behavior. This focus also allows observers to include or take account of multiple levels of analysis. Individual psychology or beliefs may be included in a case analysis alongside international or systemic structures. Though FPA is often associated with formalized theoretical approaches like the rational actor model, the organizational process model, and so forth, those approaches are highly visible rather than integral in FPA.

At their foundations, both FPA and description prioritize broad-based observation unencumbered—to the extent possible—by theoretical commitments. To be clear, certain FPA models are deeply committed to a given causal framework; however, FPA itself is a general approach focused on certain agents or units of analysis. For this reason, international relations and other scholars interested in developing description will find FPA to be an instructive guide. Whereas "mere description" may fall under criticism as undisciplined or post hoc, description in FPA offers a clear set of observational parameters and analytical lenses. This approach, like any, is limited. Rather than directly building causal theories, it provides material to observe possible patterns, associations, and typologies. Drawing

systematic coherence to a mass of information or to loose, conventional narratives is of intrinsic scientific and practical value.

The Need for Description

Across sciences and humanities, gathering, organizing and describing new observations is crucial work. From astronomical and biological phenomena to social patterns and neglected archives, foundational scholarly insights emerge from inductive but disciplined and systematic observation and, in turn, description. Gerring (2012) characterizes description as addressing *what* questions, whereas causal theory addresses *why* questions. Physics, for instance, often breaks down between experimentalists observing and testing visible reality and theorists developing abstract models. Neither can exist without the other.

For politics scholars, description has lost its standing in favor of causal theory. The benefits and pressures of this evolution are familiar. Unfortunately, such an environment encourages scholars to develop an overabundance of causal theories in order to justify their work as "innovative." It also creates incentives either to develop highly stylized evidence or to return regularly to the same, well-established pools of evidence rather than seeking out wider horizons. Finally, for practitioners and other non-specialists, the key takeaways of causal theory can be accessible and valuable, yet they emerge as discrete units rather than pieces of a more coherent whole. By contrast, descriptive statistics, case studies, and similar material may be more valuable and accessible for policy makers and citizens, who typically learn and reason via discrete operating principles (or theory) as well as descriptive evidence.

Scholarship on foreign policy and international relations is particularly ripe for description. Already, the field is defined by a robust tradition of quantitative and qualitative work brushing the edges of description. Many of the field's questions are defined by macro institutions—from the states system to international organizations to humanitarian standards—that scholars must observe and assess on their own terms because there is only one modern unit of analysis: the international system itself. Historically-oriented work may engage more comparative study across international systems and eras, yet those still must grapple with a limited number of observations in addition to limited or constrained information. Often, observing *what* as it transpires over time and/or across the international system is intrinsically valuable, and it is frequently a necessary precondition for seeking to develop *why* explanations.

Foreign policy as a research area particularly suffers from collapsing description into theory. Foreign policy is the arena where international action often is determined by individuals working within formal structures, amongst political agendas, against other leaders, and a range of other constraints and incentives. It often overlaps significantly with international relations as a whole. Scholars in this area are also under pressure to address current events. For these reasons, scholars often struggle to separate applying a theoretical agenda from developing a reliable, descriptive account of, say, a given administration's foreign policy decision-making processes, its treatment of key issues like trade, or the wider conditions shaping and channeling an abstract phenomenon like a grand strategy. Often, analysts, practitioners, and scholars simultaneously make an argument for *what* as simply the path toward *why.* They are frequently driving toward "what went wrong?" or "how can this be better?" or "where are we going?" Such work is about what policy decision *should* have been made and how to achieve a more effective or appropriate foreign policy. Necessary and valuable, this work is often the greatest public contribution of foreign policy scholars to the wider society, but it also may compromise its own

foundations by entangling description with causal, strategic, and normative theory. In building descriptive research to serve specific causal theories, the latter is weakened by driving the former toward a given theoretical agenda. In Gerring's terms, *why* is less reliable because *what* was never independent.

FPA: Addressing the Need

As scholarly approaches, both FPA and description prioritize broad-based observation unencumbered—to the extent possible—by theoretical commitments. To be clear, certain FPA models are deeply committed to a given causal framework; however, FPA itself is a general approach focused on certain agents or units of analysis. For this reason, international relations and other scholars interested in developing description will find FPA to be an instructive guide. Whereas "mere description" may fall under criticism for an undisciplined or post hoc approach to gathering observations and generating patterns, FPA offers a clear set of observational parameters and analytical lenses. For instance, if a scholar wished to describe South American governments' international trade policies over the most recent decade, FPA offers one among several possible answers. In this case, the scholar might systematically observe each state's leadership decision-making on that topic. With a timeframe already set, the observer might specify certain types of source materials to maintain consistency. These might include leader statements or interviews, bureaucratic policy positions, trade data, or international media coverage. Causal variables are not proscribed in this approach. The observer may decide to focus on certain causal factors, but the framework itself does not commit the study to given variables. In this context, description will provide material to draw possible patterns, associations, and typologies. Drawing systematic coherence to a mass of information or existing but loose narratives is of intrinsic scientific and practical value. It may even offer some expectations about future behavior based upon existing trajectories. Still, it will not offer direct answers to *why* certain policies emerged or provide tested, probabilistic predictions. To draw an analogy, this is similar to gathering weather data and observing patterns to understand a local climate versus developing a probabilistic model to make a forecast of the next season. Causal theory and modeling are crucial for social or any other science, but observational description provides insights not independently achieved via those methods.

In practice, FPA has accommodated a diverse range of studies, many overlapping with description. During my doctoral work, for example, I arrived at "grand strategy" as a useful analytical framework to study foreign policy. (By *grand strategy*, I mean a government's overarching approach to or theory of pursuing its interests in the world.) In turn, observing this phenomenon through the lens of FPA offers the researcher specific agents as units of analysis: government leaders and other decision makers. Grand strategy as a phenomenon, then, is testable via observation and description. Unfortunately, scholarship has tended to leapfrog observation and description in favor of building narratives, sketching categorical schema, and, in effect, proof texting theories. The field does include a rich array of case study research, but again, this work typically gathers evidence based upon a particular schema, event, or outcome rather than seeking to inductively observe and describe grand strategy before moving toward causal questions. By contrast, starting with formal description allows more analytical flexibility. Rather than assuming that certain variables must matter or that certain patterns must occur, scholars can identify—in this example—a grand strategy and its functions followed by testing how and why those behaviors and thought patterns emerged, changed, or collapsed. By separating description from explanation, scholars gain more purchase on both.

Examples

In my example above, I found that international relations and foreign policy analysis often engaged "grand strategy"—a key part of my doctoral work—yet most scholars prioritized causal or normative agendas. There was no shared empirical touchstone for the phenomenon. This effect is particularly true for fields in which the number of observations are necessarily few. In the US experience, for instance, there are only a few moments of major foreign policy or grand strategy change, so even widely accepted descriptive statistics are not usually possible. In my case, seeking to compare the Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush administrations, I needed to start by building descriptive research: developing chronologies and gathering materials to observe the overall flow of grand strategy during each administration's tenure. Drawing upon FPA, I structured and disciplined this task by focusing particularly on key leaders' statements and decisions alongside formal policies and actions. In turn, distilling the field's competing schema that identify grand strategy, I developed a simple, tripartite set of dimensions that allow inductive observation and description.[1] I have subsequently refined and applied this approach to the Obama, Trump, and—currently—Biden administrations. Structured descriptive research allowed me to formalize a reliable account of any given leaders' approach to grand strategy that is separate from prior theoretical commitments. In turn, that baseline allows more reliable and consistent engagement with and comparison across those causal theories.

In the wider scope of FPA, a long, often hidden-in-plain-sight tradition points toward descriptive research. In most of these studies, "description" as a formal approach is never invoked, yet the work either does adopt this approach at some stage or would benefit from expressly articulating and applying this concept for the sake of clarity and analytical focus. Robert Jervis, for instance, helped lay the early foundations for FPA. His 1968 article on misperceptions makes an eloquent case for careful causal theory and hypothesis testing, yet in drawing from Michael Polanyi and other philosophers of science, he is keenly aware of the power and utility of 'observational evidence.' A developed vocabulary of descriptive research would have helped Jervis disentangle the types of evidence required for observation and theory building versus testing causal claims. Margaret Hermann's 1980 article on the personalities of leaders effectively broke into two parts: first, using content analysis from interviews to describe leaders and their personalities and, second, using statistical regression methods to test hypotheses related to her theory of personal characteristics and policy behavior. She paired Gerring's *what* and *why*. In their classic 1988 book *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-makers*, Richard Neustadt and Ernst May offer rich descriptions of presidential decision points and the conditions surrounding those moments. Scholars, students, and practitioners have found the approach helpful because it fleshes out events as they unfolded and only then draws observations and conclusions. The exercise does not engage theory building, yet its insights are well-grounded and invite more research and analysis. A decade later, scholars Barry Posen and Andrew Ross sought to identify the major visions of US grand strategy vying to dominate the post-Cold War period. They observed material from "academics, government officials, journalists, and policy analysts" and identified five schools of thought. Though insightful and influential, such work is built upon implied descriptive research. Valerie Hudson, in her 2006 book that now serves as a touchstone for the field, argues that scholars should shift from asking, "Do leaders matter?" to "When" and "Which leaders matter?" Since most leaders must be analyzed at a distance, Hudson proposes psychobiography and content analysis. Again, she seems to be

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[1] I have dubbed those grand strategy dimensions *scope*, *substance*, and *assertiveness*, but those details need not be developed here.

calling for description as a key pillar of scholarship but lacks the express language of a formalized method in political science and international relations. In turn, when scholars seek to identify a leader's foreign policy "operational code," such as in He and Feng's 2013 article on Xi Jinping of China, the core empirical move is structured description based upon the framework's established categories. Finally, in reviewing scholarship on how elites interact with and shape foreign policy, Elizabeth Saunders in a 2022 article calls for greater insight into the selection, incentives, and interaction of elites as they enter foreign policy decision making positions. Progress on such topics demands consistent, structured description. These and many other works serve to sort impression and conventional wisdom from observed reality which, like surveyors filling gaps in a map, reveals the true landscape.

Conclusion

Description is a central scholarly and scientific endeavor, a practice frequently but almost always tacitly employed by scholars in FPA and the wider social sciences. This paper argues that foreign policy analysis already and often utilizes description to identify and observe its target phenomena. When paired with basic observational schema, such as personality traits or policy characteristics, description serves to help scholars step away from received wisdom, preexisting assumptions, and theoretical commitments. In many cases of prior scholarship, a formalized vocabulary and set of standards for description would have clarified the work's units of analysis, operative questions, and/or contribution to larger phenomena. Moving forward, description offers a natural complement to new enquiry that is free from prior theoretical commitments. Effective application, however, will require students of descriptive research and FPA to develop greater consensus regarding definitions, standards, and applications. In turn, new research can probe the uses and limits of descriptive research. Ultimately, it is a tool that, like a painter discovering new brushes, allows greater coverage and flexibility for work she already had been pursuing but with less accuracy.